



Communications Interoperability

Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001 interoperability has become the new buzzword in the emergency services community. We in Bucks County have been ahead of the problem within the county since the trunking system was installed. However, departments coming into the county or going outside the county beyond the capabilities of our system were left with no communications. Working closely with the Pennsylvania Southeastern Region Counterterrorism Task Force, the five-county Philadelphia region has developed a Tactical Interoperability Communications Plan (TICP). This plan identifies four different methods to achieve interoperability within the region. The acceptable interoperable equipment includes: swap/cache of radios, gateways, shared channels and shared systems.

Bucks County took this plan and made a good, honest assessment of our shortcomings and made the following proposal to the police and fire communications advisory boards:

1) The establishment of an additional seven channel conventional narrow band radio system with satellite receivers. This system would have four channels in lower Bucks and three channels in upper Bucks. The purpose of this system will be to move major incidents such as large fires, SRT incidents, MIRT team activations, etc. This will free up the trunking system for routine traffic and reduce busies on the trunking system during these busy times. In addition, four mobile only frequencies were obtained for direct communications at emergencies. This is a big step, but we were not finished;

2) We also proposed the purchase of a C.O.W., or Communications On Wheels. This will be an 18-foot step van truck equipped with a 40-foot crank up aluminum tower. The truck will be equipped with 17 full repeat base stations, 12 500MHz and five 800MHz, 100 portable radios, 75 500MHz and 25 800MHz, 150 spare portable batteries, and three gateways to allow for merging radio

systems from other counties or the state.

The C.O.W. will also allow for the four mobile-only channels to repeat through the repeater in the vehicle to allow for a wider area of use.

“Gateway” systems interconnect channels of different systems (whether on different bands or modes), allowing first responders to use their existing radios and channels to be interconnected with the channels of other users outside of their agency;

3) We have installed I-TAC (Federal inter-op channels) channels at four sites in the county and expect to install the I-CALL channel in the near future;

4) The last step will be completed with the installation of a microwave system linking 11 counties in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware that will allow direct communications between centers and further enhance interoperability.

The proposal was approved unanimously by both advisory boards as well as the Bucks County Emergency Management Agency. A purchase request for the fully equipped C.O.W. vehicle was sent to the state for purchase through the use of U.S. Department of Homeland Security funding in May. A purchase order for a large portion of the radio system has been received and equipment is being delivered.

What will this mean to all the system users? First and foremost, there will be no cost to our system users. It means you will need to have your radios reprogrammed to add the new channels. This will be done by our technical staff at no cost to your organization. This will be a major undertaking, as we will be reprogramming 4,000 radios.

Installation of this equipment will put Bucks County at the forefront of public safety communications in the region. We'll keep you informed of our progress.

Ivyland, Here We Come!

At a recent commissioners meeting, a contract was awarded to W2A Architects to begin planning to construct a new communications center at the current Emergency Services Building in Ivyland Borough. The communication center will be located in a second floor addition to the existing building over the current and expanded apparatus bays. Personnel from this department have had several meetings with the architects to begin planning for the new center.

The move was brought forth due to lack of space at our existing facility for a new phone switch for Phase II of the Wireless 9-1-1 system. The current communications center will become the backup center.

The commissioners advised they hoped to break ground in January.

Needless to say, these are busy times in the Emergency Communications Department.

FCC Notices to Bucks County Fire Departments

Recently the FCC sent correspondence to all Bucks County fire departments advising the need to provide proof of an FCC license if they are operating on 46.10 MHz. Several companies were re-broadcasting their tones over 46.10 MHz and did not have an FCC license. The county license covers only portables and mobiles for fire departments. It does not, and cannot, cover base stations.

It is critical that everyone receiving this letter respond to the FCC in writing before the deadline of September 30, 2006.

Interoperability Training Exercise

On Thursday, August 24th, our staff participated in a training exercise at the Strafford Train station on the border of Chester and Delaware Counties. Although our participation was limited due to the location, it was a good experience for all. The exercise was monitored by representatives of the Federal Government to determine the region's compliance with the regional Tactical Communications Interoperability Plan (TICP).

We are happy to report the region received a "thumb's up" from the feds!

Reporting Problems

This department takes pride in providing a professional service to the citizens of Bucks County and our system users. When complaints are received we work hard to get to the root of the problem and take steps to prevent it from reoccurring.

To continue to work toward our goal, we ask that you contact our department as soon as possible if you have a problem. Please don't assume we are aware of something and are ignoring it. We receive nearly one million phone calls a year and dispatch more than 1,500 calls per day. Yes, mistakes will be made, but we strive to limit them to as few as possible. Many times we receive complaints through the rumor mill and not from those directly involved. Complaints often are delayed getting to our department.

We ask that anytime that you have a question or problem with anyone or policy to contact our on duty supervisors immediately. If you do not receive a reply within 24 hours, contact either Director Brent Wiggins @ 215-348-6630 or Operations Superintendent Dennis Forsyth @ 215-348-6619.

We can't fix problems if we are not aware of them. It is the mission of our department to provide the best service possible to both the citizens and system users, but we need your feedback - both good and bad. Your cooperation is appreciated.

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