

Statewide Radio Communications Interoperability

The development of a statewide interoperable radio communication system in Montana would be aided by establishing a system in statute, developing state agency migration plans, and promoting operational best practices for the system.

Introduction

Communications interoperability - also referred to as compatibility or connectivity - refers to the capability of different electronic communications systems to readily connect with each other and thus enable timely communications. Timely communications, often via wireless radios, are vital to the effectiveness and safety of first responders and their supporting agencies, as well as the safety of the public at large. When communications systems are interoperable, police, firefighters, and other public safety officials responding to a routine incident or catastrophic accidents can talk to each other to coordinate efforts and work effectively together. In Montana, the current effort to develop a statewide interoperable radio communication system is known as Interoperability Montana (IM).

Audit Findings

Analysis of statewide interoperable radio communication systems in other states indicates the development of the IM project is unique. In contrast to the IM project, most other states have assigned the development and oversight of a statewide interoperable radio communication system to a state agency. The IM project was initially developed through a partnership of local governments across Montana, including representation from all 56 counties. However, participation in the project is voluntary. Presently, there are several stakeholders with radio communication infrastructure at the local and state level which have chosen not to participate. Establishing a statewide communication system in statute and defining the participation of local, state, and federal stakeholders would aid in the

ongoing success of a statewide interoperable radio communication system. In addition, developing formal state agency migration plans would coordinate state resources relative to the system.

IM Funding		
As of November 2008		
Source	Amount	Percentage
Local and Tribal	\$849,500	1%
State	15,177,484	27%
Federal	41,554,328	72%
Total Funding	\$57,581,312	100%

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division from Interoperability Montana records.

Approximately \$60 million has been leveraged for the IM project from local, state, and federal sources. Current estimates place the overall costs to build the system between \$100- and \$150 million within the next decade. Project emphasis has been primarily focused on infrastructure construction. However, there are also several operational issues which have received little attention and could promote the success of a statewide interoperable radio communication system. Issues include: a business planning process for long-term financial viability, asset inventory and management, and organizational staffing.

Audit Recommendations

Audit recommendations address the need to establish a statewide interoperable radio communication system in statute and also define the participation of local, state, and federal partners. Recommendations

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also address several operational issues to promote the long-term success of a statewide interoperable radio communication system. Audit recommendations are directed to the Department of Administration, the Governor's Office, and the Statewide Interoperability Executive Advisory Council. Audit recommendations include:

- ◆ Establishing a statewide interoperable radio communication system in statute.
- ◆ Developing a formal migration plan to coordinate the resources of state agencies relative to a statewide interoperable radio communication system.
- ◆ Adopting a formal business planning process, operational best practices for asset management, and a long-term staffing plan for a statewide interoperable radio communication system.

For a complete copy of the report (08P-03) or for further information, contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to lad@mt.gov; or check the website at <http://leg.mt.gov/audit>