



Local Nonprofit Helps First Responders Respond Better

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FAIRFAX, Va. - Art Bushkin doesn't "know much about saving children, saving the whales or saving the environment." But for all he knows, those using his network are doing just that.

"Stargazer is an online service for social good. We don't define what the social good is," Bushkin said of the Fairfax-based charity he began about six years ago. He anticipated things like teachers across the world sharing lesson plans.

What he never imagined were the new uses for his network since Sept. 11, 2001.

"We didn't know there was going to be a terrorist attack, but we knew governments, schools and churches needed online information sharing," Buskin said.

That capability is now being used by the Maryland Emergency Management Agency, the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Last summer, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments teamed up with Stargazer to develop a Joint Information Center for first responders to communicate instantly from anywhere. Their mission was to create it in time for a regional emergency drill in September.

"We asked for a car and they built us an automobile industry," COG spokeswoman Jeanne Saddler said.

The system allows government and emergency workers from 19 local jurisdictions to do a couple mouse clicks and find out things like whether the 14th Street Bridge is open or closed.

Bushkin, 61, was an MIT graduate student in the 1960s when he landed a Defense Department internship working on a project that later became the Internet. He is quick to point out he did not invent it.

Along with his former wife he started the Stargazer Foundation with \$15 million of their own funds gained from the booming tech industry. They hoped to "give something back," he said, but couldn't have fully imagined their nonprofit's mission today.

For the first responders, Bushkin's team did not have to reinvent information sharing software, but they did have to modify it so that multiple people could post information without the oversight of one webmaster.

"While IBM was saying it couldn't be done, our guys had already built it and it was up and running," Bushkin said.

"We're the beneficiary of hundreds of millions of dollars IBM has spent on research," Bushkin said. His "clients" get this top-of-the-line technology for free.

"One of our biggest credibility issues is people can't believe we're real. They say, 'What's the catch?' There is no catch," Bushkin said. The only thing Stargazer asks is that those using the free technology be nonprofits, schools, community or government organizations.

So far, Bushkin says people across the U.S., Asia, the Middle East and Europe have used the network.

Virginia emergency management has encouraged families to use ReadyLinks to set up their own emergency planning Web site.

Michael Lasky, Stargazer's managing director, demonstrated his family site with features like driving directions so his son could pick up his sister from school and take her to his grandparents in a weather or other emergency. His personal site also has the real time view from a traffic camera on Interstate 66 near his Arlington home.

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