

# Enhancing Communications and Interoperability:

*Perspectives and Key Considerations for Improving  
Local and State Coordination*

**SAFECOM**



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## **Executive Summary**

This report offers key considerations for emergency responders seeking to improve coordination among their local and state agencies. Local and state emergency responders stand to benefit from coordinated efforts to improve communications interoperability in the following areas of opportunity:

- Improved Use of Funding Resources
- Enhanced Incident Response
- Shared Technical Expertise
- Outreach to and Education of Public Officials and the Public

This document identifies three functional areas around which local and state emergency responders can coordinate efforts to improve communications interoperability. The functional areas of work are:

- **Planning:** Tasks include developing near- and long-term goals and strategic objectives, collecting and disseminating valuable information, and collaborating to achieve common objectives.
- **Operations:** Tasks include establishing procedures for the use of communications interoperability assets by multiple agencies and jurisdictions during incident response, and conducting training and exercises to promote awareness and enhance operations.
- **Policy Development:** Tasks include educating public officials and the general public on the needs of the public safety community, and developing policies that support coordination to enhance communications interoperability.

For each functional area of work, supplemental checklists that include questions to consider are provided. The considerations in the checklist are intended to encourage local and state emergency responders to take actions to improve local and state coordination; thereby, realizing improvements to communications interoperability.



### ***Why is Local and State Coordination Important?***

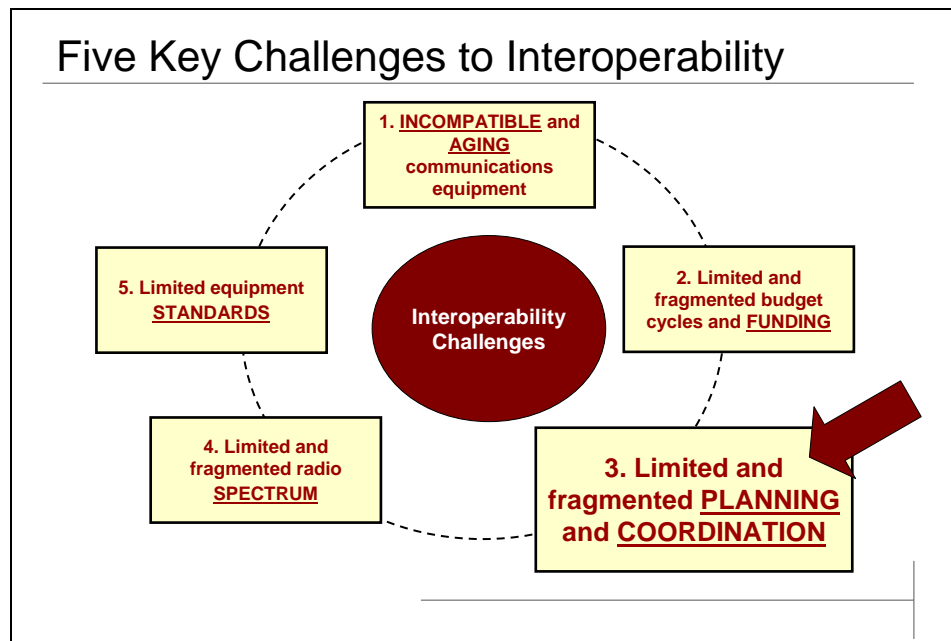
***Coordination between local and state emergency responders helps improve communications interoperability in the following ways:***

- Shared agreements and understandings on how to move forward when developing and implementing projects to improve communications interoperability
- Enabling of seamless communications during response to incidents involving local and state emergency response agencies
- Sharing of information and resources to ensure the most efficient and effective incident response possible

## Introduction

The framework and considerations for improving local and state coordination in this report are a result of data and experience collected by the SAFECOM program during the Regional Communications Interoperability Pilot (RCIP) projects.<sup>1</sup> SAFECOM observed that working relationships and projects for improving communications and interoperability were often not coordinated among local and state emergency responders. In many cases, local and state agencies lacked institutionalized processes for coordination. They also lacked a shared understanding of their respective responsibilities and relationships to each other. This lack of coordination often resulted in disjointed efforts to set up communications interoperability during the emergency response to an incident.

The issues around local and state coordination echo the finding of “limited and fragmented planning and coordination” identified by the National Task Force on Interoperability (NTFI).<sup>2</sup> This challenge emphasizes that improving communications interoperability requires coordination in how projects are developed, policies are established, and procedures are generated across agencies in all levels of government. Limited and fragmented planning and coordination remains one of five key challenges facing public safety today – as depicted in the graphic below.



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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the SAFECOM program and the RCIP projects, refer to [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#).

<sup>2</sup> The mission of NTFI was to help public safety achieve communications interoperability. To accomplish its mission, NTFI provided educational information to local and state elected and appointed officials and representative associations on the benefits of interoperability, and provided a forum for public policy makers to partner their efforts with those of the public safety community to address interoperability issues more comprehensively. The five key challenges to interoperability were summarized by NTFI in the February 2003 final report, *Why Can't We Talk? Working Together to Bridge the Communications Gap to Save Lives*. More information can be found at: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/commtech/ntfi/welcome.html>.

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In an effort to address the issue of limited and fragmented planning and coordination, SAFECOM offers an updated perspective on local and state coordination in this document. This guidance document provides a series of questions to consider for improving local and state coordination around three functional areas of work.

The following points highlight the importance of and opportunities available through improved coordination among local and state emergency responders.



### ***Why Is Local and State Coordination Important?***

***Coordination between local and state emergency responders helps improve communications interoperability in the following ways:***

- Shared agreements and understandings on how to move forward when developing and implementing projects to improve communications interoperability
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## **Target Audience**

This guidance document provides key questions and considerations for decision makers from local and state emergency response agencies who lead efforts to improve communications and interoperability within their states. It addresses an audience that might have responsibilities for:

- Establishing collaborative decision making processes and procedures to enhance communications and interoperability among multiple agencies, jurisdictions, or disciplines
- Exploring issues related to interoperability and seeking guidance on the critical planning and coordination steps necessary to achieve interoperability
- Designing and implementing communications and interoperability initiatives, solutions, and improvements



**Note:** This document contains an initial version of conclusions and checklist questions developed from SAFECOM's observations in working with local and state emergency responders. Therefore, public safety practitioners reviewing and using this document are invited to provide their own insights and experiences to the SAFECOM program at [www.safecomprogram.gov](http://www.safecomprogram.gov) to improve future versions of this document.

## **Scope**

Local and state emergency responders across the nation are encouraged to review and reflect upon the considerations and questions in this document to help improve alignment between local and state emergency response agencies. The checklist for local and state alignment can be used in a variety of ways, including the following uses:

- Guide for establishing processes and procedures to ensure information sharing
- Planning tool for improving communications and interoperability coordination
- Verification that all levels of government are sharing information when making communications and interoperability-related decisions



## **Potential Benefits of Coordination between Localities and States**

Turf battles, resistance to change, and failure to recognize the benefits of increased coordination often impede progress toward improved communications interoperability. Many opportunities and benefits available to local and state emergency responders can be achieved through increased coordination, as described in the following sections.

### ***Improved Use of Funding Resources***

Leaders from local and state emergency response agencies enhance their buying power when they share information about upcoming purchases and/or combine their funds to purchase in volume, when appropriate. Cost savings also arise if local and state communities take steps to share already-purchased resources, when feasible, rather than making unnecessary purchases. Cost-sharing opportunities can be attained from an operational standpoint when local and state communities plan and conduct interoperable communications training and exercise events together. In short, coordination is key.

In addition, limited funding resources are spent more wisely when local and state communities share information about the quality, benefits, challenges, and suggested mitigations when they purchase similar interoperability assets and resources.



**Example:** Through its complex of information networks, the Telecommunications Section of the Emergency Management Division in the State of Washington has provided several communications benefits to local and state stakeholders. It provides reliable primary and back-up systems for telecommunications among local, state, and federal response agencies to share information and coordinate response and recovery efforts. The Telecommunications Section also develops communications plans and systems in support of local and state emergency response plans. The Section manages federal matching funds, when available, for local jurisdictions to upgrade and maintain basic elements of their emergency communications and warning systems.

**Source:** <http://emd.wa.gov/1-dir/com/com-idx.htm>

### **Enhanced Incident Response**

Coordination among local and state emergency response agencies leads to improved use of interoperable communications equipment and resources in daily operations. For example, coordinating to establish procedures and training on the use of existing interoperable resources will better prepare local and state emergency responders for actual incidents. Further, as new capabilities and resources are acquired, local and state agencies can work together to develop standard operating procedures, training curricula, and exercise schedules for the use of new capabilities. As a result, a larger number of stakeholders in the local and state agencies have access to and knowledge of resources and capabilities for interoperable communications.



**Example:** The State of Rhode Island has a number of coordination channels in the VHF band available for mutual aid. The Rhode Island State Public Emergency Response Network (RISPERN) includes a mutual-aid channel in the VHF band for local law enforcement agencies. RISPERN is available to all 39 cities and towns throughout the state and to other law enforcement agencies within Rhode Island. The Civil Defense State Radio System (CDSTARS), a single-channel system, is used for emergency coordination by the 39 communities, state and federal agencies, and volunteer agencies and utilities.

**Source:** [http://www.safecomprogram.gov/NR/rdonlyres/ED7A0D8A-8D48-4776-8343-A880C3C1436E/0/Interoperability\\_Solutions\\_Map.pdf](http://www.safecomprogram.gov/NR/rdonlyres/ED7A0D8A-8D48-4776-8343-A880C3C1436E/0/Interoperability_Solutions_Map.pdf)

### **Shared Technical Expertise and Information**

Many local communities do not have access to independent, unbiased technical experts for advice and guidance when developing interoperability solutions and making purchasing decisions. With greater alignment, local and state emergency responders have the choice to share the cost of personnel with technical expertise and an understanding of public safety missions and operations. These advisors provide input into interoperability planning efforts for the communities that help fund their positions. These shared technical experts are then well-positioned to serve as conduits for sharing information across the local and state agencies.



**Example:** Public safety practitioners participating in RCIP projects provided the following insights on the need for shared technical expertise and information among local and state agencies:

- “If we had known when other jurisdictions were doing something, we could have coordinated or made combined purchasing decisions.”
- “There are not enough practitioners with technical expertise. Vendors are telling practitioners and legislators what is needed for interoperability and are dominating purchasing decisions.”
- “At the local levels, we are interoperable, but the difficulties arise as we have to share resources regionally and in responses to major emergency incidents.”



### **Outreach to and Education of Officials and the Public**

Local and state emergency responders often feel public officials and local administrators do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the interoperability issue. This lack of knowledge and awareness is a barrier to improving communications and interoperability because public officials make decisions on how, and to whom, limited funds are distributed. Developing shared goals and demonstrating the benefits of local and state cooperation will help the public safety community unite to overcome bureaucratic processes, increase awareness between responders and officials, and address political barriers that might separate them.

Cooperation among local and state emergency responders to conduct outreach and education is an added benefit of alignment. This coordinated leads to the development of consistent messaging on the need for improved interoperability, the barriers to interoperability, and feasible suggestions for how public officials can support improving interoperability.



**Suggestion:** Sharing resources to work toward the same goal creates a starting point for collaboration, and makes good business sense when faced with limited resources. For instance, collaborating on outreach and education for public officials and the public on the importance of communications and interoperability can result in a far-reaching education campaign that benefits both local and state emergency responders. Such collaboration efforts also teach public officials and the general public that partnerships between local and state emergency response agencies can be mutually beneficial. As a result, they might be more likely to support planned interoperability projects in which local and state emergency responders coordinate.

## **Initiating Local and State Coordination Efforts**

Local and state emergency responders who come together to improve coordination should first define their shared objectives and the benefits they hope to achieve.



***The following are key questions to consider when planning and executing efforts to improve local and state coordination:***

- Do we have a shared understanding of what we're trying to accomplish?
- Are we working toward a common goal?
- Are we clear on the areas and projects on which it makes sense for us to collaborate?
- How can our respective local and state responsibilities and authorities be used to improve communications interoperability?
- What are the limitations of our respective local and state authorities?
- Have we considered the unintentional consequences of moving forward without coordinating?
- What benefits will make coordination valuable to our respective agencies?
- How will we justify the effort and resources expended on coordination between our agencies?
- What resources do we have available to share and maximize their use?
- What resources do each of us need, but do not have readily available?

## **Framework for Coordination between Localities and States**

Coordinating local and state emergency responders is more effectively addressed when based on a shared framework. By identifying parallel and complementary functions at the local and state levels, SAFECOM observed that emergency responders from both levels of government have responsibilities to conduct planning, perform operational responsibilities, and coordinate efforts to request political support. In each area, therefore, coordinated efforts between local and state emergency response agencies maximize communications interoperability improvements and use of interoperability resources and capabilities.

Efforts to improve coordination and collaboration between local and state emergency response agencies may be organized around each functional area of work. For this document, SAFECOM identified the three following functional categories to describe the tasks completed by public safety personnel in local and state agencies:

- ***Planning:*** Tasks include developing near- and long-term goals and strategic objectives, collecting and disseminating valuable information, and collaborating to achieve common objectives.
- ***Operations:*** Tasks include planning for the use of communications interoperability assets during incident response, conducting training and exercises, and ensuring effective implementation of communications interoperability equipment and solutions.
- ***Policy Development:*** Tasks include educating public officials and the general public on the needs of the public safety community, and supporting development of draft policies.

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The following table provides sample activities and desired outcomes for increased coordination at the local and state levels of government. For each of the functional areas of work, the sample activities give an idea of what is involved in the alignment effort.

**Table 1. SAFECOM-Defined Functional Areas of Work and Sample Activities**

<b>Functional Areas of Work</b>	<b>Sample Activities for Increased Coordination</b>	<b>Desired Outcome for Local and State Emergency Response Agencies</b>
<b>Planning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share information when conducting strategic planning and decision making that could have a large impact on local and state interoperability.</li> <li>• Collaborate to develop comprehensive funding strategies and purchasing plans.</li> <li>• Identify common goals and leverage opportunities by establishing a baseline of the current and planned acquisition projects for local and state agencies.</li> <li>• Conduct a baseline assessment of current capabilities across the state.</li> <li>• Set up forums to share success stories or lessons learned.</li> <li>• Coordinate spending, where possible, to maximize use of limited funds in large purchases of communications equipment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved levels of information sharing</li> <li>• Decisions made with input from local and state counterparts who understand the impact on interoperability</li> <li>• Opportunities to realize cost savings</li> <li>• Access to more comprehensive information based on lessons learned and experiences of others to make informed decisions</li> <li>• Increased alignment and partnership</li> </ul>

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<b>Functional Areas of Work</b>	<b>Sample Activities for Increased Coordination</b>	<b>Desired Outcome for Local and State Emergency Response Agencies</b>
<b>Operations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate to develop Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) or interagency agreements to share resources and capabilities.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Begin with an MOU for a specific interoperability project or initiative to establish common ground among all stakeholders.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Coordinate on the development of incident response plans and procedures across all levels of complexity – day-to-day to catastrophic.</li> <li>• Provide mutual aid for incident response, as needed and as seems logical, based on the scope of the event.</li> <li>• Collaborate to develop and train on standard operating procedures (SOPs) for joint operations.</li> <li>• Conduct training and exercises between local and state agencies that would respond to an incident for a particular scenario.</li> <li>• Share resources and expertise, including equipment, technical experts, and channels.</li> <li>• Determine and plan for patching or gateway solutions that will be needed, if communities do not purchase compatible or interoperable solutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved preparation and coordination before and during incident response</li> <li>• Increased communications interoperability for incident response of all levels</li> <li>• Increased and improved use of communications interoperability resources and capabilities</li> </ul>
<b>Policy Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Request local and state policy makers develop policies and regulations that support improvement in interagency operations and communications by focusing on the following efforts:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Encouraging joint or regional equipment purchases</li> <li>◦ Supporting coordination and collaboration among all levels of government to reduce turf battles</li> <li>◦ Requiring communications and interoperability during large-scale public safety operations and incident response</li> <li>◦ Sharing and coordinating spectrum</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Request implementation of grant application processes that reflect a regional approach to communications and interoperability planning.</li> <li>• Conduct outreach to public officials and the general public</li> </ul>	<p>Local and state emergency response agencies will have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased support from public officials and the public as a result of unified education and outreach efforts</li> <li>• Improvement in interagency operations and communications</li> </ul>

## **Key Considerations for Improved Coordination between Localities and States**

The following checklists for each functional area of work – planning, operations, and policy development – provide key considerations as local and state emergency responders consider how their efforts are coordinated at each level of government. Local and state emergency responders should consider these questions as they move forward with initiatives and solutions for improved interoperability and then use the questions as verification that coordination across local and state agencies occurred. Using these checklists at the beginning of a coordination effort and at its conclusion ensures coordination takes place, where it is possible, appropriate, and beneficial.

SAFECOM believes increased coordination between local and state emergency response agencies ensures resource and information sharing and mutual benefits as they conduct projects to advance their communications and interoperability. Moreover, increased alignment helps achieve improved communications and interoperability as effectively and efficiently as possible.



Local and state emergency responders who plan and implement communications interoperability initiatives and solutions should have shared agreement on the following issues:

- When and how to collaborate
- Mutual and individual responsibilities
- Their shared relationship
- Establishment of forums to share information and make shared decisions
- Acknowledgement of respective activities and the expected impact of not coordinating, when coordination is not possible

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<b>PLANNING</b>			
<b>Checklist Questions</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>If no, explain why.</b>
Is there a communications and interoperability coordination committee that is fully representative of local and state emergency responders who are responsible for improving communications and interoperability across the state? <sup>3</sup>			
Have procedures by which the coordination committee operates, including bylaws, election of leadership, and decision-making processes, been established?			
Is the coordination committee developing plans or guidance for bridging interoperability needs for the near-term, and planning long-term solutions?			
Have local or state representatives on the coordination committee shared their agency's acquisition and project plans and goals with the coordination committee?			
Has a process for promoting or posting cost-sharing opportunities been established?			
Has a process and schedule been developed to identify requirements for implementing communications and interoperability initiatives and solutions that will benefit all public safety agencies across the state?			
As a local or state representative, does your agency include requirements for interoperability with other local agencies and with state agencies in your system design and procurement plans?			
When planning purchases and systems, have you worked with other local and state agencies to ensure your system design is interoperable?			
When planning purchases, have all local and state agencies established interagency agreements for which standards-compliant equipment will and will not be purchased to ensure interoperability?			

<sup>3</sup> This committee could be responsible for addressing each of the three functional areas of work (planning, operations, and policy development). It is up to the representatives from each locality and state to decide if the organizational structure to complete the work best fits their unique circumstances.

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<b>PLANNING</b>			
<b>Checklist Questions</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>If no, explain why.</b>
Is there a statewide forum or secure web site where information about purchasing plans or interoperability system planning questions can be posted and collaboratively discussed?			
Is the technical expertise available in your area or at the state level being shared to support interoperable system planning or to provide guidance on interoperable equipment purchases?			
Is there a forum, or formal opportunity, to share innovative uses of existing interoperability capabilities, discuss communications and interoperability issues, or share lessons learned?			
Is there an inventory of the interoperable capabilities shared across the state?			
As a local or state representative, have you identified resources that could be shared with other local or state agencies?			
Have plans and procedures been developed for sharing or establishing interoperability channels?			
Has the interoperability coordination committee ensure local and state agencies are collaborating, where possible, on their efforts to obtain licenses for additional spectrum?			
Is there local and state coordination for planning the shared use of available spectrum?			
If there is no local and state coordination for planning the use and sharing of spectrum, what is your local or state agency doing to coordinate use of the spectrum?			
What has your local or state agency done to ensure enough spectrum is available to operate the systems you currently have in place?			
What has your local or state agency done to ensure enough spectrum is available to operate future enhancements to your systems?			



<b>OPERATIONS</b>			
<b>Checklist Questions</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>If no, explain why.</b>
Are there regular meetings to discuss the use of communications and interoperability resources and capabilities in public safety operations from day-to-day activities to catastrophic events?			
Have representatives from local and state agencies collaborated to develop incident response plans that include procedures for the use of interoperable communications resources and capabilities?			
Are local or state representatives participating in the development of SOPs for using interoperable communications resources and capabilities? (For instance, they might develop SOPs for the use of existing mutual aid channels. These SOPs should include rules for use, such as speaking in plain English, keying the talk button for three seconds, or repeating a statement twice.)			
Are representatives of all first responders from the state and local level participating in the development of the SOPs they will be expected to adopt?			
Are these SOPs regularly used when responding to incidents that require communications interoperability?			
Have representatives from local and state agencies collaborated to incorporate National Incident Management System (NIMS) principles into regional SOPs?			
Is the technical expertise available in your area or at the state level being shared across the state to support developing SOPs?			
Have representatives from local and state agencies developed shared training and increased awareness of how to activate and use communications and interoperability solutions to ensure proper use by all emergency responders?			
Have representatives from local and state agencies collaborated to develop a schedule of exercises that includes scenarios of varying levels of complexity for the use of interoperability communications resources and capabilities?			
Has a shared resource for documenting information about the limitations of each solution been created to address issues such as radio coverage limits,			

<b>OPERATIONS</b>			
<b>Checklist Questions</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>If no, explain why.</b>
user access procedures, and special activation processes?			
Has a feedback process been established to improve the training curricula as a result of lessons learned from real life events and exercises?			
Are there scheduled interoperability tests or checks for using interoperable capabilities or resources?			
Is there an established office or team to provide technical assistance to local and state agencies?			

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<b>POLICY DEVELOPMENT</b>			
<b>Checklist Questions</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>If no, explain why.</b>
Has a unified outreach campaign plan been developed that includes consistent messaging about the communications and interoperability needs of the public safety community?			
Have personnel from the coordination committee (or leaders from the local and state agencies) been assigned or empowered to participate in Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rulemaking activities on behalf of all local and state emergency responders?			
Have personnel from the coordination committee been assigned or empowered to participate in standards development activities to ensure emerging standards accurately reflect state and local requirements?			
Have personnel from the coordination committee been assigned or empowered to request that successful improvement to interoperability become a priority in a major address by the governor and in major speeches by mayors or local administrators in all localities?			
Is the coordination committee working to establish public safety funding as a fiscal priority?			
Is the coordination committee working to encourage development of funding strategies or incentives to encourage greater local, regional, and state interoperability?			
Are the needs of local and state communities shared with the state spectrum manager so those communities receive coordinated policy guidance, resources, and direction on the efficient use of spectrum?			
Has a policy been created in the state to offer incentives to local and state agencies that share, participate in, or contribute to interoperable communications systems, capabilities, or resources?			

## **Appendix A – The SAFECOM Program**

SAFECOM, a communications program of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office for Interoperability and Compatibility (OIC), works with its federal partners to provide research, development, testing and evaluation, guidance, tools, and templates on communications-related issues to local, tribal, state, and federal public safety agencies. OIC is managed by the Science and Technology (S&T) Directorate. SAFECOM believes that any successful effort to improve public safety communications and interoperability must include the voices of first responders on the front lines in large, small, rural, or urban communities across this Nation.

## **Appendix B – Background on the Regional Communications Interoperability Pilots (RCIPs)**

OIC was directed by Section 7304 of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 (Public Law 108-458) to address communication issues facing public safety. As such, OIC conducted two Regional Communications Interoperability Pilot (RCIP) projects through SAFECOM. These pilot projects focus on providing assistance in two selected states, the State of Nevada and the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and gathering experience and information for SAFECOM to support development of tools and models to improve interoperability for other jurisdictions nationwide.

Pilot sites were selected using criteria provided by Section 7304 of the Act and by SAFECOM, including review of the following concerns:

- Level of risk to the area
- Number of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies in the area
- Number of potential victims from a large-scale terrorist attack in the area
- Community risk and vulnerability
- Level of commitment and interest in the pilots by the region
- Articulation of a defined interoperability need by the region
- Ability of the pilots to serve as national models

In Nevada, SAFECOM formed a partnership with the Nevada Communications Steering Committee (NCSC), and completed a statewide strategic planning process in the summer of 2005. SAFECOM also committed to developing several specific guidance documents and working in partnership with one of Nevada's urban areas during Phase 2 of the Nevada RCIP. These guidance documents are intended to specifically address the state's needs related to funding, procurement, and governance as well as relate the development of models that might be useful to communities across the nation.

SAFECOM partnered with the Clark County Office of Emergency Management and representatives from the state to conduct an urban area project. The SAFECOM-Clark County Urban Area Project supported the identification of opportunities for the urban area and the state to enhance their planning and coordination to improve communications and interoperability. Information gathered during the urban area project was aggregated with other SAFECOM experiences as the basis for this report.<sup>b</sup>