

## **DHS's New Office for Interoperability Brings Definition and Structure**

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### *Interoperability*

Among the more prominent buzz words that have emerged prominently in the post-911 era, along with "threat level," "homeland security," and "first responder," one must include "interoperability." The reason for its high profile goes back to September 11, 2001 when, not for the first time, but certainly with the most devastating consequences, communications were not sufficiently interoperable to save the lives of hundreds of first responders.

The move toward interoperability took a great leap forward this month with the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Interoperability and Compatibility (OIC). The Office's stated purpose is to provide oversight to the wide range of public safety interoperability programs and efforts currently spread across Homeland Security.

From a funding standpoint, interoperability has been a feature of most homeland defense programs, including "First Responder" funding (the State Homeland Security and Urban Areas Security Initiative programs), Port Security Grants, and the Assistance to Firefighters program. Additionally, Congress has passed earmark appropriations of \$180 million per year for the last two years under the COPS program with the title, "Interoperable Communications Technology." Add to that National Institute of Justice and DHS R&D funding, and a pattern at least of interest in supporting interoperability begins to emerge. Further, the President and Congress have consistently advocated for, and produced, programs that, if not entirely open to competition or transparent selection criteria, do put dollars on the street to support the cause of interoperability.

The problem many first responders on the ground have had with the concept of interoperability has been the lack of a clear and nationally consistent definition of interoperability, as relates specifically to first responders' ability to interface with the voice, data, and intelligence of other teams of personnel, whether they be from different disciplines, different communities, or even different levels of government. Indeed, interoperability has been defined in many ways: narrowly, to describe first responders using the same bandwidth, and more broadly, to

enable emergency response personnel to arrive from anywhere in the country and share communications, information, and even turnout gear without fear of these products failing in the process.

The Office of Interoperability and Compatibility, with new standards for the products emergency response personnel use for communications and personal protection, has defined interoperability broadly. This broader definition, which extends beyond just communications, should be a boon for local first responders. Standardized, interoperable equipment will not lock you into a particular vendor forever. Instead, it will favor providers that work with non-proprietary technologies, and it will enable you to choose the best of each piece of PPE, secure in the knowledge that DHS has certified its compatibility with every other piece.

For vendors, the standards will likely produce a scramble to comply with emerging standards as they are developed, in order to gain the competitive advantage that will come with product certification.

This feature will probably also add a layer of bureaucracy to the grantseeking process. OIC has included "integrating coordinated grant guidance across all DHS grant making agencies that touch on public safety interoperability" as one of its specific responsibilities. As a result, it should not come as a surprise that DHS will eventually require all communications and equipment purchases to include items that have been certified by OIC as interoperable and/or compatible. More forms are certain to follow!

Overall, this new office and its charge to make local, state, and federal agencies more interoperable will enhance first responders' abilities to respond to threats and events more effectively, more safely, and more quickly than before.