Homeland Security

Office of Emergency Communications

OEC Bulletin

Connecting Emergency Responders, Keeping America Safe

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

OEC Goes South—and North—of the Border

Cross-border interoperability plays a critical role in both homeland security and emergency preparedness. OEC's efforts in this area are gaining visibility among Congress and the public. On February 19, 2008 OEC Director Chris Essid testified before Congress at a field hearing in Laredo, Texas—just north of the Mexican border. His testimony addressed cross-border communications challenges related to spectrum management, international telecommunications policy, information security, and inter-governmental coordination.

Achieving interoperability at the domestic level is challenging enough, but coordinating emergency communications internationally can mean an even higher level of complexity. Given the unique challenges such as language barriers, use of different spectrum bands, system security concerns, and international negotiations, enhancing cross-border interoperability requires both significant effort and extraordinary collaboration among nations.

In coordination with its stakeholders and partners, including the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), OEC is working to improve cross-border interoperable communications through a number of initiatives.

> *"This issue is of great importance to the first responders and citizens living on the borders, and my staff and I consider it a priority."*
>
> —Chris Essid, OEC Director

Some of the key initiatives in this area include the following:

- United States-Mexico High Level Consultative Commission on Telecommunications (HLCC) Security Communications Task Group (SCTG);
- The 2010 Olympics Task Force Security Subcommittee, Communications Interoperable Working Group;
- The Federal Partnership for Interoperable Communications Southwest Border Communications Working Group (see page 2 for more details).

During his testimony, Director Essid stressed OEC's commitment to cross-border interoperability: "OEC will continue to cultivate relationships among North American users and regulatory agencies across all levels of government to better identify and address barriers to interoperability."

Southwest Border Communications Working Group

OEC recognizes the serious need for effective cross-governmental emergency communications along the southwest border of the Nation. To assist in meeting the requirements of all stakeholders in this region, OEC through its involvement in the Federal Partnership for Interoperable Communications (FPIC) created the Southwest Border Communications Working Group (SWB CWG). The SWB CWG held its first general meeting in Albuquerque, NM, in November 2007, during which participants focused on identifying existing and planned Federal, State, regional, local and tribal communications systems along the border and any opportunities for immediate sharing of information, infrastructure, or other network resources. Attendees also approved general objectives, developed a draft charter, and identified participants for the State-level working groups, which will begin to hold meetings in March 2008.

The objectives of the SWB CWG are as follows:

- Ensuring coordination and collaboration among programs
- Coordinating potential infrastructure and resource sharing
- Sharing information among participants

In addition to OEC, active participants in the SWB CWG include: Customs and Border Protection; Immigration and Customs Enforcement; U.S. Department of Defense; U.S. Department of the Interior; U.S. Department of Justice, State public safety and emergency management departments; State and local law enforcement and fire departments; and other local government entities.

For more information on the Southwest Border Communications Working Group, cross-border communications issues or the Federal Partnership for Interoperable Communications, please contact OEC at oec@hq.dhs.gov.

ICTAP Observes 2008 Gasparilla Festival

Every year, under the watchful eyes of public safety officials in Tampa, FL, Mayor Pam Iorio hands over the key to the city to "pirates" at the annual Gasparilla Festival and Parade. This year, the pirate-themed celebration, one of Florida's most famous public events, took place on January 26. Like many large-scale, widely-attended events, Gasparilla presents unique interoperability challenges to the public safety agencies in the vicinity, including the Tampa Police Department, Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office, and U.S. Coast Guard.

This year, representatives from OEC's Interoperable Communications Technical Assistance Program (ICTAP) joined local public safety officials to observe the celebration. Since 2005, ICTAP has worked with the Tampa Police Department and member agencies of the Tampa Urban Area Working Group to implement and provide program support for a number of communications technologies under the Tampa Bay Demonstration Project.

"OEC's ICTAP support to the Tampa Bay project has helped the entire area realize substantial gains in interoperability."

—Assistant Chief Castor, Tampa Police Department

This year's festival saw the rollout of a Web-based portal providing situational awareness for the festival, to include fusing data and video communications into a common operating picture. This platform, implemented as the Tampa Bay Safety Net Emergency Data Awareness Portal, is part of the Tampa Bay Demonstration Project, and a collaborative effort between OEC and the DHS Science and Technology Rapid Technology Application Program.

A Hillsborough County Sheriff Office's deputy keeps close watch over the boating activities during the Gasparilla Festival.

According to Tampa Police Assistant Chief Jane Castor, "ICTAP assistance has ranged from engineering support for three communications vans to detailed review of land mobile radio systems proposals. Tampa has benefited immeasurably from this DHS program."

New Hampshire's Uniform Frequency Matrix Permits Easy Interoperability

As New Hampshire first responders prepared for the State's presidential primary, they knew this year's election would pose a particular challenge to efficient emergency communications coordination. On the Democratic side, Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign came to town complete with a former First Lady, a former U.S. President, and Secret Service agents.

In describing how New Hampshire has addressed their interoperability challenges, Colonel Frederick H. Booth, New Hampshire State Police explains, "We are lucky to have a standard VHF platform for all first responders." They use a frequency matrix—Colonel Booth refers to it as a "godsend"—developed for police, fire, and EMS that coordinates frequencies for all disciplines and jurisdictions. "For the first time in New Hampshire's history, it is possible for one police agency to talk to another police agency across the state, and with fire and EMS personnel."

Police set up communication lines outside of campaign headquarters for Democratic Presidential hopeful, Hillary Clinton.

The frequency matrix, jointly funded by New Hampshire and Federal grants, is what Booth calls a "true partnership of State, county, and local departments that have worked hard to cooperate with each other." Besides developing the frequency matrix, a table which designates frequencies for specific uses, the partnership resulted in the distribution of 5,000 mobile and 10,000 portable radios and new infrastructure, including mountaintop equipment on the law enforcement side. "We have truly upgraded statewide from top to bottom," says Colonel Booth.

Hostages Taken at Clinton's Campaign Headquarters

The ability of New Hampshire State and local agencies to communicate seamlessly with each other enabled a well-coordinated law enforcement response to the hostage situation at Hillary Clinton's campaign headquarters on November 30, 2007. "The incident generated a multi-agency response," says Colonel Booth. The local Rochester (NH) Police Department assumed command and immediately activated the regional SWAT team; the State Police also activated its SWAT team to provide an immediate response before Federal agencies could arrive on the scene and resolve the crisis. "Part of the successful response was because we have a well-used communications

path with all frequencies plugged in," Colonel Booth says. "When you have a large group of first responders—the perimeter team, SWAT, the negotiations team—that kind of communications provides the opportunity for the left hand to know what the right hand is doing."

This incident underlined a crucial component to multi-discipline response the Communications Unit Leader (COML).

> *"When we did our nationwide Tactical Interoperable Communications Plan (TICP) exercise 18 months ago, it was clear how important the role of COML is in overall operations."*
>
> —Colonel Frederick Booth, New Hampshire State Police

"This is a huge must," he emphasizes. "They coordinate the response of each of the special units. You need them to ensure that the teams don't compete for the same resources. The hostage situation had the potential to escalate into an event across the whole spectrum of public safety response," he says. "It could have gone from a hostage situation to include a fire or injuries, requiring a multi-discipline response where the organized coordination of radio communications is critical."

In Memoriam:
Marilyn Praisner

Marilyn Praisner, a five-term Montgomery County, MD council member and a long-time member of the National Association of Counties (NACo), died in February, following complications from surgery. She was 66.

She represented local government on a variety of Federal, State and regional public safety communications committees including serving as the Chairwoman of the SAFECOM Executive Committee. She also represented local government on public safety communications committees including the National Task Force on Interoperability, Federal Communications Commission's Local and State Government Advisory Committee, and the Public Safety Wireless Network (PSWN) program—all in addition to being the longest serving woman ever on the Montgomery County Council.

"What always impressed me the most throughout my 29-year friendship and collaboration with Marilyn was her steadfast resolve to serve constituents, listen to concerns, and advocate for first responders and public safety. She was the hardest-working public official I ever knew," said Rocky Lopes of NACo. "Her ability to grasp the most intricate of details was amazing, as well as her responsiveness. It was quite common to receive email from her sent at 2 o'clock in the morning," Lopes continued.

While the practitioner community mourns the loss of one of its most-vocal interoperability advocates, Mr. Lopes recommends, "We can pay tribute to her by continuing our efforts to support interoperable communications, particularly in building and sustaining governance structures to ensure that all can communicate when emergencies occur."

Long-time member of NACo, Marilyn Praisner, passed away at age 66.

SCIP and PSIC IJ Peer Review Process

More than a hundred Federal, State, and local public safety practitioners across the Nation volunteered to participate in the Statewide Communications Interoperability Plan (SCIP) and Public Safety Interoperable Communications (PSIC) Investment Justification (IJ) peer review process. In phase one of a two-phase process, the peers completed individual reviews of the SCIPs and IJs. In phase two, the peers convened the week of February 11th in St. Louis, MO and participated in panel discussions to discuss their individual reviews.

"Getting together with professionals from across the country was wonderful. It made for lively discussion, great debate, and the development of a sense of 'we're all in this together.'"

—SCIP/IJ Peer Reviewer commenting on the review process

OEC, in conjunction with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Grant Programs Directorate (GPD) and the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), oversaw the peer review process. OEC is currently evaluating all the information collected from the peers to make final approval decisions on the SCIPs.

As a follow-up to the peer review process, OEC will provide each State and territory with feedback from the peer reviewers on how the State/territory can further enhance their essential interoperable communications strategic planning and implementation efforts for the future. Feedback will be provided no later than April 4, 2008.

OEC's UPCOMING EVENTS

MAY

23 Nevada Interoperability Communications Conference (NICC), Reno, NV

28 NACo Interoperable Communications Working Forum

JUNE

3 SAFECOM Executive Committee/Emergency Response Council Meeting, Washington D.C.

23-26 Adjutants General of the United States, Spring Conference 2008

For additional information on the Office of Emergency Communications or its initiatives, please email oec@hq.dhs.gov.