

Challenges Facing First Responders In Border Communities

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Good morning, Chairman Cuellar, Ranking Member Dent, and members of the subcommittee. My name is Christopher H. Lombard of the Seattle, Washington, Fire Department. Today, I come before you as one of our Nation's first-responders. My purpose today is to share insights with you regarding critical public safety issues, especially those that impact the border regions of our Country. I appreciate how very similar our jobs are – in that we are all united in the effort to serve the safety needs of citizens.

I feel privileged to have accumulated a wealth of practical experience from the field and to have a diverse background in Geography (resource allocation), communications, firefighting and Emergency Medical Services (EMS). It is through these roles that I support many of the communications efforts of the Seattle Fire Department and the Seattle Urban Area. My background and experience have allowed me to become involved in many national public safety related efforts. Noteworthy among these are the following:

- The InterAgency Board for Equipment Standardization and Interoperability (IAB)¹
- National standards development - Committee for the National Fire Protection Association's Standard 1221(related to Emergency Service Communications)
- Communications policy guidance for national emergency-response - SAFECOM²
- National incident response (FEMA – Urban Search and Rescue teams and Metropolitan Medical Strike Teams).

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the committee members, for the opportunity to discuss some of these issues that we, in the fire service, have as a result of operating in, and near America's border regions. I would like to discuss three key issue areas:

1. Successes
2. Communications Issues, and,
3. Our Nation's Ports.

SUCCESSSES

The first responder communities, in cooperation with our state and federal partners, have implemented several efforts that are having a positive impact on the safety and effectiveness of our work. I would like to thank you for your support of these very successful endeavors that are truly making a change for the better. While some of these successes are not necessarily border community specific, they have had a positive impact on these border communities, as well.

RESPONDER KNOWLEDGE BASE

The Responder Knowledge Base (RKB)³ is a web-based information service for the emergency responder community funded by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and hosted by the National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT). RKB operates as a public service, with no cost to users and no cost to information contributors such as product manufacturers. Thousands of jurisdictions and departments, as well as virtually all State

¹ <http://www.iab.gov>

² <http://www.safecomprogram.gov/SAFECOM/>

³ <https://www.rkb.mipt.org/>

Administrative Agencies, now use the RKB on a regular basis to obtain grant guidance and unbiased product information.

The RKB is unique in that, while supported by the government, it is not an official government endeavor. This independence has allowed the RKB to function almost like a 'Consumer Reports' for the equipment we use – first responders are able to describe firsthand experience with equipment (pro and con), opinions can be expressed, brands can be mentioned specifically, etc. Its users come from all disciplines (Fire, EMS, Law Enforcement, Emergency Management, Utilities, Transportation, Private Industry, etc.) and are in every state.

The RKB continues to gain acceptance, among first responders, as 'The First Place To Go' for finding out information pertaining to available grants, information about the equipment we use (with the ability to dialogue with other first responders about equipment pros and cons – based on firsthand experience), relevant standards applicable to that equipment, and more.

I know of no other single source of information that remains as current, accurate and easy to navigate regarding the equipment we use and need. The RKB is adamant about being directed by the needs of the thousands of first responders who access it. It is my understanding that the RKB itself is funded through a grant application processes. Energies that could be focused toward greater 'Information Exchange' for first responders must be directed toward assuring continued funding for the next year. I would request that the RKB be given your continued support and that you consider funding this valuable resource in a more permanent fashion.

The InterAgency Board for Equipment Standardization and Interoperability (IAB)

The IAB is designed to establish and coordinate local, state, and federal standardization, interoperability, compatibility, and responder health and safety to prepare for, train and respond to, mitigate, and recover from any incident by identifying requirements for an all-hazards incident response with a special emphasis on Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear or Explosive (CBRNE) issues.

The IAB's membership roster and their leadership successfully 'eliminates the middle man' by pairing current first responders with federal representatives that have decision making authority. The IAB is "working" because key federal program managers have partnered with first responders to tackle the tough issues that prevent first responders from getting the job done. Simply put, the IAB has been able to quickly and clearly communicate essential needs and translate those needs into tangible equipment solutions, organized efforts, new standards and more.

Like the RKB, the IAB is a source that many turn to for guidance on best practices and I urge you consider continued support for this worthwhile effort.

SAFECOM

SAFECOM is a communications program that provides research, development, testing and evaluation, guidance, tools, and templates on communications-related issues to local, tribal,

state, and Federal emergency response agencies working to improve emergency response through more effective and efficient interoperable wireless communications.

The SAFECOM program within the Department of Homeland is another program serving many different disciplines (Fire, EMS, Law Enforcement, etc.) and regions. We appreciate the work that SAFECOM has been able to accomplish in bringing our nation's first responders closer toward interoperability.

SAFECOM recognizes that many locales have expert knowledge about what they need to improve their own respective communications. SAFECOM's role is to help assure that these 'improvement' efforts around the United States are coordinated – hence gaining interoperability. By starting with, and emphasizing the importance of practitioner level support, and working from the 'ground' up, SAFECOM has been able to achieve first-responder 'buy in' of the national coordination efforts. They continue to involve all disciplines from all levels of government. We appreciate what SAFECOM is doing to unify the Nation's efforts towards interoperable communications amongst first responders (fire, EMS and law enforcement) and their supporting networks (federal response).

SAFECOM has distilled valuable lessons through the execution of their grant guidance programs and sponsored projects. Many state and local communities have benefited, and continue to benefit from SAFECOM efforts as they strive to improve their communications systems.

I would ask you to continue your strong support for this necessary and worthy effort.

COMMUNICATIONS ISSUES

First responders are faced with many challenges in communications that are starting to be resolved. We still have a ways to go on several of these issues, including:

Operability versus interoperability

While interoperability has reached buzz-word status, there continues to be an immense and oft overlooked need for improved, simple operability. Before we can claim significant victories in the area of interoperable communications, (international, cross-border or otherwise) we continue to struggle with simple operability: our ability to just talk amongst ourselves – e.g. fire fighter to fire fighter at the same incident. Interoperability (“The ability of emergency response officials to share information via voice and data signals on demand, in real time, when needed, and as authorized⁴) does continue to be a pressing need. But again, one of the largest challenges facing first responders today is the lack of ‘Operability,’ not interoperability – the most basic ability to communicate within a single jurisdiction.

Earlier this year, Chief James B. Harmes, President of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), in his testimony before the House's Subcommittee on Homeland Security for the Committee on Appropriations, stated that an estimated 65 percent of fire departments do

⁴ <http://www.safecomprogram.gov/SAFECOM/interoperability/default.htm>

not have enough portable radios to equip all emergency responders on a shift. As a friend of mine, former Chief John Eversole (retired from the Chicago Fire Department) would likely have affirmed, **“There are agencies sending fire fighters out the door today that cannot afford to equip them with a radio to talk to other members of their own fire fighting team.”**

When considering both on-shift and off-shift fire and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) personnel, it is estimated that the number having access to radios drops to less than 25 percent. This is significant because, when large incidents occur, agencies can call off-duty members back to duty, but they cannot equip them. It is my understanding that many law enforcement agencies are facing similar deficiencies. This continues as an unacceptable reality, and should be addressed in order to move forward.

It is my understanding that, as a part of implementing some of the 9/11 Commission’s findings, Congress is considering legislation that would provide additional grants, on the order of \$3.3B, for communications related equipment and efforts – **These grants should include provisions for simple operability (not only the purchase of radios, but basic supporting infrastructure, local training, planning and governance too) as well as interoperability.**

As you institute new regulations for other, terrorism-focused homeland security grant programs, please preserve the ‘all-hazards’ FIRE and SAFER Act grant programs – these are one of the ways in which public safety is working toward addressing operability.

Interoperability is a people problem – not a technology problem

The United States has made great strides in recent years towards developing the hardware needed to achieve communications interoperability. Now we need to focus attention on those responders, the people, who will make this hardware work most effectively. FEMA’s NIMS Integration Center (NIC) needs to increase its role in resolving some of the roadblocks. Some of the essential ‘people’ issues we need them to address include:

- National credentialing – At large incidents, local agencies often call for specific assistance from other areas of the country. It is important to know that those coming to assist are who they say they are. The scene of an emergency is not the time or place to confirm that incoming assistance is both qualified and who they say they are.
- Standardization (of qualifications) – when an entity asks for, and receives assistance, there is an expectation that the assistance they receive will be competent to accomplish the required task(s)
- Training – while the NIC is not expected to conduct the training, a mechanism must be in place to assure standardization of the training, as well as qualifications of those who do conduct the training, of those who are trained, and for the ongoing maintenance and updating of training programs.
- Certification – similar to credentialing, there should be a central location responsible for certifying individuals and tracking that certification.

Public safety access to the 700 MHz bandwidth

The first responder community applauds recently passed legislation that will provide additional public safety frequency bandwidth in the 700MHz frequency range. Of all of the discussion about the ‘use-options’ for this new bandwidth, it is important to keep in mind that there are treaties with Canada and Mexico that will be affected by any change in 700 MHz allocation. Some of the aggressive timelines for the various interoperability grants are at odds with these treaties – they specify the purchase of equipment for frequency ranges that, depending on the treaties, may not be available to us.

A significant concern of ours pertains to those portions of the spectrum that are designated for voice versus those that are designated for data. Treaty work with Canada, regarding the initial 700 MHz plans, has already assured that portions of the voice communications will not have cross-border interference. Because the State Department has had to renegotiate our treaties, the 3-5 year planning process of public safety agencies wanting to use these bands will also experience setbacks.

The importance and prioritization of clear voice communications cannot be overemphasized. This is important because it is counterintuitive to the everyday user of communications devices. Consider the communications devices each of you probably use every day. **Despite the popularity of text messaging, if I am having trouble in a fire, or one of my friends in law enforcement is chasing someone, we are not likely to break out a cell phone, two-way pager or other messaging device and start pressing buttons! Preserving voice communications, free from interference, is an important life-safety concern.**

This year, the Commerce Department, through National Telecommunications Information Agency (NTIA), is in the process of awarding the nearly \$1 billion in communications grants to public safety agencies, which you have generously made available. These grants are to be used for the acquisition of equipment for the above described 700MHz frequency range. Unfortunately, because the frequency allocation plans are in flux, and we do not know the current state of our treaties with Canada concerning these frequencies, our ability to efficiently spend these billion dollars in the allotted time is being directly impacted. We feel strongly about our accountability both to you for awarding the grants, and to our public for providing the funding.

In order to effectively implement this change in the amount and/or location of public safety frequencies in the 700MHz bandwidth, we would ask for assistance with better dialogue between the US State Department and those public safety representatives responsible for supporting our communications infrastructure (specifically pertaining to treaty discussions with Canada and Mexico, as relates to the relevant frequency ranges).

Also, if private industry is to build out a nationwide broadband network for public safety use, it is critical to have a strong public safety presence to protect the interests of public safety. There is a large concern that rural areas will be left out of any private/public partnerships for the construction of infrastructure. The National Public Safety Telecommunications Council

(NPSTC) recently released a position paper, posted July 7, 2007, that further clarifies some of public safety's concerns.⁵

Nextel re-banding effort

As with the 700 MHz issue, there are some aspects of Nextel re-banding effort in which we, public safety, are unable to move forward without knowing the status on existing treaty information – information that the State Department should be able to help with. Unfortunately, the dialogue with the State Department has not been what it should be.

One significant difference between the United States and Canada relates to public access to specific types of information – specifically, the frequencies and locations of radio transmitters. In this effort, we are not asking Canada to change anything (e.g. radio frequencies they use and transmitter locations). If (again, through cooperative efforts with the State Department) those of us that need-to-know were to have access to this information, we would be able to plan accordingly in the modification of our 800MHz systems so as to not interfere with their existing infrastructure. We are at an early enough stage where it is possible to alter our systems to accommodate both the Nextel re-banding effort and our neighbors to the north.

The 2010 Olympics in British Columbia, Canada

While the Olympics will be physically occurring in Canada, a concern shared by many in our region (on both sides of the border) pertains to the international media. Similar past experiences have shown that when the international media convene at an event such as this, they often utilize whatever communications infrastructure they relied upon in their home country. A problem this presents relates to our first responders depending upon those same frequencies state-side, that the international media uses in their native countries. The international media's broadcasting equipment tends to be magnitudes more powerful than our public safety radio infrastructure and, as a result, components of our systems can be rendered ineffective.

If possible, the establishment of a more formal partnership between the United States, Canada, our respective Customs agencies, and our respective first-responder communities, may be able to mitigate many of these specific issues before they occur.

OUR NATION'S PORTS

Security and Protection

While attention and discussion is starting to be drawn toward the security of our Nation's borders, our ports continue to be a proverbial "open back door."

To provide a practical example, the crew of a container ship visiting Seattle has to send advance notice of its "14" crew members several days before actually reaching the port. But those individuals intent on harming us could fill two containers, of the estimated "...an 11

⁵ <http://www.npstc.org/positionPapers.jsp>

million containers entering the United States annually...”⁶ with 20 individuals each, including most anything they can carry (short of radiological goods), and with only 1000 US Customs and Border Protection inspectors for more than 360 ports (ibid), they stand a good chance of entering this country illegally and undetected.

As with trying to prevent all fires by implementation of the fire code, incidents still do, and will happen.

Response

As just one point of reference, the ports of the Greater Seattle/Puget Sound Area, collectively, are among the largest ports in the nation. Last year Seattle area ports hosted over 735,000 cruise line passengers. We had over a thousand vessel call our ports. In 2005, we moved ~\$70.5 B worth of goods through the area.⁷ We have a robust fishing industry, oil refineries, and a thriving private sector marine community. The Navy also maintains a large presence with at least one carrier task force, the Bangor Submarine Base, and the Bremerton Naval Shipyard.

The Puget Sound waterways encompass over 1,000 square miles and include over 1,000 miles of shoreline. Currently, there is only one fire boat staffed 24 hours a day for this entire area. It is my understanding that these ‘understaffing and inadequate resources’ issues are commonplace amongst our nation’s ports. While some of these capitol outlays (e.g. fireboats) are very expensive, often costing \$12 M or more, they do last longer than other equipment (40+ years).

America’s first responders need help acquiring the tools, training and means to mitigate these incidents that are going to happen. When an event occurs at any of our nation’s ports, the first response of employees, federal (U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Customs) or otherwise, is to call 9-1-1, just as they did with other federal offices like the Murrah building in Oklahoma City and the Pentagon... And, that brings the discussion back to the nation’s first responders – fire fighters, law enforcement and EMS. For the high risk/low frequency events that happen at our ports, we need help purchasing fire boats, port/marine firefighting equipment, hazardous materials equipment and supporting the associated training.

It will probably be asked why public safety has not purchased this equipment with the grant funds already offered. As referenced in the communications sections previously, it is a matter of prioritization – we need to be able to communicate effectively before we can do anything else.

Recovery

Daily, first responders are responding to emergencies in our ports and, most of the time, they successfully mitigate the situations they find. Occasionally, in doing so, they will lose much of their equipment to severe contamination (e.g. chemical, biological, and radiological). A

⁶ <http://hutchison.senate.gov/speech515.html>

⁷ <http://www.portseattle.org/seaport/statistics/>

case in point included many of the local agencies in our gulf states (Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas) immediately following Hurricane Katrina.

A successful effort started, by Congress a number of years ago, developed emergency caches of first responder equipment to assist with the rapid reconstitution of a local department's protective clothing, the department's communications equipment, their breathing devices, etc. As mentioned previously, regarding communications equipment, after a large incident, public safety can quickly recall significant numbers of off-duty members, but we do not have the equipment to outfit them all. FEMA is now supporting this project - The Pre-positioned Equipment Packages, Package on Demand (PEP POD). This program more than proved its merit in both concept and value.

Unfortunately, it is starting to slip 'under the radar,' and succumbing to the old adage, "out of sight, out of mind." Several of the PODs were deployed during Katrina and have yet to be replaced. In the remaining PODs, some of the equipment purchased over 5 years ago is nearing its expiration dates and is in need of upgrading or replacement. Field support staffs for the program have not received necessary subsequent, or refresher training and some critical certificates have expired.

This is another federal program that was making a huge difference in recovery and had demonstrable successes! Many fire and EMS agencies in Louisiana and Mississippi were able to get quickly back on their feet. Again, the program is in jeopardy and I would hope that you consider continued support.

Exercises

Public safety agencies need continued support for training and exercises on a regional and international level which include backfill and overtime. These types of events are beyond the budget/scope of any single jurisdiction. Further, because it often results in large areas of our respective districts being without coverage, the fire service is hard-pressed to place multiple companies out of service for the purposes of training and exercises.

CONCLUSION

Again, thank you for the opportunity to address you this afternoon. On behalf of the nation's first responders, I would like to express our continued appreciation to this committee for its dedication to preparing America's first responders for present and future disasters, both in border regions and throughout our country.

We appreciate your due consideration regarding these important federal emergency response programs and your continued support of America's fire fighters, EMTs and law enforcement officers.