



Training & Exercises Case Study: Washington Integrated Interoperable Communications Plan Training & Exercises

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Implementing effective training and exercise programs to “practice” communications interoperability is essential for ensuring that the technology works and emergency responders are able to effectively communicate during emergencies. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to showcase and justify investments in a training and exercise program compared with a new, cutting-edge technology system. As a result, training and exercise programs often slip down the list of priorities for emergency response agencies.

The value of training and exercises was evident in preparing for the 2010 Winter Olympics. Although the Games took place 30 miles north of the U.S.-Canada border in Vancouver, Canada and security was primarily the responsibility of Canadian public safety, the State of Washington worked tirelessly to ensure it would be ready for any event. Federal, State, local, and tribal governments participated in some of the most comprehensive,

communications-related training and exercise drills in State history.

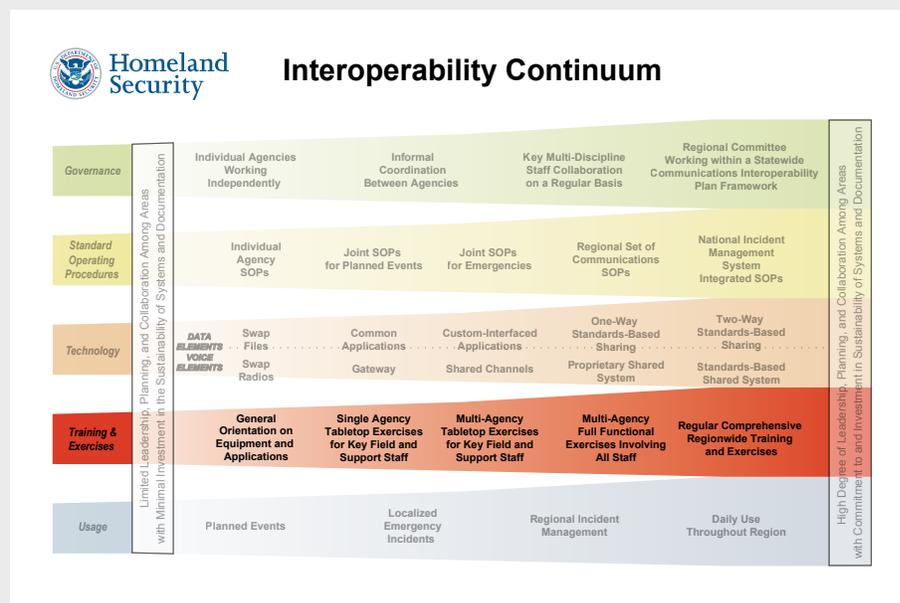
The goal of the training and exercises was to help ensure that data and voice communications during critical security operations would be exchanged seamlessly among Federal, State, local, and tribal law enforcement, emergency responders, and homeland security personnel within the United States and across the border. “We knew that we would need to rely on existing systems, so the focus was on scenario-based planning, training, and communications exercises” said Bob Schwent, Electronic Services Division Commander, Washington State Patrol and Co-Chair of the 2010 Olympic Communications Interoperability Working Group.

Preparing for the Vancouver 2010 Olympics

The 2010 Olympics Security Committee developed a Communications Interoperability Working Group

Training and Exercises

The Interoperability Continuum is designed to assist emergency response agencies and policy makers to plan and implement interoperability solutions for data and voice communications. This tool identifies five critical success elements that must be addressed to achieve a sophisticated interoperability solution. The third critical success element is Training & Exercises (T&E). Implementing effective T&E programs to practice communications interoperability is essential for ensuring that the technology works and responders are able to effectively communicate during emergencies. In order to reach the most sophisticated level of interoperability in the T&E lane, regular comprehensive regionwide training and exercise must be actively in place and performed.



(CIWG) to address coordinated voice and data communications.

The CIWG was assigned several tasks, including:

1. Developing an Integrated Interoperable Communications Plan
2. Conducting communications-specific training and exercises based upon the Plan

During the 24-month preparation period, the

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CIWG worked with Federal, State, local, tribal, and cross-border stakeholders, to advance interoperability across the regions in preparation for the Olympic Games. The CIWG interviewed more than 120 agencies to develop the Integrated Interoperable Communications Plan. The Plan defined the communications capabilities needed to support interagency communications among Federal, State, local, tribal, and non-governmental emergency response agencies.

Additionally, the Integrated Interoperable Communications Plan included a catalogue of existing governance documents, memoranda of understanding, agency points of contact, mobile assets, and available personnel resources. Although specific to the State of Washington, the plan is based upon well-established Federal guidelines and policies, including the Interoperability Continuum and the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program.

Once completed, the Integrated Interoperable Communications Plan was adapted into a two-day curriculum taught through a unique format that enabled class participants to apply their new communications skills through a series of short, scenario-based tabletop exercises. More than 200 first responders, dispatchers, technicians, and agency officials participated in the training, which included

the creation of scenario-based response plans. This helped emergency responders, and dispatchers be better prepared to respond appropriately to the type of incident.

The first day of the course familiarized participants with the key sections of the Integrated Interoperable Communications Plan and strategies to build an effective preliminary Incident Command System 205 (ICS 205) Incident Communications Plan, which is used by incident commanders to collect and inventory on-scene equipment and personnel. Reviewing the ICS 205 helps responders who are not trained as Communications Unit Leaders (COMLs) to understand and be able to capture critical information needed to complete the ICS 205 early in an incident. Once a certified COML is available on the scene, the COML can build upon the preliminary plan to produce an official ICS 205 Incident Communications Plan. According to a participant Bill Hanes, Communications Manager, City of Bellingham, “There was a real diversity of roles in the room throughout this process—from Fire/EMS, Law Enforcement, and the Dispatch Centers—and it really got us thinking

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City of Bellingham, WA*

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On the second day, students applied their knowledge and classroom training from the first day to a series of five increasingly complex response scenarios identified in the Integrated Interoperable Communications Plan and approved by the 2010 Olympics Security Committee Training and Exercise Working Group.

Students worked together in groups to complete the first four scenario response drills, completed the fifth scenario individually, and were later evaluated on their work.

Chris Lombard, Incident Manager and COML from the State of Washington says, “For incident communications to be managed effectively, the supporting members (COMLs, Communications Technicians, etc.) need access to the planning process. When these trained members of the Communications Unit are allowed access to the decision making process of an incident, they are able to anticipate incident-communications needs and potential problems.”

Continued Training at the County Level

For many local responders, the exercises in preparation for the Olympic Games in Vancouver, Canada, marked the first time they had trained together with other responders from Federal and State agencies. Local responders appreciated the interaction with Federal agencies and the opportunity to meet colleagues with whom they had been communicating for many years. This was especially true for dispatchers who are often not included in this type of training.

Many local responders also realized that while the training was specifically tailored for events in their regions, additional targeted training would be beneficial. Several counties sought assistance from the developer of the initial training program to assist in tailoring it to their local needs.

Whatcom County

One of the counties to solicit additional training was Whatcom County. The county is located outside the Seattle urban area in the northwest corner of Washington State, directly along the US-Canada border. The county has five international crossing points. In 2010, the population was just over 200,000 people with a total area of 2,504 square miles – much of it in the heart of the Cascade Mountains. Whatcom County and its public safety responders were integral to preparations for the Olympics.

Building on the work at the State level, Whatcom County emergency response officials used \$80,000 from a Federal grant to write a Tactical Interoperable Communications Plan (TICP) and exercise the plan in cooperation with Federal, State, county, local, and Canadian responders. According to Rob Wilson,

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This project enabled Whatcom County emergency response agencies to:

1. Establish a governance structure for interoperable communications
2. Develop a TICP, including development of mutually agreed upon standard operating procedures, and common radio channel naming and programming
3. Train 32 first responders as Communications Unit Leaders

Once the Whatcom County TICP was created, a training class was offered that covered communications planning under the National Incident Management System. The training also includes a tool that generates on-demand, scenario-based communications playbooks using incident-specific information directly from Whatcom’s TICP.

All of these activities culminated in a scenario-based, communications-specific exercise with Whatcom’s Federal, State, and international partners. It enabled officials to further develop and validate critical information in the TICP and the playbooks to prepare for the Olympics and beyond.

Conclusion

As with other aspects of interoperability, jurisdictions cannot simply measure a capability once and declare victory if the outcome is satisfactory. A commitment to sustain or even enhance that capability must be established. Whatcom County has made that commitment to their training and exercise program by making plans for future exercises, and is establishing an ongoing process to update their TICP and corresponding communications playbooks.

During high-stress incidents, responders return to the level of training they are most familiar and comfortable. Therefore, the reinforcement of skills through training and exercises is crucial to ensure that responders are able to communicate during routine and large-scale incidents. The preparation for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games resulted in successful operations during that event, but also provided public safety with training and exercise resources for the future. Whether other States follow Washington's approach or pursue their own, the creation and implementation of regional training and exercise programs are vital to effective emergency communications response capabilities.

This case study is a part of a series developed by the Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) to highlight advancements made by stakeholders in strengthening emergency communications capabilities. The case studies align to the Interoperability Continuum and detail milestones in the areas of governance, standard operating procedures, technology, training and exercises, and usage. Each study represents a unique solution from a State, region, city, or town across the Nation.