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How the Texas State Guard Prepared its Network for an Emergency

By Mark Bell

As a branch of the Texas Military Forces, the Texas State Guard's (TXSG) mission is to assist state and local authorities during emergencies. The TXSG assists citizens during hurricanes, floods and other natural or man-made disasters, working through four sub-commands: army, air, maritime and medical. The TXSG, with headquarters in Camp Mabry, Texas, has more than 1,700 members statewide, which are at home or at work until they are called for duty, when they can be deployed anywhere across the state.

Emergency response is the most critical service that we perform, and with hundreds of members all over the state, our network is an essential part of our communication during emergency situations. We need to get information and resources to the right people in a timely manner, even if they are on the other side of the state, so a reliable network is a key to our effectiveness. Most of our users access network resources though a virtual private network or Web-based services, which are used to communicate within the TXSG and with other agencies.

When I joined the TXSG, I discovered that we had no network monitoring in place. If an e-mail server went down, we would not know about it until we started getting phone calls from users. The remote structure of the network, plus the sporadic nature of active duty, is the reason why waiting for users to report problems simply will not work. By the time users realize they are unable to use e-mail or access other resources, it's too late. You don't want to find out from a field unit actively involved in an emergency that its members are not able to communicate. We need to know as soon as a problem occurs so it can be addressed before it impacts our users.

We needed to get an automated network monitoring system in place so that we could identify and respond to network issues quickly and become more proactive. Because of my background in IT consulting, I had worked with Ipswitch's WhatsUp Gold IT management software, and proposed to my commanding officer that we deploy WhatsUp Gold to help make the TXSG network more available and reliable. He approved the request right away.

Within three weeks of contacting Ipswitch, WhatsUp Gold was installed and up and running at the TXSG, and we have already seen it prove its worth, with benefits that include:

Improved systems availability — Now that our systems are being "watched" on a 24/7 basis, we have been able to improve troubleshooting and resolve network issues more quickly, which has led to a 25 percent improvement in overall systems availability.

Early identification of issues — The management software has allowed us to identify potential non-network issues such as low disk space, and we have been able to solve issues like this proactively before there was any impact on our systems or users.

Easy remote monitoring — The software's Web-based interface allows our IT staff to easily keep tabs on the network from any remote location, including through mobile phones. Upon receiving an alert from WhatsUp Gold, our staff can access servers or network equipment remotely to diagnose and remedy the issue.