

PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICIALS CITE DIFFICULTIES IN COMPLETING NARROWBANDING BELOW 512 MHz

August, 2009

Posted with permission of TR Daily

A number of state and local public safety representatives complained today about a myriad of difficulties in complying with the FCC's 2013 deadline for completing narrow banding for VHF and UHF systems operating on frequencies below 512 megahertz, including funding shortfalls, the impact the transition will have on interoperability, and the chance of diminished coverage areas.

During a conference call arranged by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Emergency Communications, Steve Rauter, a member of the board of directors of the Illinois chapter of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials-International, called the narrow banding requirement a "classic unfunded mandate" that comes at a time that state and local public safety agencies are facing other obligations. "It is a very daunting situation."

Mr. Rauter, who is executive director of Western Will County Communications in Plainfield, Ill., and others on the call urged OEC to do all it can to get the word out about the transition. Several participants on today's call said that some members of the public safety community don't know about it even though it's been in place for years. "A lot of the departments aren't even aware of this, believe it or not," said a representative of the Boston-area Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) program.

Radio systems operating on the VHF (150-174 MHz) and UHF (421-512 MHz) frequencies must transition from 25 kilohertz to 12.5 kilohertz channels by Jan. 1, 2013. Beginning on Jan. 1, 2011, the FCC won't accept applications for new or modified VHF and UHF systems that use the wider channels unless they are capable of transmitting on 12.5 KHz channels.

OEC's Robert (Dusty) Rhoads said the purpose of today's call, and another held earlier this month on narrowbanding, was to see what OEC could do to help with the transition. He repeatedly asked for feedback from state and local public safety representatives.

"Funding is the biggest problem, particularly if people have waited to this moment to think about narrowbanding," said Ralph Haller, chairman of the governing board of the National Public Safety Telecommunications Council. Regarding the changes in coverage areas with narrowbanded systems, he advised agencies to "do some studies to see whether the narrowbanding is likely to cause problems." Mr. Haller also said that agencies that use pagers may also have to get them upgraded or replaced after the transition.

Several of the people on the call expressed concern about gaps in interoperability as some agencies complete the transition before others. "Everybody has to be on the same page," said the Boston-area UASI representative, noting the difficulty of modifying equipment that operates on more than 500 frequencies in the region.

OEC is working to ensure that narrowbanding is included in the SAFECOM grant guidance for fiscal year 2010. OEC hopes to ensure that narrowbanding will be an eligible expense for recipients of Homeland Security Grant Program and Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program funds for FY 2010. And the office is urging agencies to consider applying for COPS grants as well, as they may also cover narrowbanding expenses.

Some participants on the call complained that not all vendors are prepared for the transition and some may give inaccurate information about whether their equipment is compliant, and some pleaded with OEC for assistance. “If you have a vendor that tells you [that] you don’t have anything to worry about, find another vendor,” Mr. Rauter advised.

Another caller said OEC should produce a “how-to book” explaining whether current radios are capable of operating on narrowband channels and national interoperability channels. And a public safety representative from northern Illinois said that states should help localities prepare for the switchover. - Paul Kirby, paul.kirby@wolterskluwer.com