

Alabama Getaway

On the road and back at home, The Alabama Department of Public Health serves up instant training via satellite ■ Ed Wesolowski

WHILE IT ISN'T EVERY DAY THAT Michael Smith, director of distance education for the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH), is interrupted mid-sentence with a request for an emergency training program that must reach thousands of public health workers within 24 hours, it happens often enough that he's used to the drill by now. When Dr. Tom Miller, head of the ADPH's Bureau of Family Health Services, bursts into his office to tell him that Bureau staff have serious problems with a Federally-funded ADPH program, he knows what to do: mobilize the training network arm of the ADPH, create a program and lock in a transmission time the following day with SpaceConnection, Inc., in Burbank, California, which has an annual contract with the network.

"Typically with training and education we plan programs months out," says Smith, "but we also respond to urgent requests, whether because of threats like anthrax or, in this case, something happens in a department that employees need to know about."

Satellite-Centric

Since 1995, the ADPH has produced an average of 70 satellite con-

The ADPH's satellite uplink truck, with Smith at the controls inside, produces satellite conferences from around the state.

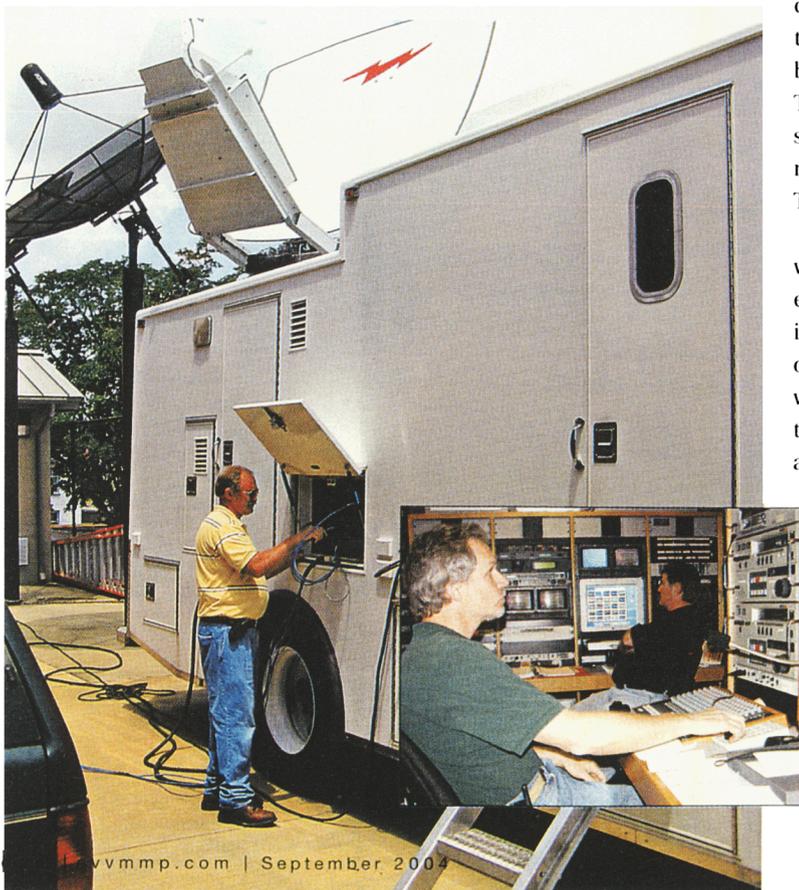
ferences each year, "more than any other state or federal agency," boasts Smith. It produces them both in its 30-ft. x 50-ft. studio in its headquarters in Montgomery, as well as on the road from a dedicated satellite uplink truck.

Prior to 1995, a content specialist, or physician, had to travel around the state and do repeated presentations of the same program. It was expensive and took a lot of time. "That person would train six people and those people, in turn, would train their staff. But with a satellite conference, the content specialist can do a single program and reach the entire workforce," says Smith. The ADPH also provides news feeds to 30 television stations and 133 radio stations, as well as print for several hundred newspapers around the state.

Delivering health care in the largely rural state of 4.5 million people had always been a challenge for the ADPH. When satellite technology was first considered in the early 1990s as a means to deliver the bulk of the ADPH's training and outreach, it was quickly seen as a salve to the sky-rocketing costs, time and logistical hurdles the ADPH was experiencing. The Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta then funded a pilot satellite conference in Alabama with the condition that it run one of the CDC's courses for public health professionals, which were typically taught in the classroom on the CDC campus. "It turned into a series of six satellite conferences, one hour each," says Smith. The program was uplinked from Auburn University in Eastern Alabama. ADPH staff around the state attended via nearby satellite receive sites in the U.S. Department of Agriculture Extension Offices. Following the success of the initial pilot, ADPH again partnered in 1993 with CDC to replicate the program, but at the national level. That pilot became the model for the Public Health Training Network the CDC uses today to deliver public health

communications across the country. The Alabama Public Health Training Network is the state affiliate of the national Public Health Training Network.

The Alabama network had another early advantage: an innovative state health officer, Dr. Earl Fox, who worked tirelessly to help both the media and the state's population better understand critical issues such as infant mortality, sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy. The urgency of his outreach helped fuel the ADPH's developing reliance on



satellite delivery.

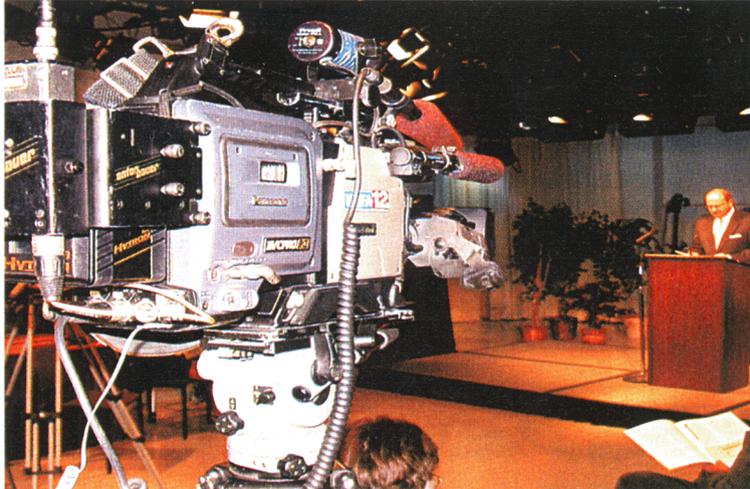
Today, a nine-person staff at the Distance Education group programs and manages the Alabama Public Health Training Network both in Montgomery and out of the satellite truck on the road. When parked near its headquarters, the truck also transmits programs from the group's ninth floor studio via a dedicated fiber optic cable.

Tools Under the Hood

The truck, with an Andrew Corporation 2.4 meter transportable satellite antenna, was built in 1995 by Frontline Communications, Inc., in Clearwater, Florida. State-owned, steerable C/Ku band dishes used to receive the network's programs were purchased for 65 of the state's 67 counties. Analog receivers are being upgraded to more user-friendly Motorola 4DTV analog/ digital receivers.

Inside the network's regular studio, new Strand lighting instruments and a dimmer board are used with the studio's fully outfitted lighting grid. Cameras for both studio or mobile production include five Sony CA 327's configured with Vinten Vision 5 head/tripods; a sixth camera serves as a document camera. The studio and truck also both have a Ross RVS-216A (16 input) switcher. A single BetaSP back is fitted to one of the portable Sony cameras for field recording. An upgrade to digital cameras with FireWire output is planned.

The group's editing and playback equipment is helping to



The ADPH produces satellite conferences from its 30-ft. x 50-ft. studio in its headquarters in Montgomery, Alabama.

nudge it toward a completely digital workflow. Five Apple Mac G4s, running Final Cut Pro 4 are connected via a LAN and a 1 GB switch. The LAN is supplemented with seven Laird Telemedia capdiv direct DV recorders (4.5 hr. recording time each).

The group also recently added a RealNetworks Helix Server and bandwidth license upgrade to support increased streaming video and live online viewers. While Smith concedes that IP delivery of the Department's many programs may be the way of the future, he doesn't see satellite delivery going away any time soon. ■

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