

Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications

What is the Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications?

The Nationwide Plan is public safety's action plan for achieving nationwide progress on communications interoperability. The Plan is a set of 12 guiding principles for interoperability and 22 action steps within four major initiatives: leadership and coordination, system design and planning, standards and certification, and standardization and accreditation. This Emergency Response Council (ERC)-developed Plan documents the critical actions and defines the partnerships required between the public safety community and all levels of government.

Why was the Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications created?

Practitioners rallied for the development of a Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications at the ERC meeting in December 2006. During the spring of 2007, the ERC charged a cross-disciplinary working group to draft the foundational principles for this Plan. Both the Office for Interoperability and Compatibility and the Office of Emergency Communications leadership provided critical support in this process.

Who created the Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications?

A nationwide community consisting of public safety practitioners and policy makers representing a diversity of disciplines, jurisdictions, and all levels of government who serve on the ERC will lead the development of the Plan. ERC members represent more than 50 agencies and organizations including law enforcement, fire response, and emergency medical services (EMS) responders; transportation, public works, and forestry officials; local, tribal, state, and Federal Government officials; and industry and associations liaisons, among others. A leadership group, the ERC provides mechanisms for individuals with specialized skills and common interests to share best practices and lessons learned. This valuable exchange enables interested parties at all levels of government to gain from one another's experience in advancing nationwide interoperable communications. As individuals, none of the ERC members has the authority to implement a Nationwide Plan for Interoperability Communications. But, together they are one, strong, powerful voice that can activate and sustain change across the Nation.

What are the next steps for the ERC in support of the Plan?

This summer, practitioner action teams, comprised of ERC members and other nominated practitioners, will detail how this plan will be implemented. These action teams will report their recommendations to the Executive Committee (EC) in September 2007; the EC is the governing body of the ERC. The EC will provide direction on next steps to the public safety community as well as provide input to the Federal Government on the leadership and resources needed to further nationwide interoperability efforts.

Why is now the time to create a Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications?

Today, technology can bring news, entertainment, and information to the masses in real-time and on devices smaller than we ever imagined. However, at the same time, many public safety practitioners working in the same jurisdiction cannot exchange information seamlessly during day-to-day incidents or crisis situations. The inability of our Nation's public safety practitioners to communicate with each other on demand, in real time, and when authorized, risks their safety and the safety of people awaiting help. Leaders that do not take action to strengthen the Nation's interoperable communications compromise public safety's ability to achieve mission-critical operations and the lives of those awaiting help.

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The ERC believes the time is now for the development of a locally- and practitioner-driven Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications because: Congress is paying attention like never before; the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has structured and restructured itself to focus entire programs and offices on interoperability; changes to spectrum are imminent; and, recent natural disasters have highlighted the tragic impacts of deficient communications equipment and technology on the ability of public safety practitioners to protect communities and save lives.

When was the Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications created?

The ERC met in Denver, Colorado, on June 14, 2007, joining together as leaders to take action. Never before had a group of public safety practitioners stepped forward to lead an effort to draft a Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications. At this meeting, practitioners reaffirmed their shared vision for a “system of systems,” and developed critical components they believe should be included in any successful Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications. This proposal for a Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications *is for practitioners and by practitioners* and is the path to true interoperability.

What is meant by the Plan’s “system of systems” vision?

The system of systems approach allows public safety agencies the flexibility to select equipment that best fits their technical requirements and budget constraints, while still achieving interoperability. When implemented, a system of systems approach makes it possible for distinct systems owned and operated by different public safety agencies to communicate with each other. Public safety practitioners operating on a system of systems can respond anywhere, bring their own equipment, and can work on any network immediately when authorized. This eliminates the need for the agencies to purchase the same equipment produced by the same manufacturer.

What is the commitment of the ERC to the Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications?

The ERC has agreed to stand for the principles that will guide system design, planning, and procedures at all levels of government, and will drive forward the Nationwide Plan for Interoperable Communications initiatives. Members of the ERC committed to raise awareness and mobilize support for these principles and actions with their associations, states, regions, tribes, localities, governance groups, partners, departments, agencies, programs, Federal leaders, and anyone they meet involved with public safety. Working to strengthen communications nationwide is a challenge they willingly accept, they will not postpone, and one which they intend to achieve.

How is this group addressing data and information sharing needs of the public safety community?

The ERC agreed that mission-critical voice is primary; data is secondary, and very important. As a community, they committed to supporting the development and acceleration of data messaging standards, which help share information between disparate incident management systems and software applications.

What is interoperability?

Wireless interoperability is the ability of public safety service and support providers to exchange voice and data on demand; in real time; when needed; and when authorized. For example, when communications systems are interoperable, police officers and firefighters responding to a routine incident can talk to each other to coordinate efforts.

Why is interoperability important?

Effective communications can mean the difference between life and death. Interoperability is critical to the capacity of public safety practitioners to perform their mission-critical duties; it facilitates rapid and efficient interaction among all public safety organizations, and provides immediate and coordinated assistance in day-to-day missions and large-scale emergencies. Interoperability affects not only the public safety community, but the public service arena as well, including government officials, utilities agencies, and chief information officers.

What barriers does the Nation face in contending with the wireless interoperability challenge?

Public safety practitioners often have difficulty exchanging voice and data communications when adjacent public safety agencies are assigned to different radio bands, use incompatible proprietary systems and infrastructure, and lack adequate standard operating procedures and effective multi-jurisdictional, multi-disciplinary governance structures.

Beyond these barriers, the greatest challenge is human. The challenge comes in helping stakeholders at all levels of government understand the need for and the potential value of effective interoperability. More importantly, it requires giving all stakeholders a voice in the national process, understanding all stakeholder perspectives, and demonstrating the advantages of participating in a coordinated effort.

How long will it take to achieve interoperability among public safety practitioners across the Nation?

There is no quick and easy solution to solving communications interoperability issues. Achieving an optimal state of nationwide interoperability involves financial, cultural, and technological factors. Ultimately, it will be the result of a cumulative effort that involves the coordination of processes and input from stakeholders across all levels of government.

In the event of an emergency, which level of government has the responsibility for interoperability?

It is critical for local governments to take responsibility for the interoperability capacities of their region's public safety agencies. However, the Federal Government must coordinate its interoperability initiatives and must partner with users at *all* levels to ensure that Federal agencies can effectively interoperate with local, tribal, and state agencies in the event of an emergency. Similarly, state governments are responsible for ensuring that state public safety agencies can effectively interoperate with local and tribal agencies.

In the event of an emergency, local practitioners are the first ones on the frontlines—before state and Federal practitioners operations arrive on-scene. As the first agencies to commit resources during an emergency, local agencies will have the least flexibility. Consequently, reinforcement operations provided by outside resources (e.g., state and Federal agencies) must be able to connect with agencies already committed to the emergency, not the converse. Additionally, local resources are already stretched thin; local jurisdictions own, operate, and maintain 90 percent of the Nation's communications infrastructure. Federal and state governments are equipped with the fiscal and operational resources needed to link communications with local level agencies.

Ultimately, the input of both practitioners and policy makers across *all* levels of government must be included in any solution. As a result, any strategy for improving public safety interoperable communications must be based on user needs, and should come from the community that is best able to own and implement the solution.