Recapping the National Association of State Technology Directors (NASTD) Conference

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As the 2013 National Association of State Technology Directors (NASTD) Conference wrapped up, both vendors and state IT officials may have left Charleston, S.C., with one message pounding in their heads: Watch out for storm clouds on the horizon.

Concerns over cybersecurity, employee retention and the pending roll out of FirstNet – the national public safety broadband initiative – dominated this year's conversation as NASTD officials packed sessions with multiple speakers on each topic. Each subject has been more or less driven by a combination of current events and long-term trends.

The long-awaited wave of retiring baby boomers is finally underway and wreaking havoc on the ability of federal and state agencies to replace experienced personnel and retain institutional memory. After four years of planning and design, federal officials are getting ready to tally the number of states that will opt in to the federal FirstNet broadband plan and those that will build their own network. States received a wakeup call in October 2012 when nearly 4 million social security numbers and credit card data were hacked from South Carolina's state government. The cyberattack brought to life the warnings that cybersecurity officials in the public and private sector have been quietly raising for years.

Most of the speakers opted to take an awareness approach and attempted to lay out the dire problems and statistics as plainly as possible; not because they were dodging the issues, but often because there are no obvious solutions to these problems. Besides, that wasn't necessarily their job. Ultimately, these challenges are going to have to be addressed by the people who were sitting in the audience.

The dominant themes among these kinds of conferences for the past few years has been the recession, budget cuts and figuring out how to maintain service levels with fewer resources. The conversation has begun to shift, but the major themes of NASTD 2013 demonstrated that the end of one crisis often provides state IT officials with just enough breathing room to prepare for the next.

Cybersecurity in the age of cloud adoption and the mobile workforce will be one of the preeminent issues state and local governments deal with over the next 3-5 years. The volume and sophistication of attacks directed at state governments is rising at an alarming pace every year, which means that more state CIOs are going to be expected to pursue aggressive security strategies over the next few budget cycles. More attacks similar to the South Carolina hack will ensure that funding and budgets for these areas are robust. Dedicated network penetration and training for staff to help identify common phishing techniques and personnel security measures were two methods that most security officials stressed at the conference.

In the public safety realm, vendors should be on the lookout for another handful of RFIs dealing with FirstNet development and implementation. Whether a state opts in or out of the federal plan, the NTIA foresees a considerable amount of private sector involvement for this project over the next few years, which is good news for vendors nationwide.

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