

DHS Pilots Interoperable Wireless Network with City of Washington, D.C.

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Last week, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology Directorate began a pilot of an interoperable communications system with the District of Columbia Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO). The Radio Over Wireless Broadband (ROW-B) project will demonstrate how to connect existing wireless radio systems with advanced broadband technologies, such as laptops and smart phones.

In addition to traditional, handheld or vehicle-mounted radios, emergency responders are increasingly using separate, wireless broadband systems to communicate. Wireless broadband services are often supplied by a commercial cellular service provider. Because the radio and broadband systems serve specific and different needs, they were not designed to communicate with each other. The lack of interoperability between these two systems may compromise emergency response operations when responders using a broadband system are unable to communicate with responders using a radio system. That's why the pilot is so important.

"The ROW-B pilot represents an important milestone in our efforts to advance interoperability progress," said Dr. David Boyd, director of the DHS' Science and Technology Directorate's Command, Control and Interoperability Division. "The capability to communicate among radio and broadband system users will significantly improve emergency response operations by allowing non-radio users to communicate with response units in the field."

During July-August 2008, the ROW-B pilot connected OCTO's existing land mobile radio system--wireless radio systems that are either handheld or mounted in vehicles--with broadband devices using the Bridging Systems Interface. This allows a single user to reach multiple users through talk groups on a city-operated 700MHz broadband network. By allowing users to create talk groups in real-time, this technology saves critical response time. ROW-B also will use GIS technology to identify the location of other vehicles, equipment, and responders. GIS databases display these locations on maps that include important information such as roads, buildings, and fire hydrants--enabling emergency responders to access the locations of critical resources, and to form dynamic talk groups based on proximity.

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