

COMMUNICATIONS

Interoperability key to firefighters' future success

By Lorraine Murphy
DHS Systems LLC

As firefighters battled flames inside the Twin Towers on Sept. 11, 2001 they were faced with an even larger obstacle. Fire rescue personnel, lacking communications equipment compatible with that used by other responders at the scene, including members of the New York Police Department, were unable to receive warnings of the buildings' inevitable collapse.

Many police officials were able to safely evacuate, but 343 firefighters lost their lives while responding to the attack on the World Trade Center. Several reports about the incident, including that produced by the 9/11 Commission, claim that a lack of interoperability was greatly to blame.

Though the need for interoperability garnered national attention after 9/11,

communication between different agencies has long been an issue. Incidents across the country, including the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 and the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, have proven that interoperability is crucial for responders to safely and quickly complete their mission.

Firefighters arguably have one of the greatest needs for communication with other agencies. Participating in response efforts during small and large-scale disasters alike, fire rescue personnel must be able to work with various de-



bridging devices, has been greatly promoted by federal grants. These devices let users connect different radios with different frequencies to a single unit, ultimately allowing different agencies to speak with one another.

Getting Local Responders Involved

With the U.S. government looking at ways to overcome responders' lack of interoperability across the country, it's equally crucial that state and local agencies, including fire departments, examine their needs and design an interoperability plan based on their operations.

A department's equipment needs ultimately fall into one of three categories – local, regional or global. Local interoperability allows multiple departments, such as fire rescue personnel, police and EMS responders, to bridge different radio frequencies and communicate with each other.

Regional interoperability is needed for departments, from local organizations to state agencies to the National Guard, often called to respond to regional incidents. This type of plan may include the use of satellite phones and internet access.

Responders expected to take part in response efforts during a wide-scale event would most likely need to implement a global interoperability plan, possibly featuring broadband internet access and VoIP phone lines.

Building a command center

Equally important as pur-

partments on the local, state and federal level.

Rise of interoperable equipment

Interoperable equipment has been on the rise in recent years as the government has worked toward improving inter-agency communication during disasters. This equipment allows responders from various departments to communicate with one another regardless of differences in equipment or hardware.

Interoperable equipment also helps different departments consolidate communication operations, share information and coordinate plans during joint response efforts and save money by investing in a single system to be shared by the various agencies.

Commercial companies have introduced several types of communications technology that allow multiple users to share one system. One form of this technology, radio

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chasing the right communications equipment is creating a facility that can serve as a centralized location from which command efforts can be organized and executed during a crisis.

Responders need a command post that can not only safely store all the equipment needed to complete their operations, but that is mobile enough to be deployed directly at the scene of any emergency — no matter its location.

Many departments have found that traditional command trailers are too large and not flexible enough for their wide range of responsibilities. As a result, some companies have begun to produce smaller, more modular command posts.

DHS Systems LLC recently introduced the Reeves Incident Command Post (ICP) Trailer, a trailer and shelter combination designed for fire rescue personnel to quickly and easily establish command and control directly at the incident scene.

The ICP features a lightweight trailer that can be towed behind most vehicles, as well as a military-grade shelter built to withstand harsh environmental conditions — from wind gusts of up to 65 mph to free falling and blowing rain. Additionally, a console can be used to store a department's communications equipment or one of the ICP's optional interoperable communications packages.

Continuous improvement

As departments begin to explore the various com-

munications equipment and command posts available, they must also be prepared to continuously examine and improve their response plans if they hope to truly achieve interoperability.

Some states have created organizations whose purpose is to ensure that various agencies can communicate with one another. These groups examine responders' operational needs and update interoperability plans accordingly.

The State Interoperability Executive Committee (SIEC) in Washington works with the state and local governments to allow departments to share information through

voice and data signals as needed. In Virginia, the government has established the Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator's Office (CICO) and the State Interoperability Executive Committee (SIEC) to work with interoperability experts to create and continue to update a statewide communications plan that meets the needs of all responders.

Other states currently rely on responders themselves to determine what equipment and plans need to be in place so that they can successfully complete joint operations. Agencies in these states must work together to upgrade their technology when necessary and conduct proper training to prepare personnel to implement the plan during a real-life emergency.

Implementing interoperability now

Whether expected to take the reins or work alongside

the government, departments must begin to create an interoperability plan and obtain the right tools to make the plan a reality. Disasters have proven time and time again that communication is essential for first responders — including firefighters —

to be able to perform their duties and, more importantly, stay safe while doing so.

To access a white paper on interoperability, visit www.reevesicp.com/whitepaper.

Lorraine Murphy is the Communications Coordinator at DHS

Systems LLC and has had several articles about the issues facing today's first responders, including the need for interoperability, printed in publications across the country. She can be reached at lmurphy@drash.com.



Lorraine Murphy

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