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Utilities Unite to Upgrade Response During Storms

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As hurricane season approaches, electric utilities are banding together to use a new communications system designed to help them respond more quickly to customers who lose power.

Through the new system, utilities unaffected by outages will be able to take calls from people in storm-stricken areas. The collaborative effort is an attempt to solve one of the biggest problems utilities face after a disaster: jammed phone lines that leave customers with recorded messages or busy signals.

"Our customers' willingness to talk to a machine dwindles after about the first day," said Rob Cheripko, managing director of customer service for American Electric Power Co. of Columbus, Ohio.

Called "Mars," for Mutual Assistance Routing System, the initiative takes advantage of communications systems developed by closely held **Twenty First Century Communications** Inc. of Columbus, which can take

overflow calls from affected utilities and reroute them to customer-service representatives at other utilities.

Many states require utilities to have the capability to answer calls within 60 seconds, and they can face stiff penalties if they fail to do so in large numbers.

So far, Pepco Holdings Inc., Southern Co., Tampa Electric Co. and AEP have joined forces. Other utilities that are part of the 37-utility Southeastern Electric Exchange in Atlanta, a trade association, are considering participating. If it works well, it could spread to other parts of the U.S.

"My members are the coastal utilities that get clobbered a lot," said Jim Collins, executive director of the trade association. "This really fills a need."

Some utilities are hanging back. "This is breaking the mold for some utilities that don't trust other people to handle their calls," said Al Osterling of Pepco in Washington, the customer-service manager who helped develop the idea with Barb Powers, head of customer service at TECO.

Mars is the latest attempt to improve communications between utilities and customers during emergencies. Utilities often have little awareness of what is happening in their lower-voltage distribution systems unless people tell them.

At Pepco, there usually are about 200 people working in call centers on a typical Monday. But if the utility were hit by a massive ice storm, it could quickly add more people to its virtual call center outside the affected area with the Mars method. It could later offer its workers to other utilities, since all U.S. electric systems are similar.

During Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, some call centers limped along because employees couldn't reach them or had to attend to their families' needs.

Twenty First Century handles overflow calls with its automated voice response equipment for 80 utilities that serve about 70% of U.S. electric meters. The company has 30,000 phone lines and is capable of "bursting" up to 100,000 lines by tapping other

companies, such as those that take calls for viewer-voting shows like "American Idol."

Utilities started talking about loaning each other customer-service teams in 2007 who would fly to utilities in need. But, as happened after Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, there usually is a shortage of hotel rooms and roads are impassable.

"The logistics were mind-boggling," said Mr. Osterling at Pepco. "You had to pick up, feed, house and train people to use your systems. It wasn't cost-effective."

With the new system, which costs each utility about \$100,000, simple screens of data are shared by all utilities, providing a common communications platform to utility databases held by Twenty First Century. Training needs are minimal and representatives work from their usual cubicles. Mr. Osterling said he thinks the new system will greatly improve service to customers. At the very least, he said, "It beats having to fly people all over."