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Commonality in the Commonwealth

Virginia authorities learned a great deal as they pursued interoperability among their security agencies—chiefly, that interoperability resides in people, not machines. Now the man in charge shares the lessons he learned.

By CHRIS ESSID

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HOW MANY PEOPLE GET TO ACCEPT A POSITION AND THEN WRITE THE POSITION DESCRIPTION? THAT WAS MY SITUATION WHEN I ACCEPTED THE POSITION OF COMMONWEALTH INTEROPERABILITY COORDINATOR FOR VIRGINIA IN DECEMBER 2003—THE FIRST POSITION OF ITS KIND IN THE NATION.

Looking back, I can honestly say I had no idea what I was getting into. Some people asked me immediately if I was a radio engineer or had vast technology experience. The simple answer was, no.

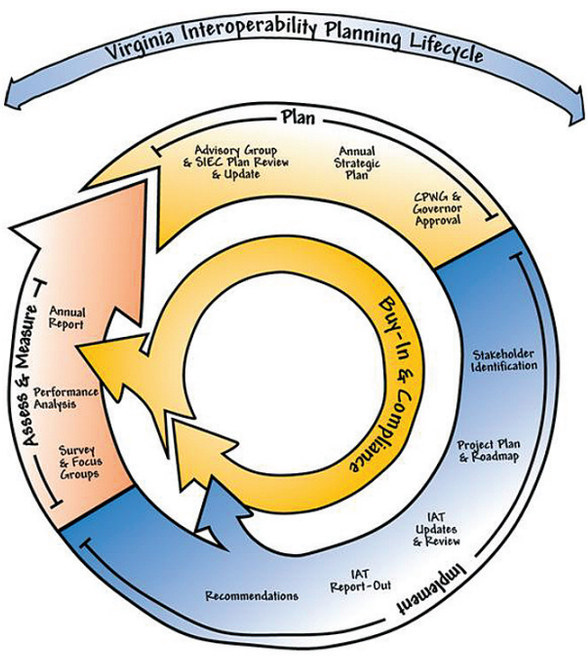
Oddly, though, a lack of technical background proved an enormous advantage.

Shortly after taking the job, I realized that the interoperability problem is 90 percent coordination and 10 percent technology. It also rapidly became evident to me that, while some of Virginia's communities lacked the basic technology to interoperate, most were more greatly hindered by cultural barriers preventing collaboration.

I hope that what we've learned in the years since can be of value to other states and localities wrestling with their own interoperability problems.

Recognizing the human factor involved in interoperable communications, my office took a unique approach to the problem. Instead of focusing on technological solutions, we began coordinating across various levels of government and first responder disciplines to create a community of individuals working toward a common vision.

As part of the Governor's Office of Commonwealth Preparedness (OCP), my office and the rest of the state committed ourselves to solving the outstanding issues and embraced a collaborative approach.



The interoperability lifecycle employed on an annual basis to bring incremental change toward the Virginia 2015 Vision, including the essential component of buy-in and compliance from the Commonwealth's responder communities. This lifecycle requires a great deal of coordination and coalition building that involves much more than just specific technology projects.

Coordinating across all voice and data communications systems at the local, regional and state level, and serving as Virginia's liaison for interoperability on the federal level, my office has now grown to include two additional state employees and three contractor staff focused solely on effective coordination of interoperability projects.

Collectively, the Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator's Office (CICO) has made huge strides toward overcoming the cultural barriers that continue to prevent interoperation. These accomplishments can be directly attributed to the establishment of consistent coordination and formalized practitioner-based governance.

PARTNER FOR CHANGE

In 2004, the Commonwealth partnered with the National Institute of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and its SAFECOM program, which provides research, development, testing, evaluation, guidance and templates on communications-related issues, to develop the Commonwealth of Virginia Strategic Plan for Statewide Interoperable Communications (or, the "Statewide Plan," as it's more widely known).

As a pilot project for statewide planning, SAFECOM conducted six regional focus groups within the state to identify the needs of Virginia's local responders. Because SAFECOM was founded on a practitioner-driven structure, Virginia benefited from this perspective and focused on the pursuit of responder needs to drive the development of the Statewide Plan. This development included a mission and vision statement, in addition to a clearly defined set of goals.

Performing as a "pilot state" for the SAFECOM program, Virginia's process was documented in the Statewide Interoperable Communications Planning (SCIP) Methodology, which is now being provided to other states to help guide their own planning efforts. The SCIP Methodology not only highlighted the effectiveness of Virginia's process but created national attention for the Commonwealth's efforts toward improved interoperable communications.

The process worked so well that in 2005 the Virginia General Assembly created Virginia Code Section 9.1-1200, requiring an annual update on implementation of the Statewide Plan. In addition to these requirements, the code requires that Virginia's agencies and localities be in compliance with the Statewide Plan by 2015.

CICO works to make compliance attainable for all localities and agencies through collaboration, communication and effective governance.

BUILD AND FORMALIZE COOPERATION

"Governance" can often be considered a bad word among public officials, but effective stakeholder involvement was essential to the success of Virginia's effort. The Commonwealth established the State Interoperability Executive Committee (SIEC) and

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Advisory Group to serve as advisors to CICO and provide subject matter expertise and recommendations for interoperability planning and implementation efforts to the governor's office.

SIEC and the Advisory Group are practitioner groups with members from state agencies and associations that represent localities, fire, law enforcement, emergency medical services, regions, hospitals, public health, transportation and other emergency support functions.

The governance committees bring practitioner needs to the forefront of planning and establish a level of buy-in for initiatives during development of key recommendations.

By partnering with public safety associations and agencies, the Commonwealth has been very effective in developing policies, procedures, and criteria with a high level of consensus and agreement among the stakeholders.

As Bob Crouch, the assistant to the governor for Commonwealth preparedness, put it: "In Virginia, we recognize that our success in achieving communications interoperability throughout our state can only be accomplished by the active participation of stakeholders—the end users—at every level of government and from every part of our diverse state. This has been a commitment of former Gov. Mark Warner and now of Gov. Tim Kaine. We've moved forward by seeking to change culture, as much as by implementing new technologies. While we recognize full interoperability will always be something of a moving target, we've made important strides in institutionalizing the processes that now have the potential of keeping us on the edge of advancements in interoperability and, most importantly, protect the safety of our citizens and those who serve them in law enforcement and emergency response and rescue."

OVERSEEING IMPLEMENTATION

The Commonwealth targets its efforts toward 10 to 15 strategic initiatives per year. Because the Virginia Code requires the annual implementation and update of the Statewide Plan, CICO works through its governance members and additional state subject matter experts to develop recommendations.

Initiative Action Teams (IATs) are established to develop statewide guidance for major initiatives that are of a more technical nature.

IATs are typically comprised of any governance members that have an interest or level of expertise and additional stakeholders who are specifically targeted to provide information necessary for effective recommendations development.

Recommendations are also provided to the Governor's Office, and to date have been universally approved. From interoperable communications funding distribution to statewide-deployable radio cache policies and procedures, to the common language protocol, all practitioner efforts have been well received at the state and local level.

On July 20, 2006, due to their effectiveness and subsequent success, Gov. Kaine signed Executive Order 30 to officially establish the SIEC. Each member organization was required to formally appoint primary and alternate representatives to the committee. The Executive Order added a layer of legitimacy and weight to the governance structure that had not previously existed.

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COORDINATE, COORDINATE, COORDINATE

Unfortunately, the interoperability effort that sits at the state level to coordinate across communication projects is often confused with the largest statewide project, the Statewide Agencies Radio System (STARS).

While STARS is a very important part of the overall interoperability solution, there are other investments and efforts that, when combined, will address interoperability across the state. Too often, interoperability coordinators are "attached" to one system. Virginia acknowledges the importance of an impartial body to make the connections and to improve the greater good.

STARS will connect 21 state agencies, including the Virginia State Police, but it must also be able to interface with existing local and regional communication systems. CICO and the interoperability governance structure provide a forum for technology projects to coordinate, connect and leverage one another. Additionally, the effort ensures that the operational need for new equipment has been established and the appropriate operating procedures, governance and training are in place to support technologies.

A good example of the importance of this coordination took place about a year ago when we set up a meeting with a county

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administrator and the STARS. The locality was about to build a radio system and, since STARS was in the same frequency band, we had the idea that the locality could leverage its STARS investment. The result was about $7 million in savings that the locality would have otherwise spent on construction of towers and maintenance. This was one example of what we can accomplish by working together and having a full time interoperability coordinator and SIEC looking at the big picture as a neutral broker.

In fact, many of the initiatives being championed by SIEC have little to do with technology, much less any specific system. A few examples of current initiatives include: Transitioning police and other responders from 10-codes to plain language, promoting the use of national interoperability channels in the various frequency bands, and adopting a common nomenclature so that the channels' first responders use nationwide will be uniform.

CHANGING THE WAY RESPONDERS TALK TO EACH OTHER

Virginia's public safety community recognized the importance of interoperability before the establishment of the State Interdepartmental Radios System (SIRS) in 1978. SIRS was developed with the basic goal of ensuring that law enforcement agencies could communicate across the state—not just within their individual jurisdictions. It also provided the equipment and frequency needed to establish connections between localities and the Virginia State Police.

By today's standards, the SIRS system provided only basic functionality but the goal remains the same as it did then: First responders must be able to communicate with each other over divergent radio systems when needed.

Since that time, the Virginia public safety community has acquired lots of equipment to create enhanced voice and data communications, ranging from gateways to entire mobile and portable radio communications systems.

Prior to the existence of CICO, funding was distributed to localities and state agencies without a comprehensive "big picture" plan and with limited oversight. In 2004, the Commonwealth recognized that it could no longer operate in that manner.

The question was: Since we must have a coordinated and planned approach to solving the interoperability problem—and since we had purchased numerous technologies—why wasn't the problem solved? The simple answer was that responder communities hadn't bought into the concept of interoperability or they built complex work-arounds to establish communications.

Since then, the Commonwealth has made large strides toward improved interoperable communications. The practitioner governance structure has opened the once locked doors between fire and law enforcement and started making inroads into public and private sector collaboration. IATs have worked to overcome the barriers of coded language on radio systems in addition to establishing a statewide-deployable back-up and supplemental communications resource. CICO has worked to establish a coalition of responders statewide that not only know what interoperability is but champions the cause in their communities. Furthermore, the Commonwealth has also been working closely with neighboring states to share lessons learned and solve communications issues along state borders, which has proved to be vital during mutual aid situations.

Charlottesville Fire Chief Charles Werner, the current Chair of the Virginia State Interoperability Executive Committee, links two radios from disparate frequency bands.

ANALYSIS

By establishing a strong and stable support system within its borders, Virginia will achieve its vision of a system of systems that supports interoperable communications for day-to-day and major emergency situations.

Without this support, localities and individual agencies would continue to make purchases based on their own needs and statewide interoperable communications would not be possible.

The federal government has imposed new regulations on states to force compliance with planning criteria. Plans cannot, and should not, be created in a boardroom at the state capitol—rather, there is a wealth of knowledge, lessons learned and expertise among our public safety communities, and it must be leveraged and utilized in order to greatly improve our ability to protect the public across—not only our own Commonwealth—but the entire nation. HST

CHRIS ESSID serves as the Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator within the Governor's Office of Commonwealth Preparedness. Essid has 13 years' experience working at the local, state and federal levels of government, including four years with the US Army Military Police. He currently serves on the DHS SAFECOM Emergency Response Council, Commonwealth Preparedness Working Group and as the chairman for the All Hazards Consortium Interoperability Working Group.

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