

VoIP critical to US security says former DHS chief

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Voice over IP must be adopted by all levels of US government in order for it to be able to adequately respond to another terrorist attack or natural disaster, Tom Ridge, the first Secretary of US Homeland Security, said in a keynote speech yesterday at the Internet Telephony Conference in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Ridge, who retired from his post nearly a year ago, said a governmental VoIP network would be a way to get important information about a disaster situation to emergency workers.

"There is a need and a potential down the road" for the widespread use of VoIP by the US government, he said.

"I think that with VoIP, given its multiple applications and the ubiquitousness of the Internet, you have a place that you can aggregate different kinds of data from different sources and make it available to first responders [of emergencies]," Ridge said. "It's the way we need to go in the future."

The standing-room only crowd of VoIP vendors, service providers, developers and enterprise buyers welcomed his comments with a standing ovation. A national governmental VoIP system along with geo-location devices, emergency workers could locate people, with the help of photographs, data and video, he said.

VoIP also would be a way to alert and forewarn the public of impending disaster. While the tech industry has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the technology of detection, of biological agents for example, and in aggregating data, there needs to be a way to get that information to the people who need it during an emergency, Ridge said.

"Hopefully, in time, there will be the vision and financing necessary to make that vision a reality," he said.

He said the government was working to develop new technologies to trace "certain chemicals, certain biologic agents. And there's the technology of communication, which is critical to our first responders. And that's where you come in." Ridge noted that during the Katrina Hurricane disaster in New Orleans last year, the local command center, faced with jammed satellite phones, downed landlines and cell phone towers, relied on VoIP.

"All other systems failed, so they decided to use the Internet to create their own call centers. It shows the application of what you do to help our first responders," Ridge said.

Not only must the national emergency 911 system go "from a landline mindset to a twenty first century technology mindset," Ridge said, but the international 911 system must also look to VoIP.

Asked how long he thought it would take for Congress to pass regulations so the industry can get on with the implementation of VoIP as the new communications technology, Ridge paused before answering. "I don't know. One of the challenges and frustrations is that, in terms of legislation in this country, for good, bad or indifferent, we move oftentimes at a glacial speed . . . that's a reflection not necessarily on congress."

He said the VoIP industry needs to "keep the pressure on" and educate local congress. This is almost as important as educating local emergency call centers or state emergency planners, he said. "You can't, in this country, necessarily wait for things to happen," he said. "Demand it." Ridge, who also is the former governor of Pennsylvania, raised the issue of privacy and civil liberties surrounding new technologies, such as the use of biometrics. Questions on how much information should the government have about its citizens, who should have to it and for what purposes are "tough" to answer, he said. "But we will debate it publicly, aggressively and, I hope, thoughtfully."

Technology has "jumped over" the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which outlines procedures for government electronic surveillance, since it was passed in 1978, Ridge said. Today, the government uses programs that search for certain numbers and words that it has identified as clues for something it might be following, he said.

"I think technology has outstripped our legitimate congressional oversights," he said. "We need to go to [Capitol] Hill and amend the surveillance act." Ridge spoke in broader terms about the country's preparedness for future acts by terrorists, which he said was "a new enemy that uses new tactics."

"I'm very bullish that while we confronted the tragedy of 911 and accepted it as a challenge for the next generations, our response will make us a stronger country," he said. "It will be a stronger country because of people like you doing what you do."

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