

## **Interoperability: A Local Perspective**

**Testimony by Chief Michael P. Neuhard  
Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department  
before the House Government Reform Subcommittee on Technology,  
Information Policy, Intergovernmental Relations and the Census**

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### ***Introduction***

Chairman Putnam, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, my name is Michael P. Neuhard, and I am the Fire Chief for the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department located in the Northern Virginia area and a member of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. Thank you for the opportunity to provide you with a local perspective on Project SAFECOM and the issues of interoperability.

The Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department serves over one million residents, as well as workers in local businesses and industry, and transient visitors who pass through our jurisdiction on one of the interstate highways that traverse our County. We provide emergency service through a network of 35 strategically placed fire stations and a staff of over 1400 dedicated men and women. Our stations are staffed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year. We are an all-hazard fire department, providing fire suppression efforts, basic life support (BLS) and advanced life support (ALS) emergency medical services, and technical specialties to include specialized rescue and cave-in capabilities, hazardous materials response and mitigation and marine operations. The Department also provides fire and hazardous materials preventative services through its Fire Marshal's Office. Last year, we responded to over 90,000 calls for service and our call volume continues to grow.

Many of you know of us because Fairfax County's Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) program is renowned throughout the United States as one of the premier FEMA-supported specialty units. We are a premier leader in training, readiness, response and recovery, in catastrophic event mitigation. We have responded to tragedies such as the bombing of the Murrah building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. The team is recognized through the grant support from the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to respond to disasters, either man-made or natural, through-out the world. Our team has traveled to and assisted in the Armenia Earthquake in 1988, the Philippines Earthquake in 1990, the Nairobi Kenya U.S. Embassy Bombing in 1998, the Izmit Turkey Earthquake, the Taiwan Earthquake, and the Duzce Turkey Earthquake in 1999.

I provide you with this information as background for a sense of the depth and scope of the services provided in a large urban area that has benefited from the efforts of regional cooperation and coordination. We continue to work toward achieving interoperability among our diverse jurisdictions in Northern Virginia and the Metropolitan Washington region. In addition, because of our proximity to Washington DC and the potential targets this area presents, we have been fortunate enough to receive Federal

funding support toward our goals of planning, preparedness, response, and mitigation activities.

### ***Interoperability Overview***

Interoperability is a critical issue for the emergency services – police, fire, and emergency management. From a local perspective, where you are in this country will determine how successful you have been in achieving interoperability. It must be remembered that interoperability is not just about technology. In fact, it has been said that interoperability is really 80 percent communication and coordination in various forms, and only 20 percent technical.

Critical components of emergency response systems which are interoperable, but not technical, include:

- common incident management techniques
- common terminology
- common policy and procedures
- standardized training
- compatible equipment such as protective clothing, metering devices, self-contained breathing apparatus
- common hose threads for firefighting, and
- redundant methods of communications

While it is important to continue to improve upon and advance technical interoperability amongst wireless communication devices, it must be remembered that they will be useless, confusing, and counter productive if adequate attention is not given to the emergency response system as a whole in those areas that I have just identified.

I would like to take the next few minutes to discuss three areas related to interoperability. They include what is happening at the state and local level in Virginia regarding interoperability, the challenges that continue to exist that must be overcome, and finally a local perspective on Project SAFECOM.

### ***State and Local Perspective***

The Commonwealth of Virginia partnered with SAFECOM, a federal program managed by the Department of Homeland Security, to design a locally-driven planning approach to enhance communications interoperability across Virginia that has resulted in a Commonwealth-wide strategic plan.

The locally-driven strategic planning process designed and employed by the Commonwealth and SAFECOM included six regional focus group sessions and a strategic planning session. The purpose of the regional focus group sessions was to capture perspectives from local public safety responders throughout the Commonwealth as the basis for the mission, vision, and initiatives presented at the strategic planning session. The outcome of the subsequent strategic planning session was consensus on

the mission, vision, and recommended key initiatives, all supported by data gathered from the regional focus group sessions.

Key strategic goals include the following:

- establish communications interoperability as a high priority
- expand the statewide use of a common language and coordinated communication protocols
- increase interoperability capabilities and coordination by maximizing the use of existing communications systems and equipment and by planning for future technology purchases, and
- enhance the knowledge and proper use of existing and future communications equipment by providing frequent and routine training for public safety personnel.<sup>1</sup>

This plan is now being implemented by a full time program manager known as the Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator whose mission is to improve public safety in the Commonwealth through enhanced data and voice communications interoperability between local, regional, state, and federal agencies.

### **Challenges**

There are many challenges that remain. While progress is being made on the technical sides of producing and having available radio communication that are interoperable, we still face the challenge of our computer aided dispatch systems talking to each other within a region. This capability is necessary so that we can effectively transmit through existing systems written information and data to field units.

We still have a long way to go to ensure that there is adequate and common command processes, common language, and policies and procedures that ensure seamless functioning on an emergency scene between multiple agencies.

Most federal grants have been specifically designed to authorize the purchase of equipment, yet the grants do not allow for planning and training expenses. The result is that many localities simply buy new radios without having the proper training on operation and integration of that equipment into emergency operations. In fact, it has also resulted in the purchase of the wrong equipment due to the lack of planning and study prior to purchasing.

While in Virginia interoperability is high on the priority list as demonstrated by the strategic plan and actions at the state and local level, conducting actual exercises of new equipment and procedures at the regional level is still very uncommon. We need

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Virginia, *Strategic Plan for Statewide Communications Interoperability, Fiscal Years 2005-2007*

to support more regional training and exercises to incorporate interoperability solutions and identify additional gaps.

In summary, there is a lack of life-cycle planning. There continues to be technical barriers; there is a lack of information sharing and an inadequate level of training. These factors continue to be challenges towards the goal of interoperability. While much progress has been made on identifying the problems, we still have considerable work to do.

### ***Project SAFECOM***

The Department of Homeland Security, through the SAFECOM Program, has gained the support of all the major associations representing public safety officials (law enforcement, fire, and public safety communicators), state and local elected and appointed officials. In January 2004, the ten associations released a joint statement that declared "With the advent of the SAFECOM program ... public safety, state and local government finally have both a voice in public safety discussions at the federal level and confidence that the government is coordinating its resources."

The foundation of the SAFECOM Program and the driving force behind it has been the support of the local and state public safety practitioners. As a practitioner driven program, SAFECOM is a program designed by public safety for public safety creating interoperability solutions that are driven from the bottom-up.

Key accomplishments include \$150 million in grants last year from FEMA and COPS; the completion of the Statement of Requirements; coordination of federal interoperability efforts; development of a methodology for statewide interoperability plans; and success of the RapidCom Initiative.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

The key to all interoperability is cooperation among and between the various agencies and jurisdictions. Maintaining forward momentum on improving communications and operational interoperability requires continued actions on multiple fronts, including common command language, local and state level planning, common policy and procedures, training, and technical advances. It is imperative that interoperability remains a high priority at the local, state, and federal levels with adequate funding, coordination, and support. Failure to do so will allow interoperability to be a passing fad leading to inefficiencies and poor performance at the next major emergency requiring more than one agency or level of government response. Project SAFECOM is one answer to ensuring it stays focused at the federal level.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>2</sup> International Association of Fire Chiefs, Notes on Interoperability