

BUILDING INTEROPERABILITY IN THE PSAP

Experience shows there are seven considerations for successful cooperation

By Cheryl Konarski

7 Considerations for Successful PSAP Interoperability

SUPPORT
Do you have the participation and support of city/county administrators and chiefs?

1

FUNDING
Have you identified initial funding sources?

2

EDUCATION
Are administrators educated on the ongoing costs?

3



Source: www.hexagonsafetyinfrastructure.com

In public safety we often hear the term “interoperability” but how does that fit within the PSAP environment? How can it assist when we begin talking about consolidation? In this article we’ll delve into those topics and shed some light on the impact interoperability has on a PSAP and the agencies it works with.

There are seven areas to consider when introducing interoperability into your center based on the experience of agencies that have worked through the introduction of interoperability into their centers and want to share lessons learned with other PSAPs.

SUPPORT

Support is the first consideration for a reason — without it all the other parts will have a very difficult time getting off the ground.

Interoperability, by its very definition, must have support from all involved. Build that support by talking about the issues that all parties are concerned with — responder safety, lack of communication and awareness of events in surrounding jurisdictions, shared resources and data, to name a few. For example, Tim Hannah, Communications Systems Assistant Director with South Sound 911 in Pierce County, Washington, cited deputies driving right by in-progress events in neighboring jurisdictions that they were unaware of due to lack of interoperability. Having instant access to shared resources will help drive partnerships forward when seeking support from stakeholders. With interoperability, situational awareness will go directly to responders, helping them form a plan of action, helping to provide an even swifter response.

FUNDING

Funding is a huge constraint for today’s PSAPs. Never has there been a time where technology is growing so rapidly, while PSAPs struggle to keep up, largely due to funding. Technology is what drives the data that is gathered, sorted through and disseminated to our responders. When we lack the technology we are not able to offer the support that is needed, not only to the agencies we work with, but the citizens we all serve. By identifying initial funding sources we can get the ball rolling to create our interoperability plan.

Additionally, when we share resources, we share the cost as well. Whether it is backroom technology, infrastructure, physical locations or personnel, there are many ways partnerships and interoperability can save agencies money when it comes to those crucial dollars that must be spread through so many parts of the operational picture. Even negotiating a shared contract can reap the benefits of volume discounts and shared expenses.

EDUCATION

When you are developing your interoperability plan make sure to include ongoing costs associated with the plan. Who owns contracts? Who maintains equipment? Once equipment and technology reaches its end-of-life, how are these tools replaced?

Agencies that do not include this forward thinking in their strategic plan can be caught off guard and may not have the funding to keep the program going as it grows and develops with the needs of partner agencies. This can also include planning funds for any upgrades as your system continues to grow. Discuss this with your vendor and agencies that will be included in the build-out. Do your due diligence, talk to other PSAPs that have implemented interoperability and find out what growing pains they may have experienced. Lessons learned from each other help smooth the path for those following behind.

INVOLVEMENT

Involve every facet of your operation. From the frontline telecommunicator, through your supervision and technical personnel up to your director/manager, make sure you have representation from each level. Each one has specifics they will be looking for, and will know from their perspective

7 COLLABORATION
Is there a willingness and ability to collaborate with other agencies to accommodate all needs?

6 DESIGNATION
Is there a designated hub agency to act as the central lead?

5 RESPONSIBILITY
Have agreements between agencies been written to identify and protect each agency’s responsibilities?

4 INVOLVEMENT
Are employees from all areas of the department involved in the process?

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what will help them use the full range of capabilities interoperability offers.

As you move outside your PSAP, look to those agencies for which you dispatch. Encourage them to also have representation across the field within their discipline, including patrol officers and deputies, detectives, supervisors, forensics, evidence, K-9 officers and other specialty units. For fire, include firefighters through battalion chiefs, and all levels in between. Ambulance and EMS services must have a seat at the table, as should the information technology and computer-aided dispatch (CAD) staff. Each agency knows what they need for a strong interoperability infrastructure.

Don't forget about your governmental representatives— mayors, city council members, county commissioners and others who will help influence policymakers and citizens alike. If you need to pass a bond initiative or tax increase, having their partnership will help tremendously when you go before the voters. They will be a great asset as you spread the message of how important it is for the welfare and safety of your citizens to implement this program.

When he was the city manager of Lakewood, Washington, current South Sound 911 Executive Director Andrew Neiditz helped make the case to voters in 2011, explaining that they were potentially at risk because their police departments, fire departments and other public safety entities were not able to communicate across radio channels effectively.

The result? In November 2011, residents in Pierce County voted in favor of a 0.1 percent sales tax increase to support the formation of South Sound 911 and the efficiencies gained through consolidation and cooperation. Local governments came together to create the interlocal agency, which supports 41 police and fire agencies. Since then, the agency has provided nearly 4,600 new public safety radios to responders, improved the regional 700 MHz and 800 MHz radio system, implemented a unified CAD system, consolidated five PSAPs, replaced outdated 9-1-1 phone systems, and they are working on designing a new public safety communications center. The work is not complete, but these accomplishments have created a more unified response across the disciplines, creating interoperability among the many agencies.

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RESPONSIBILITY

Agreements written between agencies to identify and protect responsibilities will keep things straight between all those involved. This can help alleviate potential issues during incidents. Also, create agreements that will address agencies that leave the configuration; without this you may run into issues of continuity when there aren't measures in place to address partnership changes. Have plans in place before it happens.

South Sound 911's "member agencies," the local governments who founded the agency, created an interlocal agreement, and oversight comes from a policy board composed of elected officials from around the county and an operations board composed of fire and police chiefs who depend on the agency. The agreement establishes roles and responsibilities, and the boards help reach decisions as issues and needs arise.

DESIGNATION

Is there a designated hub agency to act as the central lead? Although this is interoperability, one agency needs to act as the lead to keep the flow of work moving, to be the spokesperson as well as advocate for the project.

South Sound 911's Policy Board and Operations Board chairs, Tacoma Councilman Joe Lonergan and Fire Chief Jim Sharp summarized the cooperation this way: "Every agency is working together for solutions in dispatch and radio communication interoperability. South Sound 911 facilitates those solutions. It is an independent, cooperative entity. No single jurisdiction "owns"

it, which ensures fair consideration to the needs of the public and each agency using its services."¹

Just as incident command functions, so should implementation of interoperability. Rather than talking to multiple agencies, having a designee that facilitates and works for the group will save much frustration during and after the project.

COLLABORATION

Working together as a team, regardless of what patch is on your uniform or what agency name is on the side of your responders' units, helps in ways we are still learning. From the frontline telecommunicator up through the personnel in the field, each wants every possible resource available at their disposal. With interoperability, your local resources bring to the table their expertise and knowledge of their jurisdiction. Meanwhile, agencies within the interoperability platform bring the added bonus of additional resources being available quickly, whether through the phone or via a radio frequency. This must be done willingly and with an ability to collaborate with agencies, accommodating all needs.

"Since our voters approved funding in November 2011 for the consolidations in our county as well as to upgrade radio systems to improve interoperability, we have experienced many times where we have successfully handled large and complex incidents," Hannah said. "We continue to work towards even greater interoperability within our county but also within our region."

Agencies around the country, and even the world, should continue to work towards this level of interoperability, not only for the good of their citizens, but for the good of their agencies and personnel. Strong agencies coming together as a team to achieve their common goals while being able to communicate effectively will make the difference as we move forward in public safety communications. ●

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Reference:

¹ The News Tribune, June 24, 2017.