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System will alert of potential attacks

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Emergency personnel at The Medical Center in Bowling Green are using a new, state-of-the-art software system to monitor 911 calls and other information sources for potential bioterrorism attacks and natural epidemics.

The FirstWatch system is used in 12 other cities across the nation, including San Diego, Las Vegas and Oklahoma City, but The Medical Center's is the first EMS in the state of Kentucky to add the software package, Director Randy Faithbruckner said.

"With this system, southcentral Kentucky will be on the cutting edge of protecting the nation against bioterrorism," Faithbruckner said. "What's even better about this new biosurveillance system is once it's set up, everything is automatic, and it will analyze and report data in real time."

The software can track reports of diseases such as flu or SARS or potential exposures to airborne contaminants or chemical spills, he said.

As information from EMS responses is fed into the computer, FirstWatch totals and analyzes the data to make sure the information does not deviate from established norms for the area served by The Medical Center.

In the event of an emergency situation, the computer contacts appropriate agencies to warn them of the situation and alert local agencies to the potential problems.

"This automated device is more than a computer system against terrorism," Faithbruckner said. "It's the stepping stone to the future of emergency medical services."



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The FirstWatch system was purchased for The Medical Center's EMS along with the Barren County EMS, which also serves Metcalfe County, said Chris Barnett, health promotion coordinator for the Barren River District Health Department.

Barnett coordinates the regional bioterrorism awareness committee for the health department, a committee that began through grants from the federal Health Resources and Services Administration in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The Barren River region received a \$50,000 grant to set up the committee, and about \$30,000 of that money was spent to purchase and install the FirstWatch system for the two EMS departments, Barnett said.

"It's an early warning system," she said. "In some cases, it can pick things up before health care workers even notice that a pattern is developing."

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