Homeland Security

ECF
Emergency Communications Forum

Office of Emergency Communications

Volume 3, September 2010

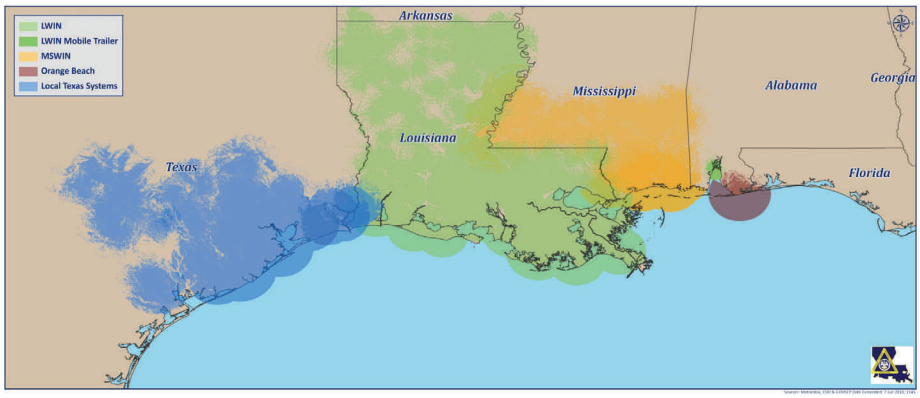
Oil in the Gulf: Planning for the Unknown

By Brant Mitchell, Louisiana Statewide Interoperability Coordinator

The Deepwater Horizon BP oil spill off the coast of Louisiana led to one of the country's largest environmental disasters. Though clean-up efforts are ongoing, emergency response operations have been effective. Louisiana and the Gulf Coast are demonstrating how a robust communications system can lead to an effective response.*

Technology

Following Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana statewide officials invested in improving interoperable and operable communications throughout the State, and the results have been evident during the response to the BP oil spill. Radio coverage in the State extends beyond what is depicted in coverage maps (below). Louisiana's Project 25 (P25) 700/800 MHz system provides 90 percent portable radio coverage across the State. Enhancing multi-State interoperability, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas each follow P25 protocols. Through partnerships and training, the Gulf Region communications network spans from Galveston, Texas to Pensacola, Florida. The P25 systems that make up the network were able to recognize each radio being utilized, allowing a single radio to roam between all systems.



Usage

From the moment that the explosion occurred, interagency coordination was tested. Local responders communicated with the US Coast Guard, and within 12 hours of putting out a request, a communications system was established. Fortunately, Coast Guard members were already familiar with Louisiana's radio system after using it during an oil spill response in 2009. To facilitate information sharing, daily conference calls were held during the planning stages with Federal, State, and local officials.

Standard Operating Procedures

Recovery operations benefitted from years of governance planning and relationship building. Louisiana coordinated with surrounding States to create talk groups designated for the spill. Now responders from across disciplines and in multiple States can switch their radios to a pre-determined, designated zone for each State. At the same time, they are able to remain in the same talk group, regardless of which of the four States they are operating from.

Training and Exercises

There are three Communications Unit Leaders (COMLs) in the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness who have been communicating closely with COMLs at the Federal, State, and local levels. Regardless of their level of government, each of these COMLs was trained under the same Incident Command System approach. This standard training allowed them to communicate easily.

COMLs were essential to the response, initiating the process of action planning and leading major communications efforts throughout operations. The COML concept really came to fruition in Louisiana during this incident. COMLs were involved at the State, Federal, and local levels, a dynamic that would not have been possible just two years ago. It gives significant credibility to what is happening at the national level.

Governance

This incident underscored the importance of increased governance planning and partnerships. Already, Louisiana is looking to expand its communications network to interconnect with Arkansas as well. Even though Arkansas is not directly affected by the spill, taking an all-hazards approach now will prepare States for future disasters in the region. Building on this initiative, when Louisiana updates their Statewide Communication Interoperability Plan in 2011, it will put a very heavy emphasis on pre-planning for multi-State initiatives.

Federal, State, and local agencies are demonstrating that they are more prepared and coordinated than ever before.

* The response to the oil spill utilized all five of the lanes of the SAFECOM Interoperability Continuum, as demonstrated by the article sections.

NECP Two Years Later: Impact of the Nation's First Strategic Plan

On July 31, 2008, the Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) delivered to Congress the Nation's first strategic plan to improve emergency communications. The National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP) was developed with input from more than 150 stakeholders representing Federal, State, local, and tribal responders across the Nation, and includes 3 strategic Goals, 7 objectives, and 92 milestones that provide guidance for emergency responders and government officials to make measureable improvements in emergency communications.

Through the course of implementing the NECP, there have been significant improvements in the effectiveness of emergency response. Coordination across the Federal government and with State, local, tribal, and territorial partners has significantly increased. More targeted policies, grant funding, and technical assistance are improving emergency communications capabilities. Today, two years after the release of the NECP, over 80 percent of the milestones recommended for OEC, Federal partners, and State and local communities have been met.

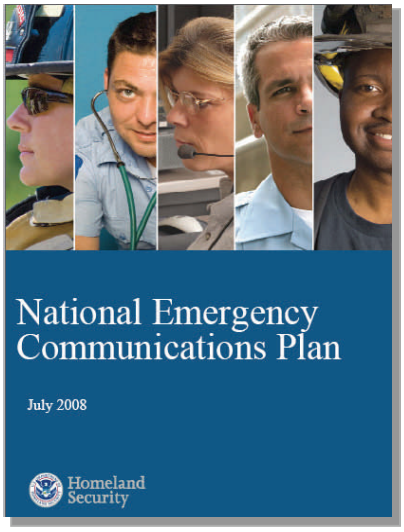
"I can't overestimate the positive impact OEC and the NECP have had on our statewide public safety communications governance, planning, and implementation efforts."

—Boyd Webb
Utah Statewide Interoperability Coordinator

Focus on Governance

The NECP was written with the understanding that each of the 56 States and territories have unique emergency response needs and challenges. States have updated their Statewide Communication Interoperability Plans (SCIPs) to coordinate with and complement the NECP. In order to ensure States' individual progress, and also to facilitate collaboration among States, the NECP recommended that every State appoint a Statewide Interoperability Coordinator (SWIC).

Prior to the creation of the NECP, the State of Utah coordinated emergency response through a technology-oriented committee called the Utah Wireless Integrated Network (UWIN). According to Boyd Webb, Utah's SWIC, the charter directed the committee to develop a planning strategy for interoperability. For a variety of reasons, the strategy failed to resonate with the emergency response community. Through grant support and guidance, OEC was able to assist Utah's efforts to restore statewide governance.



"The truth is, we didn't really know how to meet the [planning strategy] requirement, or what a SCIP should even look like until OEC took the initiative to provide the necessary guidance," says Webb. "More important than that, however, was the credibility OEC provided to the statewide planning process… replacing the political chaos with sufficient motivation to find common ground and work together under a Statewide Interoperability Executive Committee focused on emergency responder communications."

Utah was not alone when it came to needing governance assistance. Today, 44 States and territories now have full-time SWICs or an equivalent position to drive interstate and intrastate coordination. To further coordination and provide a forum for discussion and innovation, OEC developed a council for all SWICs, allowing them to access model policies and lessons learned.

OEC also provides targeted, on-site technical assistance to support the alignment of statewide plans with the NECP. In 2010, OEC conducted 50 follow-on workshops to implement SCIPs (for more information see article on page 3).

The Nation now has a network of emergency response leaders, statewide plans, and governance structures, ensuring effective information sharing, integrated planning, and increased trust and collaboration within the emergency response community.

The Path Forward

Outcomes from NECP implementation have informed State and local emergency responder agencies planning and coordination. Emphasis on multi-jurisdictional, multi-agency planning and has increased coordination. This year, the high-risk urban areas designated in the Urban Areas Security Initiative Program are formally demonstrating their progress by evaluating the capabilities of response-level communications in order to meet Goal 1 of the NECP.

Just as OEC collaborated with the emergency response community to develop the NECP, OEC continues to partner with nationwide stakeholders to fully implement the NECP and ensure the emergency response community remains on track to meet the milestones and Goals.

2010 SCIP Implementation Workshops

Statewide Communication Interoperability Plan (SCIP) Implementation Workshops are quickly becoming a major component of statewide emergency communications planning efforts. Over 1,300 stakeholders nationwide participated in the first round of workshops in FY 2009. Since then, the workshops have gained momentum with 50 States and territories hosting SCIP Implementation Workshops in FY 2010. With support from the Office of Emergency Communications (OEC), Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (SWICs) gathered State and local emergency response stakeholders to discuss SCIP implementation efforts and prepare for National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP) Goal 2 measurement.

"I consider it a good session when people feel like they can ask each other for help and that they can make things better today."

—Lisa Meyerson
Statewide Interoperability Coordinator, Arizona

Goal 2 states:

"By 2011, 75 percent of non-Urban Area Security Initiative jurisdictions are able to demonstrate response-level emergency communications within one hour for routine events involving multiple jurisdictions and agencies."

During the SCIP workshops, OEC staff worked with statewide officials to identify a methodology for measuring Goal 2 within the State. Each State will report their selected methodology in their FY 2010 SCIP Implementation reports due later this year.

Participants focused on one of the following four service offerings, according to the needs of their State:

- SCIP initiative planning
- SCIP update
- SCIP implementation governance.
- Statewide interoperability education and outreach

Education and outreach proved to be the most popular. This service offering provided States with the tools and strategy to increase awareness of interoperability with elected officials.

Following a discussion about education and outreach, Arizona SWIC, Lisa Meyerson, noted that participants left with an "understanding that they need to be addressing these issues as part of their role as emergency response leaders." To support participants in this new role, OEC staff discussed a variety of communications methods that can be used to harness the attention of decision makers. For example, participants identified key audiences, key messages, roles and responsibilities, and next steps for increasing awareness of interoperability in the State.

Arizona stakeholders from across the State also used the opportunity to share their own communications approaches. Stakeholders collectively discussed lessons learned, best practices, and new strategies to engage decision makers. While this information will ultimately be used to develop a comprehensive, statewide outreach plan, Meyerson was pleased with the immediate effect the session had on the group. She remarked, "People were helping each other. They didn't have to wait for this big communications plan to get started now. I consider it [valuable] when people feel like they can ask each other for help and that they can make things better today."

Statewide Communications Interoperability Workshop participants on April 13, 2010 in Phoenix, Arizona

Across the Nation, SCIP Implementation Workshops served as a forum to address important initiatives and prepare for Goal 2 measurement. The interactive nature of the workshops reenergized SWICs and stakeholders alike, fostering innovative ideas and techniques for continued progress toward statewide interoperability.

From the Field:
Flooding in Tennessee

Last May, Tennessee experienced torrential rain falls, resulting in flood waters as high as 19 inches. The flooding led to 24 deaths in Tennessee and caused major damage to notable Nashville landmarks, including the Grand Ole Opry House. From the outset, the scope of this historic disaster tested emergency response efforts at all agency levels - Federal, State, and local. Yet despite the unprecedented conditions, the emergency response community in Tennessee was able to mount a coordinated response based upon strong partnerships and effective training.

Louis Friedmann, Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) Director for Operations and Communications and Tennessee's Statewide Interoperability Coordinator credits partnerships with much of the success of flood response. With 3,000 State and 20,000 local jurisdiction personnel, 1,000 mutual aid responders from unaffected jurisdictions, personnel from 15 Federal agencies, and more than 50,000 volunteers on site, responders were forced to rely on existing relationships to properly plan and coordinate responses. Multi-discipline and cross-jurisdictional collaboration among responders at Federal, State, and local levels was in part attributed to having strong relationships in place well before the rain descended.

Bill Jorgensen, *9-1-1 Director* for the Williamson County Department of Emergency Communications, recounted a scenario in which existing relationships were essential to communications. At one point during the flooding, Williamson County dispatchers began receiving 9-1-1 calls from neighboring Davidson County, which included Nashville's hardest hit areas.

"It's all about relationships. [Even with] a million-dollar command post, operations will not function properly if relationships haven't been built."
-Bill Jorgenson
Williamson County Dept. of Emergency Communications

Fortunately, Jorgensen already knew Nashville Communications Captain Lisa Fulton from a joint exercise, and he was able to call Fulton to coordinate the situation. Within minutes, Jorgensen's team in Williamson County was forwarding calls to Davidson County, ensuring that these urgent calls were handled effectively.

Partnerships also proved invaluable in the field. Response teams comprised of responders from multiple disciplines and jurisdictions relied on their Communications Unit Leaders (COMLs) for effective, efficient communications. The State of Tennessee continues to devote much time and effort for COML training.

Photo courtesy of Williamson County 9-1-1, taken May 5, 2010 in Tennessee

In the months before the flood, Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program (IECGP) funds were used to provide COML training throughout Tennessee and to conduct three large-scale practical communications exercises in West, Middle, and East Tennessee. Officials in Tennessee experienced first-hand the benefits of these earlier investments in training.

(continued on page 5)

(continued from page 4)

Only in the past few years have COMLs become standardized roles within the field. The Office of Emergency Communications, within the Department of Homeland Security, has hosted a series of COML training courses that train responders across the Nation to take charge of Communications Unit efforts on the scene of an incident.

Jorgensen praised the training courses, saying "the COML Training is more than just a class, it's a movement - it's a movement for public safety to start working together…but it's not going to happen overnight…we are training a lot of younger folks, and [they] are going to be the leaders in the future."

Jorgensen concludes, "In a perfect world, everyone would be working together all the time and put aside their differences. Relationships are the key to our Nation's security."

Photo courtesy of Williamson County 9-1-1
Taken May 5, 2010 in Tennessee

WyoLink: An Innovative Federal-State Resource Sharing Project

US Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary Greg Schaffer (right) discusses the WyoLink network with Martin McCoy (left), Support Manager for WyoLink.

Department of Homeland Security Assistant Secretary Greg Schaffer recently visited Cheyenne, Wyoming, where he met with Wyoming Governor Dave Freudenthal and observed a demonstration of the WyoLink statewide communications network. The Office of Emergency Communications established a partnership among the Departments of the Interior, Justice, and Homeland Security, and the State of Wyoming to develop an innovative Federal-State resource sharing agreement known as the *Wyoming Interoperability Demonstration Project*. Through this agreement, Federal agencies provide Wyoming access to spectrum and land for building out a statewide system. In return, Wyoming provides Federal agencies access to its statewide system, which significantly increases Federal wireless coverage and capabilities across the State. This approach results in cost savings and improved capabilities for Federal and State agencies in Wyoming; more broadly, this arrangement offers a model that can be repeated in many regions across the Nation.

About the Office of Emergency Communications

The mission of the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) is to support and promote the ability of emergency responders and government officials to continue to communicate in the event of natural disasters, acts of terrorism, or other man-made disasters, and work to ensure, accelerate, and attain interoperable and operable emergency communications nationwide.

The *Emergency Communications Forum* (ECF), published by OEC is intended to engage and inform the emergency response community, policy makers, and Federal, State, local, and tribal officials about issues and events that directly affect everyday nationwide emergency communications.

We would love to feature your story in future editions of the ECF. Please send any articles or content ideas to oec@dhs.gov