

## News and Announcements

### 1) Upcoming Events:

- 4/13 Benson Hospital Emergency Readiness Display
- 4/28-29 La Vuelta de Bisbee Bike Race
- 5/9 Ft Huachuca Safety Day

2) ID Cards – We got off to a slow start at the last CARA meeting. We will try again to get a few more at the April meeting. If you did not get your card done in March, please show up at the April CARA meeting (4/2). For those on the east side of the county (Bisbee/Douglas/Portal), you may make an appointment and go to Ruben's office in Bisbee. He works out of the Health Department Building off Melody Lane in the County complex. You may call him at (520) 432-9438 to set up an appointment.

3) SAR Overnight - We have removed the overnight SAR training from the list of upcoming events. The SAR team needed to shift that training to the same weekend as our La Vuelta support due to a competing mission to assist the Graham County SAR team. Hopefully we will be able to reschedule a similar training event to some time in the fall.

Training Segment – I recently read an interesting article entitled: "Interoperability: Stop Blaming the Radio" by Ronald P. Timmons. In this article, one of the most pressing first responder issues emerging in the post-9/11 era identified is the need to improve emergency scene radio communications. This concern actually pre-dates the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, and has been a commonly cited issue, in dealing with nearly every disaster or incident of major significance, for many years.

The one word repeatedly heard in describing the problems relating to disaster scene communications is "interoperability." Without full consideration of all the causal factors, the charge has been to fix the oft-cited frustration of field responders being unable to communicate – and all the blame has gone to interoperability. The 9/11 attacks were a catalyst for an unprecedented amount of money spent on radio hardware. The numbers are staggering: estimates range up to five billion dollars in homeland security grants to enable and facilitate emergency communications. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 again sent first responders looking for communications improvements. The article by Mr. Timmons challenges first responders to look beyond technical solutions and consider other factors impeding emergency scene communications.

Defining the issue has been difficult. Is interoperability the ability of all police officers to talk on radios to all firefighters at the same incident? Does interoperability refer to federal agencies having radio connection to state and local officials? Is interoperability only for those at the scene, or command post, or for those at the Emergency Operations Center as well? Or does interoperability address the wider issues of radio system coverage, frequency spectrum capacities, technology piece ergonomics, and alternate (non-voice) communications methods? Interoperability has been used as a catch-all phrase to describe a multitude of issues surrounding emergency scene communications.

There are numerous reasons for inadequate disaster communications. Nationwide efforts, such as the Department of Homeland Security's Project SAFECOM, have begun to acknowledge an expanded definition of interoperability beyond the technical, to include behavioral and procedural elements. Communication impediments do include insufficient radio infrastructure, but they are also influenced by behavioral reactions of first responders in stressful situations, dysfunctional intergovernmental relations, inadequate procedures and training, and general lethargy over the need to institute special operating policies differing from routine habits and practices.

The early homeland security grants approach, immediately following 9/11, was to deploy equipment to patch radio systems and devices together, or purchase more individual radio units to communicate over obsolete and inadequate radio systems. The result has been the expenditure of huge sums of grant dollars on communications patching equipment, perhaps creating the mistaken impression on the part of first responders that emergency scene communication will instantly and automatically be improved once the equipment is bought and plugged-in. Total reliance upon technological solutions, without proportionate training and practice, greatly reduces the effectiveness of radio patching equipment.

A review of numerous critical incidents involving various combinations of fire, police, medical, local, and mutual aid units, responding to single and multi-jurisdictional incidents, found a common pattern of influences. I have selected a few of those for this evening to review:

- If a field unit expressed vocal excitement, the dispatcher's voice tended to also rise in pitch and pace. The dispatcher plays a key role in keeping everyone calm through the use of a controlled voice inflection and by exuding a stoic confidence.
- Units prefacing their transmissions with key words, such as "urgent" "priority message" or "emergency traffic," received greater attention than those continuing to talk unacknowledged and without preface, even if they conveyed urgency in the pitch and pace of their speech.
- Many incidents eventually got to the point where dispatchers and incident commanders tried to control and reduce the volume of radio traffic by who was talking. Requests such as "all units stand-by" and "command officers only on this channel," were commonly heard.
- A relatively small number of units dominated a majority of the airtime, often with non-critical matters, while many units said nothing. The channel-loading was unevenly skewed to a small portion of those present.
- The most assiduous dispatchers and incident commanders tried to anticipate those things the field users might ask, and acted to broadcast a summary of information, before it was asked for, in an effort to preempt use of the radio channel for repetitious information requests. This included such requests as best access routes, staging areas, triage points, command post locations, and brief situational updates. This relatively small list of variables produced a disproportionate number of repetitious and superfluous radio transmissions. The use of timed milestone updates gave the most even flow of information, acknowledging that time often gets out of phase – either faster or slower – to the perception of those involved at the scene. Many dispatch computer systems have automated features to trigger prompts to the dispatcher at timed intervals, for example every ten or twenty minutes.

- Dispatcher-initiated requests for updates from incident commanders, at timed intervals, aided in developing an operational picture for those at the scene, as well as for support personnel off-site (still responding, or at alternate locations, such as Emergency Operations Centers).

That's a lot of information to absorb and all I have for tonight's training. I found it very thought provoking. I hope you found it interesting. Let's go down the roster for comments.

Bob

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