

THE QUEST FOR INTEROPERABILITY: VIRGINIA'S EXPERIENCE

The importance, for both incident mitigation and responder safety, of clear and dependable communications amongst emergency responders cannot be understated. While the tragic events of September 11, 2001 dramatically underscored the need for progress in this area, it is not a new challenge. In fact, the fire service literature is rife with examples of firefighter deaths that occurred due to compromised communications. A wide range of technologies are currently being explored that promise to advance the state-of-the-art in public safety communications, with seamless “interoperability” the ultimate goal. It seems clear, however, that improved technology is only part of the answer to what is surely a multi-faceted problem.

Local and state agencies within the Commonwealth of Virginia began their quest for interoperability well before the 9/11 terrorist attacks provided a catalyst. Several initiatives are currently underway to help improve communications between federal, state, and local emergency responders statewide. This paper will identify some key “lessons learned” from these efforts—using survey results, original research, and case studies drawn from Virginia’s experience at the Pentagon and during the 2002 sniper shootings. Human factors, engineering, the policy process, and organizational behavior are all identified as important aspects of the interoperability puzzle.

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PROFILE:

Adam Thiel leads Virginia’s state fire agency with overall responsibility for: fire suppression, aircraft rescue and firefighting, fire marshal, technical rescue, and hazmat first responder training; administering \$10 million per year in grants to localities for fire-rescue training and equipment; conducting fire protection policy analyses; deploying public fire and life safety education initiatives; statewide mutual-aid coordination and incident management support; and fire incident reporting. He is a member of the Commonwealth Preparedness Working Group, Virginia Emergency Response Council, State Hazardous Materials Emergency Response Advisory Council, and Virginia Child Day-Care Council. Serving as a firefighter and company officer since 1991 he holds a Master’s degree in public administration, is pursuing doctoral study in public policy, and is a nationally-registered paramedic.