

OEC Trains 1,600 First Responders as COMLs

Emergency responders across the Nation are communicating more effectively during large planned and emergency events thanks to the All-Hazards Type III Communications Unit Leader (COML) training program. The COML course has trained over 1,600 people to coordinate on-scene emergency communications during a multi-jurisdictional response. Since May 2008, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) has offered 66 courses nationwide, ensuring there is at least one trained COML in every State and territory. The emergency response community identified the need for COML training, and with DHS support, helped to create a formal program to train COMLs on operational and technical aspects of communications and procedures to use during incidents.

Standardizing Training and Response

Captain Al Ruiz of the Los Angeles Fire Department participated in the development of the COML course and has gone on to lead several trainings. Ruiz says COML training has helped jurisdictions to standardize their planning for an incident so all responders are working off the same plan of action. Ruiz realized firsthand the impact the trainings would have soon after the first COML course in L.A. in 2008. Serious brush fires broke out, requiring response from several fire departments. Ruiz was first on the scene, but it wasn't long before he saw some familiar faces. "It was great to see students from the COML class," he says. "They were able to help right away."

Immediate Impact

Ruiz's experience is not unique. Repeatedly, students have reported using their COML skills in the field within days of completing the course. COML trainer Michael Paulette recalls that he and a fellow trainer had just started a session in Houston, Texas, in August 2008 when Hurricane Gustav was bearing down on the Gulf Coast. The trainers turned the storm into the subject of the course exercises, and several students went from the classroom to participate in storm preparation and response.

In January 2009, a severe ice storm hit Kentucky and the surrounding States, disabling emergency communications. A week before the storm, a COML training session took place in Tennessee. Immediately following the three-day session, many of the students deployed to Kentucky to assist the local responders with incident communications coordination.

Building Stronger Working Relationships

Trainers and participants alike speak of the benefit of working through COML exercises with other public safety professionals in their region. Trainers witness students making connections and growing familiar with the way other agencies operate. This type of relationship building makes a significant difference.

Chris Lombard, a Lieutenant with the Seattle Fire Department and a COML trainer, often deals with incidents that involve Canadian agencies. He says, especially at the border, interoperability is less a technology issue than a people issue. "Regardless of what radio they are using, we have the ability to make our radios talk to theirs," he says. "As far as the people go, its policy issues; it's about understanding what they are saying." Washington and Canadian agencies have now participated in several voluntary COML trainings near the border. Lombard says that through class exercises, U.S. and Canadian responders have started working out issues amongst themselves.

"When it comes to improving emergency communications, training is crucial. Better technology is one part of the solution, but COML training provides emergency responders with the other part of the solution by increasing planning, preparation, and leadership skills."

-Chris Essid

Director, Office of Emergency Communications

Next Steps

COML training will continue through State-sponsored courses. OEC also developed a COML train-the-trainer course that prepares instructors to teach throughout the country. States can formally request COML training through the OEC Technical Assistance program or contact OEC for a list of certified instructors to organize a class.

OEC is also currently finalizing a course to train individuals as incident communications technicians. The COMT course is designed to ensure that every State or territory has trained personnel capable of deploying advanced equipment (such as voice and data communications and land mobile radio equipment) and to keep it functional and operational during an incident or planned event. Classes are scheduled to begin this Spring.

For more information on COML training, please contact COMLtraining@hq.dhs.gov.



Arkansas SWIC Penny Rubow

How has your Statewide Communication Interoperability Plan (SCIP) made a difference in your State?

Our Plan has enabled us to better understand and address the needs of the emergency responder community in Arkansas. Prior to the planning effort, emergency communications plans were ad hoc at best. Now we have a State strategy that addresses the gaps in our interoperability effort.

Which accomplishment from FY 2009 makes you most proud?

If I had to pick just one, I'd say I'm most proud of our strategic planning process. We began in January 2009 with a brainstorming session that was part of our National Governors Association Policy Academy participation. In February, and again in May, we held sessions with the membership of the Arkansas Interoperable Communications Committee to make sure they were fully briefed on existing plans (e.g., Arkansas 2007 SCIP, Arkansas Wireless Information Network [AWIN] Strategic Plan, National Emergency Communications Plan). We then met for a two-day retreat to identify the gaps, develop plans to address them, and prioritize the tasks and activities for the coming year. We now have a very clear set of prioritized objectives to work toward.

Which goals for 2010 are you already preparing for and what initiatives do you expect to complete in 2010?

We expect to continue enhancing cooperation among all stakeholders. In support of this effort, we hosted a statewide interoperability conference in November 2009, and during 2010 we are planning for another conference. Another goal is to identify and implement alternative technologies for redundancy, disaster recovery, and continuity of operations to enhance, upgrade, or replace the current interoperability systems. During the coming year we will

From the Field:

Questions and Answers with Arkansas Statewide Interoperability Coordinator (SWIC) Penny Rubow

be implementing redundant controller equipment on our statewide system—AWIN—to provide for continuity of operations. Furthermore, we will be implementing a satellite push-to-talk system that will provide for failover in the event that the AWIN system is not available. Finally, our goal of establishing standard operating procedures for all incidents from day-to-day to catastrophic events is underway, and we expect to have this goal completed as well.

When speaking with public and elected officials in your State, what key messages are always relevant and important for you to mention?

We try to educate officials on the importance and successes of interoperable communications whenever possible. Budgets and funding are always important to discuss; if we've done a good job educating folks, the budgets are easier to defend. For example, in early 2009, the ice storm that caused damage throughout many States disabled most forms of communication. However, our statewide system, AWIN, remained in service with no overloads. We've used this as an example when explaining how critical it is to invest in emergency communications.

Partnering with stakeholders for implementing the statewide and national communications plans is a priority for OEC. How is your office supporting this effort?

The most significant way we are partnering with our stakeholders is through our statewide workshops and by including them in making decisions and driving our agenda. We are taking advantage of technical assistance offered by OEC, and the State has also been fortunate enough to receive grant funding for several projects.

How many in-state miles do you travel each year for your job?

I usually travel about 4,000 miles, although budget cuts have had an impact on the amount of travel. The good news is that my office is centrally located in our State, so I can visit many of the localities without driving a long distance.

If people are interested in learning more about your role, how can they reach you?

They may e-mail me at Penny.rubow@arkansas.gov or reach me by phone at (501) 682-5358.

BIDP Grant Program Targets Border Interoperability

OEC recently launched a \$25.5 million demonstration grant program designed to strengthen interoperable emergency communications along and across the U.S. borders with Mexico and Canada. The Border Interoperability Demonstration Project (BIDP) is a competitive grant program that will provide funding to at least three communities located in states on the U.S.-Canadian border and at least three communities located in states on the U.S.-Mexican border to encourage the development of innovative solutions for improving emergency communications. Eligible activities include planning, training, conducting exercises, and purchasing equipment.

Objectives for BIDP projects are to:

- Improve day-to-day interoperable emergency communications among Federal, State, local, and tribal entities and international partners along and across international borders.
- Improve interoperable emergency communications among emergency response providers responding to threats and natural disasters on international borders.
- Facilitate interoperable emergency communications among emergency response providers in border communities of varying population densities.

Eligible applicants for BIDP funding are State Administrative Agencies (SAAs) from the 17 states bordering Canada or Mexico. Eligible sub-recipients are

local and tribal governments and emergency response providers operating within a county or other jurisdiction contiguous to an international border. The following States are eligible to receive BIDP funding: **Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont, and Washington.**

As a demonstration grant program, BIDP funding affords grant recipients the opportunity to explore innovative solutions that address specific issues and can be replicated in other communities. Through BIDP, OEC will identify effective solutions for improving emergency communications along and across the border, and will share lessons learned and best practices with other communities in order to strengthen the emergency response community's collective ability to respond to natural disasters and other incidents occurring on the border.

To apply for BIDP funding, local and tribal emergency response providers should coordinate with their SAA. The SAA is responsible for compiling the BIDP application for the State, which may contain more than one project for funding, and for submitting the BIDP application through <http://www.grants.gov>.

For more information, contact bidp@hq.dhs.gov.



About the *Emergency Communications Forum*

Welcome to the *Emergency Communications Forum* (ECF), published by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Emergency Communications (OEC). The ECF is the latest evolution of OEC's stakeholder outreach efforts. The new ECF represents a transformation 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. The launch of the ECF has been guided by stakeholder feedback and is an effort to provide timely and relevant content on a bi-monthly schedule. We hope you'll join us as we prepare for a busy 2010 and let us know what you think along the way at OEC@hq.dhs.gov.