U.S. Department of Homeland Security Launches Office of Interoperability and Compatibility; Offers States and Locales Tools for Improving Public Safety Communications Interoperability

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Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge today announced the October 1, 2004, launch of the Office of Interoperability and Compatibility, along with the release of tools designed to help state and local public safety practitioners improve communications interoperability.

The Office of Interoperability and Compatibility (OIC), part of the Science & Technology directorate, will oversee the wide range of public safety interoperability programs and efforts currently spread across Homeland Security. These programs address critical interoperability issues relating to public safety and emergency response, including communications, equipment, training, and other areas as needs are identified.

"This office will ensure that Homeland Security is exercising its leadership role to bring local, state, and federal efforts together in a partnership that is essential to national progress on interoperability," said Secretary Ridge. "This is a national effort, not a federal effort, and I thank the first responder community for their initiative and collaboration."

Specific responsibilities for the OIC will include:

- Supporting the creation of interoperability standards;
- Establishing a comprehensive research, development, testing, and evaluation (RDT&E) program for improving public safety interoperability;
- Identifying and certifying all DHS programs that touch on interoperability;
- Integrating coordinated grant guidance across all DHS grant making agencies that touch on public safety interoperability;
- Overseeing the development and implementation of technical assistance for public safety interoperability;
- Conducting pilot demonstrations;
- Creating an interagency interoperability coordination council; and
- Coordinating and working closely with the new National Incident Management System (NIMS) Integration Center.

The OIC will help leverage public safety community resources by promoting cooperation across all levels of government and coordination among federal programs and activities related to interoperability. As a central clearinghouse for information about and assistance with interoperability issues, the office will reduce unnecessary duplication in public safety programs and spending, and will identify and promote interoperability best practices in the public safety arena.

Homeland Security is also distributing communications interoperability improvement tools – an "Interoperability Continuum" guide, and Statewide Communications Interoperability Planning methodology – to leaders in all fifty states and fifty high-threat urban areas.

The "Interoperability Continuum," developed through local and Homeland Security collaboration in ten high-threat urban areas, identifies five critical success factors that communities must consider as they work to improve communications interoperability. The Continuum provides guidance for increasing frequency of use of equipment, creating a joint governance structure, developing standard operating procedures, integrating technology solutions with existing systems, and conducting training and exercises. The methodology for Statewide Communications Interoperability Planning grew out of Homeland Security work in the Commonwealth of Virginia.