

**METHODOLOGY FOR STATEWIDE COMMUNICATIONS
INTEROPERABILITY PLANNING: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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Introduction

The lack of interoperable wireless communications is an issue plaguing public safety agencies in communities across the country. In many cases, agencies cannot perform their mission critical duties. Many are unable to share critical voice or data information via radio with other jurisdictions in day-to-day operations and emergency response to incidents. Communications interoperability is defined as the ability of public safety agencies to talk across disciplines and jurisdictions via radio communications systems, exchanging voice and/or data with one another on demand, in real time, when needed and as authorized.

As more than ninety percent of the public safety communications infrastructure in the United States is owned and operated at the local and state level, any successful effort to improve public safety interoperability must be driven by the local public safety community. A one size fits all solution to the interoperability issue mandated from the federal or state level down will not solve the problem.

With the support of the Department of Homeland Security's SAFECOM Program, the Commonwealth of Virginia recently completed the first step in an effort to enhance interoperability through the development of a strategic plan for improving statewide interoperable communications based on this locally driven approach. Virginia's strategic planning process was driven from the local level up and focused on building support for the plan at every level of government.

According to Chris Essid, the Virginia Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator (CIC), "The focus placed on ensuring that local first responders drive the process when creating interoperable communications plans has been long overdue. Who better to identify what works and what does not work than the very same public safety responders that use radios on a daily basis to save lives?"

SAFECOM believes that the Virginia planning process can serve as a model to other jurisdictions developing strategic plans for interoperable communications. SAFECOM developed and will soon offer the Statewide Communications Interoperability Planning (SCIP) Methodology as an effective model that other states may adapt to their particular needs.

Background

In late 2003, the Commonwealth of Virginia realized its need for one focal point to coordinate its interoperability efforts. As a result, the Governor, along with the Secretary of the Office of Public Safety, and the Assistant for Commonwealth Preparedness, created the Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator position.

Virginia's leadership determined that a statewide strategic plan, with local public safety practitioner involvement, was necessary to guide future interoperability efforts.

In December 2003, Chief Charles Werner, Deputy Fire Chief, Charlottesville Virginia Fire Department, participated in the development of a public safety wireless communications interoperability strategy session sponsored by SAFECOM – the first national program of its kind designed by public safety for public safety. SAFECOM works cooperatively with more than 50,000 local and state public safety agencies to improve public safety communications and interoperability across the nation. Consistent with the SAFECOM philosophy, this strategic planning session brought together key public safety practitioners and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal level to determine the most critical initiatives towards improving public safety communications and interoperability.

After participating in this session, Chief Werner and Barry Green, the Virginia Deputy Secretary of Public Safety, asked SAFECOM to help the CIC in his efforts to put together a similar interactive process. Virginia's effort included regional focus group sessions designed to capture perspectives from local public safety representatives throughout the Commonwealth, the outcomes of which formed the basis for a strategic planning session to define recommendations for the Commonwealth's key initiatives.

Four key goals and supporting initiatives came out of this effort, including performance measures, for the fiscal year 2005 – 2007 Strategic Plan. The Commonwealth committed to review and modify the key goals and initiatives on an annual basis. Implementation of the Virginia plan will begin in late 2004 and a comprehensive governance structure including representation across disciplines, jurisdictions, and levels of government, was established to encourage transparency, accountability, and collaboration.

Purpose

Based on the efforts employed by the Commonwealth of Virginia, with support from SAFECOM, the SCIP Methodology has been created as a model for other states. It describes a step-by-step process for developing a locally driven statewide strategic plan for enhancing communications interoperability.

Target Audience

While the SCIP methodology may be most appropriate for a state interoperability coordinator or individual in a comparable position, officials at all levels of government may apply this methodology to gain the appropriate support. Additionally, this document may be helpful to public safety practitioners interested in promoting a strategic planning process in their state or locality.

Structure

The SCIP methodology identifies the phases for developing a statewide strategic plan, critical tasks under each phase, and lessons learned during the Virginia strategic planning process. Also included are:

- Realistic timeframes during which the associated tasks can be completed;
- Examples and resources for use throughout the process;
- Samples of actual documents used in the Virginia strategic planning process. (Although the samples are specific to Virginia, they can be used as models and edited as needed); and
- Graphics and templates useful in the strategic planning process.

Phase Overview**Phase I- Establish Key Relationships and Funding**

The establishment of key relationships and agreements is a critical first step to undertaking a communications planning process. These relationships can help provide both the funding and support necessary to implement a statewide communications solution. This section outlines key areas to be considered in the development of these relationships, including the costs involved, identification of funding sources, and consideration of political and financial opportunities and barriers.

Phase II- Gather Information

Building on initial information gathered during Phase I, Phase II emphasizes the importance of gathering a complete understanding of the interoperability status and initiatives within a state, both past and current, and provides guidelines and questions to help create a comprehensive picture. The practitioner community can help to provide information on the needs, challenges, and unique features of a state's communications system. This phase also emphasizes the importance of looking outside the state to consider inter-state communications and researching best practices from across the nation.

Phase III- Create Project Plan and Roadmap

It is important to determine in advance the direction and process for the state's strategic plan and to develop a clear roadmap. Phase III details the careful preparation and planning necessary to account for the budget, resource, and timeline constraints that each state will face. This Plan will then be used to develop a Project Roadmap, a graphical depiction of the strategic

planning process to clearly communicate resources, activities and deliverables of the project.

Phase IV – Identify Roles and Responsibilities for the Project Team

Phase IV of the SCIP Methodology describes the significant role that the Project Team plays in ensuring the success of the entire planning process and the roles and responsibilities that must be identified according to the Project Plan. The SCIP Methodology assists users in identifying the varied players who must be involved for the success of the overall project. Most notably, these team members should gather input from influential members of the public safety community within the state and representatives from statewide offices. The inclusion of these practitioner perspectives helps to ensure the on-going involvement and support of the public safety community in the strategic planning process. Once finalized, the team should review and approve the Project Plan and Roadmap developed during Phase III.

Phase V – Recruit Focus Group Participants and Meeting Preparation

By holding focus groups, a state can get the “right” people involved, including a diverse representation of practitioners from across the major public safety disciplines of Fire, Law Enforcement and EMS. This is essential in order to gather the most useful and relevant information, while marketing the importance of local involvement in the planning effort. The identification of participants for the focus group interviews is a key step for the actualization of the practitioner-driven philosophy which is core to the SCIP methodology and which SAFECOM believes to be critical to the success of a state-wide strategic planning process. Phase V provides guidelines for identification of focus groups participants as well as recommended criteria and statistical breakdowns for participation as developed through the Virginia Strategic Planning effort.

Phase VI – Conduct Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews provide as an efficient and effective way to gather a broad number of diverse practitioner perspectives for the strategic planning process, while identifying key practitioner representatives to be included in the strategic planning session at the end of the process. Phase VI provides recommended techniques for a consistent and methodical approach to the planning and delivery of these sessions, including preparatory work, guiding questions to structure the interview, and the importance of capturing session results on a shared display which allows for the validation of comments by the participants and a way of managing complex discussions. This section of the SCIP methodology additionally highlights the importance of a neutral facilitator in

these sessions, to increase the sponsor's ability to actively listen and network with the public safety community in attendance.

Phase VII – Analyze Data and Prepare for Strategic Planning Session

Phase VII provides an approach on how to identify patterns and themes found in the information collected in the focus group interviews. The collective perspectives from local practitioners fuel recommendations for the development of a statewide strategic plan.

Phase VIII – Prepare and Conduct Strategic Planning Session

Successful adoption and implementation of the recommendations gathered during the focus group interviews hinges on bringing together key decision and policy makers in the state. The final strategic planning session allows focus group participants and a larger portion of state leadership to gain a comprehensive picture of the extent of communications interoperability across the state, to review the analysis of the data gathered during the interview process, and ultimately to determine initiatives that will feed directly into the structure and content of the statewide strategic plan. This phase addresses who should be invited, session format and logistics, and communications strategies for the earliest stages of implementation.

Phase IX – Develop Statewide Communications Interoperability Strategic Plan

The statewide strategic plan leverages the technical expertise of the project team, the results of the focus group interviews, and the output of the strategic planning session. As the plan is developed, the state should additionally establish bodies accountable for statewide governance over the communications interoperability efforts. SAFECOM and the Commonwealth of Virginia partnered to develop a model statewide plan and governance structure that incorporated the locally driven philosophy to best meet the specific needs of Virginia.

Phase X – Guidelines for the First 90 Days of Implementation

As a supplement to the step by step approach offered in the first nine phases, Phase X provides some preliminary guidelines for implementing the strategic plan. Prioritization of initiatives, project plan development, funding, and the enrollment of governing bodies are all critical considerations when building

engagement in and momentum for a successful start to the implementation of the statewide plan.

Conclusion

SAFECOM believes that the ten step process laid out in the SCIP methodology can serve as a guide to any state or jurisdiction planning for improved communications and interoperability. Underpinning this document is the belief that all successful interoperability efforts must build from the local/user level upward and remain as inclusive as possible. SAFECOM believes that only through such locally driven efforts can the nation overcome its wireless communications interoperability challenges. Moving forward, SAFECOM hopes to refine and supplement the model presented here as it is used by other states and jurisdictions.