



IN SHORT

NIJ

➔ TOWARD CRIMINAL JUSTICE SOLUTIONS

www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij JUN. 08

NCJ 222362

Effective Police Communications Systems Require New “Governance”

Public safety agencies must be able to communicate effectively with each other to protect and serve citizens. To do that, police departments create “governance” agreements that allow them to

jointly own, operate and manage communications systems for the benefit of all the participating agencies, which may be in different counties or adjacent states.

Key Points

- Shared governance that includes multiple agencies is a new model for public safety.
- All agencies must be involved from the beginning of the project.
- Participants must create a formal structure for governance.
- Shared ownership and mutual trust are critical to success.
- Elected officials and other decision makers must be involved.
- Without partnerships, federal, state and local systems will remain incompatible, hindering future communications and duplicating efforts.
- Public safety agencies must educate their communities about the benefits of shared governance.

THE NEED FOR GOVERNANCE IN PUBLIC SAFETY

Police departments started using radios in 1933; each unit of government bought radios individually for many years. A region might have had separate local, county and state communications networks serving the same area. Each government agency managed its own system and normally did not coordinate purchases or share equipment with neighboring jurisdictions. Even different public safety disciplines in the same jurisdiction had their own radios and other equipment. For example, fire, police, transportation and emergency medical services frequently had separate communications

networks in the same city. These uncoordinated efforts led to communication “stovepipes” in many regions and states.

In the 1980s and 1990s, some public safety agencies realized the benefits of communicating with other agencies. Innovative partnership projects began forming and developing in San Diego, North Carolina and other cities and states. Regional or statewide governance structures managed shared communications. The partners found that new purchases were more cost-effective when agencies cooperated. Some areas moved from single agency ownership to joint ownership of communications equipment.

The entire public safety community now realizes that partnerships are needed to meet future challenges. Agencies are rethinking communications and data sharing procedures and are learning new ways to communicate and exchange information. Successful governance arrangements will be critical to these efforts.

HOW TO MAKE GOVERNANCE WORK

Invite key leaders early. Major problems emerge if key agencies are not brought to the table early. Leaders who are not involved in the early stages may feel left out, which could lead to their being unsupportive of the entire idea. Agency officials are more enthusiastic about being involved in a project when they can influence early decisions.

Share ownership. Public safety agencies have traditionally owned and managed their own communications equipment. Shared governance creates complexities that are new to many agencies. Successful projects have important roles for every jurisdiction involved. While one agency may manage day-to-day activities, the project's "road map" must be shared by all the participants.

Build trust. Agencies involved in governance must learn to trust one another. Trust can be an issue if participants have never met in person or worked together. Building trust involves sharing the project's successes and problems. All integral agencies should receive credit for successes. Participants must feel that they are a part of a team, and not just "users" paying for a service.

FORMALIZE THE GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Participants must formalize governance procedures. Managers need the authority to develop project goals, define the scope of the shared ventures, and identify funding methods. The joint program must include a long-term funding plan.

Participants can take various approaches to these challenges, one of which is a "Joint Powers Agreement." These agreements are contracts that cover details such as methods of cooperating, sharing equipment and supporting the governance program. Working groups can address the details.

INVOLVE AND EDUCATE DECISION MAKERS

Communications systems have continuing sustainability and maintenance costs. Many existing public safety interoperability projects involve representatives from all branches of government. Elected officials need to understand the long-term commitments and benefits of these projects. Without the support and understanding of elected officials, long-term funding will be challenging.

EDUCATE THE COMMUNITY

The public is often not aware that effective communications is a challenge for public safety organizations. Projects can lose public support if people do not understand the benefits of sharing communications systems. Citizens can be a major force in supporting projects once they understand the situation. Some governance structures have members of the public on their boards.

OUTLOOK

There is increasing support for public agencies to work together on regional communications projects. By strengthening partnerships and improving communications, agencies can meet the challenges involved in new governance arrangements. Partnerships are needed to protect our communities and provide first responders with the latest technologies. Without partnerships, federal, state and local systems will continue to be incompatible, hindering communications.

