



## Communication in a Disaster

*Communication is a vital part of emergency response.* Yet in a number of recent disasters, the efforts of responders were hampered by communication breakdowns caused by a lack of communications interoperability.

- September 2001: Orders to evacuate the towers at the World Trade Center are received by police—343 firefighters don't hear the order and perish in the collapse.
- August 2005: Hurricane Katrina takes out most local communications. Responders struggle to rescue victims using a small number of mutual aid channels that are quickly overwhelmed.
- February 2008: Local responders and national guard troops have difficulty communicating as a winter storm strands over 2,000 vehicles on a Wisconsin highway for over 14 hours.

Interoperable radio communication allows responders from different agencies to talk to one another during an emergency. While most emergency radio systems can be tuned to talk with neighboring agencies for every day incidents involving limited mutual aid, major disasters may require help from responders throughout the state—local radio systems will be overwhelmed.

## WISCOM

*How can incident commanders control a situation when responders cannot communicate?*

A statewide communications interoperability solution is needed to fill the gap.

The Wisconsin Interoperable System for Communications (WISCOM) is a common statewide system that will allow responders across the state to seamlessly communicate during a major disaster.

The system supports up to three simultaneous conversation paths during an incident at the same site—triple the number currently available—and can be expanded to allowing responders from anywhere in the state to assist without loss of communications.



The first phase of the WISCOM VHF backbone will be activated by the end of 2010 and will provide mobile radio coverage for over 95% of the state. The shared system is designed to operate with existing radio systems and will be expanded over time through local upgrades.

## Oversight

*WISCOM will be controlled by its users in local, tribal, and state government.* The Statewide System Management Group (SSMG), a committee of the State Interoperability Council, oversees the project. The 23 member group includes representatives from federal, tribal, state, county and local law enforcement, fire, EMS and state and local emergency management agencies.

## Funding

*Initial start-up costs will be covered using federal funds.* A plan for sharing ongoing costs among all partners is being developed by the SSMG. Sharing a statewide infrastructure will result in long-term cost-savings for everyone. As communities replace their aging systems, they will be able to leverage the state backbone, sharing infrastructure costs and avoiding costly duplication of equipment.

## What you can do TODAY

Here's how you can get started supporting interoperability in Wisconsin:

- Participate in the Statewide System Management Group and its subcommittees through your representatives. To get involved, contact the Statewide Interoperability Coordinator:  
  
David Spenner  
(608) 261-7535  
david.spenner@wi.gov
- Secure and maintain compatible end user equipment. (See the WISCOM page at [Interop.wi.gov](http://Interop.wi.gov).)
- Evaluate how your local system can connect to WISCOM. If you are planning to replace or upgrade your system in the near future, think about how you can leverage WISCOM to save money and expand capacity in your area.
- Help secure funding for WISCOM enhancements and local expansion. Federal funding is available for the backbone and some radio upgrades, but state and local funding will be needed for long-term sustainability.
- Spread the word about the benefits of interoperability, and work with your fellow state and local leaders to support Wisconsin's interoperability efforts.

WISCOM is part of Wisconsin's Interoperability Initiative. More information about WISCOM and other coordinated efforts to improve Wisconsin emergency radio communications can be found on our website:

[INTEROP.WI.GOV](http://INTEROP.WI.GOV)



Any questions about implementing interoperable communications in your area can be directed to:

**David Spenner**

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# WISCOM

## Improving Wisconsin's Emergency Radio Communications

