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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Communications: Using Plain Language during a Multi-Agency Incident Response

SUMMARY

Jurisdictions should encourage regional responders and communications specialists to use plain language when communicating with other emergency response agencies during an incident.

DESCRIPTION

On October 9, 2006, the City of Albuquerque, New Mexico, Office of Emergency Management (OEM) staged the BallCom Full-Scale Exercise (FSE). The goal of the FSE was to evaluate the Greater Albuquerque Metro Planning Area's Tactical Interoperable Communications Plan (TICP) by identifying areas for improvement. The FSE simulated the explosion of a propane storage tank and a large fire in Albuquerque's Balloon Fiesta Park. Forty-nine representatives from ten federal, state, and local agencies participated in the exercise.

During the exercise, participants did not consistently use plain language when communicating with personnel from other agencies. TICP evaluators noted that participants from local fire departments used fire department codes such as "Code 31 C1," "Code 1," "Code 3," and "57 Delta 8" when speaking over the radio. However, not all participants were familiar with these fire department codes. The use of agency-specific codes during the exercise created opportunities for miscommunication among responders. Following the FSE, the City of Albuquerque OEM recommended that jurisdictions provide responders with additional training in radio protocol for multi-agency response.

TICP guidelines mandate that participants use only **plain language** during multi-agency response exercises. Plain language excludes radio codes, acronyms, and abbreviations.

Jurisdictions should encourage regional responders and communications specialists to use plain language when communicating with other emergency response agencies during an incident.

CITATION

City of Albuquerque Office of Emergency Management. *BallCom Tactical Interoperable Communications Plan Full Scale Exercise After Action Report*. 2006.
https://www.llis.dhs.gov/member/secure/detail.cfm?content_id=25896

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