

SouthernLINC Wireless Provides Reliable Wireless Communications Service for First Responders to Prattville, Ala., Tornado

Overview

On Feb. 17, 2008, a tornado devastated Prattville, Ala., damaging more than 850 homes and about 50 businesses. Powerful winds snapped or uprooted hundreds of trees. Thankfully, no deaths were reported.

Although there was severe property damage, the result could have been much worse, especially if first responders did not have a reliable means of communicating during the recovery process. Fortunately, SouthernLINC Wireless was able to support their efforts with its highly reliable network as well as added “on-the-ground” assistance.

Challenge

A reliable means of communication is a vital component of any emergency response plan, but it is even more critical for public safety officials, who need to quickly connect within and between divisions. After Prattville was struck by a tornado, local, state and national agencies deployed multiple emergency responders, including the Prattville Police and Fire Departments, Alabama Department of Public Safety, Autauga County Sheriff’s Office, Montgomery County Sheriff’s Office, Alabama Bureau of Investigation and U.S. Secret Service.

“The response and help of other area law enforcement was unbelievable,” said Alfred Wadsworth, chief of the Prattville Police Department. “They were like an ant bed – someone kicked it, and they were everywhere.”

With representatives from multiple government entities using different communications devices, keeping all parties apprised of the evolving situation could have been a challenge. In addition to potential interoperability issues, the effects of the severe weather could have hindered communications.

Solution

Fortunately, the SouthernLINC Wireless network was built to be reliable – it was designed and constructed using weather-grade specifications with reinforced cell sites in key areas that can withstand winds up to 120 mph as well as heavy rain and ice loads. And, with redundancies, such as back-up batteries, generators and extra security features, this rugged network was designed to support all of Southern Company’s utility subsidiaries, including Alabama Power.

As the Prattville community braced for a possible tornado, members of the SouthernLINC Wireless management, public sector and engineering teams prepared to provide extra support for customers in the area. Less than one hour after the tornado touched down, SouthernLINC Wireless personnel arrived on the scene and immediately began creating coverage redundancies and increasing capacity in the Prattville area by deploying a satellite cell-on-wheels (COW) unit. The satellite COW was in position and fully operational within eight hours of the tornado strike. Additional capacity was also added to the company’s existing cell sites in Millbrook, Ala., and Prattville, which ended up receiving more than six times the dispatch call volume on Feb. 17 compared to the previous Sunday.

CITY OF PRATTVILLE, ALA.

Category: Government

Connecting When it Counts – Prattville, Ala., First Responders Call on SouthernLINC Wireless

CHALLENGE

Multiple public safety agencies were deployed to Prattville, Ala., when a tornado struck the area in February 2008. First responders needed to immediately connect with colleagues in their own and at other agencies prior to and immediately following severe weather.

SOLUTION

Within hours after the tornado touched down, SouthernLINC Wireless set up a satellite cell-on-wheels (COW) unit and enhanced capacity on two nearby tower sites to help ensure uninterrupted communications. As the official communications provider for the State of Alabama, SouthernLINC Wireless enabled many local and state agencies, including first responders, to immediately and privately connect at the push of a button.

RESULTS

The SouthernLINC Wireless emergency response team ensured network operability despite the inclement weather and heavy call volume, allowing first responders to reliably communicate with one another.

BENEFITS

The company’s premier Push To Talk two-way radio solution enabled immediate and continuous communication among multiple public safety agencies during a disaster.

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Despite severe weather, damage to the area and an increase in call volume, the SouthernLINC Wireless sites never went off the air. The quick response from SouthernLINC Wireless also ensured that Prattville's Police and Fire Departments, the Autauga County Sheriff's Office and the Alabama Department of Public Safety had uninterrupted communications.

The company's Push To Talk (PTT) two-way radio service, which provides real-time, private communications, was especially valuable for emergency response teams.

"As storm events progressed, our SouthernLINC Wireless phones allowed us to communicate with other city departments and city officials, said Stanley Gann, chief of the Prattville Fire Department. "We were also able to communicate with state agencies and private agencies such as Alabama Power. Our ability to communicate with needed resources was one of the keys to the success of our response and recovery efforts."

The SouthernLINC Wireless response team remained on site around the clock for 48 hours following the tornado, and supported customers with their communication needs, which included supplying more than 30 emergency response radios to the Alabama Emergency Management Agency and equipping mobile command centers with functional communications for the Prattville Police Department and Alabama Department of Public Safety. Thanks to this effort, these officers – in addition to remaining in constant communication with first responders from multiple municipalities – were able to be in contact with the utility companies, American Red Cross and others agencies that had critical roles in the area's recovery.

SouthernLINC Wireless is the official communications provider for the State of Alabama, and the Prattville Police and Fire Departments have been customers for more than 10 years.

"Our determining factor in choosing SouthernLINC Wireless was its flawless performance for the State of Alabama and numerous other agencies," stated Gann. "As we work closely with other agencies, the ability to immediately connect with them on the same network helps us tremendously."

Benefits

Prattville's first responders, including police and fire departments, list three key benefits of using SouthernLINC Wireless:

- **Interoperability:** Since SouthernLINC Wireless is the cellular and PTT two-way radio provider for the state of Alabama, Prattville's first responders not only were able to stay in constant communication with each other, but also with officials from multiple government agencies, including the Autauga County Sheriff's Office and Alabama Department of Public Safety.
- **Reliability:** Since SouthernLINC Wireless built its system with back-up batteries, generators and towers designed to withstand severe ice and winds, the company's network remained operational during and after the tornado in Prattville. This allowed first responders to stay in constant communication and coordinate recovery efforts. SouthernLINC Wireless has a proven track record of being a trusted communications provider, especially during crucial times. Prior to the Prattville tornado, the company's premier PTT two-way radio service was the predominant means of communicating in certain hard-hit areas following Hurricanes Opal, Ivan, Dennis and Katrina.
- **Immediate, Private Communications:** First responders can connect at the push of a button, thanks to SouthernLINC Wireless PTT two-way radio service. And, since the carrier's network is digital and private, there are no concerns about sensitive information being disclosed during response calls. There is no known scanner that can intercept communications over the SouthernLINC Wireless network.

"SouthernLINC Wireless allows us to communicate instantly and that makes us efficient and successful," concluded Gann.



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