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Interoperable Communications: Ensuring Radio Coverage When Selecting a Unified Command Site

SUMMARY

Individuals responsible for establishing a Unified Command (UC) site should consider ensuring that the site has sufficient radio coverage. Functional onsite radio capabilities will facilitate interoperable communications throughout an exercise or incident.

DESCRIPTION

The Tampa Bay Urban Area evaluated the organizational performance of its Tactical Interoperable Communications Plan during the US Coast Guard Bay Sentinel 06 Full Scale Exercise (FSE) on August 1, 2006. The Tampa Bay Urban Area co-sponsored the FSE with the Coast Guard, the Florida Regional Domestic Security Task Force (Region 4), and the Department of Homeland Security Office of Grants and Training. The exercise tested participants' ability to establish and maintain interoperable communications during two simultaneous incidents at separate locations within the Port of Tampa. The first incident involved a suspicious package and individual at the Martin Gas Facility; the second was an explosion near the storage tanks at the Chevron fuel facility.

Exercise planners designated the Coast Guard as lead of the UC with the Tampa Police Department, Hillsborough County Sheriff, and others serving as deputy incident commanders (IC). The Coast Guard established the UC base of operations at the Coast Guard Prevention office. At the UC base, the Coast Guard held meetings and briefings with deputy ICs. However, UC staff did not communicate often with the communications unit leader or with the two incident sites. This made it difficult for UC staff to determine the status of the two incident sites. In addition, the lack of communication with the two incident sites caused the incident sites to act independently from one another. The after-action report (AAR) stated that it was "not clear that the site ICs were aware that a UC had been established."

Exercise evaluators observed that radios did not function in the building where the Coast Guard established the UC base. As a result, exercise participants had to leave the building in order to use their radios. The AAR noted that the lack of radio coverage negatively impacted communications between the UC base and the two incident sites in other ways, although the extent of its impact was unclear. The AAR recommended that "radio coverage be a consideration in UC site selection" to avoid similar issues in future incident operations.

Individuals who establish a UC base during an exercise or incident should consider choosing a site that has sufficient radio coverage. This will help the UC maintain interoperable communications throughout the exercise or incident.

CITATION

Tampa Bay Sentinel 06 Tactical Interoperability Plan Validation After-Action Report. 2006, pp. 14, 16.

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