Testimony

Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

Ten Years After 9/11: Improving Emergency Communications

July 27, 2011

Senator Lieberman, Senator Collins, Members of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee thank you for the opportunity to come before you this morning.

My name is Robert McAleer and I am the Director of the Maine Emergency Management Agency.

I would like to address the issue of communications interoperability as it relates to the State of Maine and in particular some the accomplishments we have achieved since 2001, our work that is currently in progress and existing gaps that need to be addressed.

By New England standards, Maine is a large state, roughly equivalent to the rest of the New England States combined. It is a mostly rural state with vast areas of very limited population and some very rugged terrain. Maine is also not a wealthy state. These factors have made improving interoperability a challenge.

Maine, however, has been fortunate to receive a significant amount of Federal funding, for which we are very grateful, to support our efforts. We estimate that approximately $9.5M or about 25% of our Homeland Security, Public Safety Interoperable Communications, and Interoperable Emergency Communications Grants funds have been dedicated to improving communications just since 2007. We have used that funding to leverage whatever local funding municipalities have generated to make notable improvements.

One advantage that we have had throughout this process is that the vast majority of our first responders use VHF radios that broadcast and receive similar frequencies. We do have a couple of pockets, such as the Cities of Portland and South Portland, that operate on 800 MHz frequencies. These jurisdictions have taken steps to ensure they are able to communicate with neighboring communities.

Because of the overwhelming similarity in equipment state-wide, our challenge has been to replace old or worn out equipment and to acquire new equipment where there was none or to replace equipment that simply was inadequate to meet current needs.

In addition to acquiring a large number of modern radios for our first responders, we have completed numerous larger projects. Attachment (a) contains a detailed compilation of the projects since 2003. Among those projects are:

- $107K to upgrade communications systems throughout Sagadahoc County and complete their narrowband transition.
- $198K to upgrade the communications infrastructure for the Hancock County Sheriff's Office
- $500K for the bulk purchase of narrowband compliant fire pagers
- $346K to support a county-wide microwave communications project in Cumberland County
- The State acquired (4) large mobile command vehicles that have state of the art radio, cell phone, internet and satellite capabilities for use in incident coordination. In multiple instances, these vehicles have served as dispatch centers when fixed facilities were out of service. We have also provided support for communications vehicles in over half of our counties.
- The State has established radio caches at crossing sites along the US/Canada Border for use by first responders moving across the border to ensure adequate interoperable equipment is available.
- Each County now has portable repeater antennas that can be deployed to remote areas where coverage may be minimal or to boost signals that might be otherwise blocked.

- Our largest and one of the most rural counties has a 100 foot tall vehicle mounted tower that can be deployed and operational within 20 minutes.
- We have been able to move our EOC from a facility that was generally inadequate to a new facility and provide the new EOC with equipment that meets virtually all of our communications needs.
- Our court system and law enforcement agencies now have access to a data broker system that enables almost instant access to the various types of critical information, such as protection orders.
- The majority of our law enforcement and even some fire departments now have Mobile Display Terminals in their vehicles which in many cases provide a better communications capability than standard radios.

We realize that interoperability is not just a matter of acquiring equipment. In many instances process and training also bring gains. Along those lines, we have established a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the owners of six state-wide frequencies to allow incident commanders to request dedicated use of those frequencies to establish and coordinate communications at an incident. These so-called CONOPS Channels have been used during training events and actual incidents. The latest instance was this past weekend when multiple agencies were involved in traffic control at a large gathering.

We have also dedicated a significant amount of time to Communications Unit Leader Training. This training helps us ensure that there is sufficient expertise available at a large event to ensure that the correct agencies are speaking on the correct channels.

We have worked with our counties to ensure that they have up to date detailed county-wide communications plans to identify all of their communications assets, ensure that their procedures are adequate and to identify any gaps.

Our border with Canada has presented a unique challenge. To meet that challenge we have been conducting a series of cross-border communications working sessions with our local, state and federal partners on both sides of the border. The sessions are helping us

understand our differences and plan for how we can overcome those differences when needed. We will soon be publishing our Border Interoperability Plan to formalize our procedures and protocols.

In addition to these workshops, Maine, with the support of our Canadian partners, applied for and received a Border Interoperability Demonstration Pilot (BIDP) grant. Out of (21) applicants Nation-wide, Maine was (1) of only (7) awardees. We are using the almost $4M provided by this grant to significantly reduce communications gaps along the border and establish a single common frequency that will be available for use by first responders from both sides of the border.

Finally, the State of Maine is investing $50M of state funding to essentially rebuild and expand the infrastructure backbone of the State's communication system. When this project (MSCOMMNET) is completed, the State will have a series of 42 interconnected transmission towers that will replace infrastructure that has reached or passed its useful life expectancy, provide enhanced coverage and increase redundancy. Of note is that part of the tower build out is a joint effort between the State and our Customs and Border Patrol partners. We believe this may be the first such partnership in the Nation. Included with this project is the replacement of virtually all State-owned portable and mobile radios.

In general, Maine is in a relatively healthy position with regard to interoperability. Through the concerted efforts of many people and the judicious use of available resources, we have been able to accomplish a great deal. And we have witnessed those accomplishments coming in to play during real world events. There is, however, more work that needs to be done.

First and foremost in our view is the requirement to meet the FCC narrowbanding mandate. While the initial estimates of the cost to meet this requirement were staggering, we have dedicated a major portion of available federal funding to the requirement as well as a concerted effort to encourage local communities to recognize their own

responsibility to invest in the solution. Because we will be able to reallocate many of the state radios that are being replaced as part of MSCOMMNET, we believe that our first responders will be ready on January 1, 2013. We remain concerned about communities that are not meeting the National Incident Management System (NIMS) compliancy requirements because we cannot assist them with Federal funds.

We believe firmly, that during an emergency situation, if we do not have solid communications, then we will have no coordination. We will only have chaos. For that reason building a solid communications capability has been a priority for the State for a number of years. Further strengthening of that capability and sustaining what we now have will be priorities moving forward.

That concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you.