Corrective Actions Still Needed to Achieve Interoperable Communications

May 27, 2015

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Russell C. Deyo
                 Under Secretary for Management

FROM: John Roth
                 Inspector General

SUBJECT: *Corrective Actions Still Needed to Achieve Interoperable*
                 Communications

Two and a half years ago, we published an audit, *DHS' Oversight of Interoperable Communications* (OIG-13-06), in which we tested Department of Homeland Security (DHS) radios to determine whether DHS components could talk to each other in the event of a terrorist event or other emergency. They could not. Fewer than 0.25% of the 479 radio users we tested could access and use the specified common channel to communicate. Further, of the 382 radios tested, only 20% (78) contained all the correct program settings for the common channel.

In other words, nearly a decade after the 9/11 Commission highlighted the problem with interoperable communications, DHS components could not talk to each other using about $430 million worth of radios purchased. They could not do so because DHS had not established an effective governing structure with the authority and responsibility to ensure it achieved department-wide, interoperable radio communications. Although DHS had established a common radio channel to enable all components to communicate using interoperable radio systems, the channel was not mandatory.

We recently conducted a verification review to assess DHS' progress on the recommendations from our November 2012 report. Unfortunately, DHS components' inability to communicate effectively on the DHS common channel persists. Although the Department has initiated corrective actions, including a draft communications interoperability plan and draft management directives to standardize Department-wide radio activities, these documents have not been finalized. Moreover, DHS was unable to provide a timetable for finalizing and disseminating these documents.

Verification Review Results

Progress on Recommendation 1

The first recommendation from our 2012 audit was that DHS create a structure with the necessary authority to ensure that the components achieve interoperability. DHS did not concur with the first recommendation, believing

that its existing structure already had the authority to ensure radio interoperability.

Although DHS initially did not concur with our recommendation, it has developed a draft communications interoperability plan that meets the intent of our recommendation. According to the draft provided by the Department, the plan "establishes a roadmap to improve tactical communications interoperability across seven distinct areas: Governance; Standard Operating Procedures; Technology; Training and Exercises; Usage; Outreach and Information Sharing; and Life Cycle Resourcing." The draft plan also includes a goal to "Identify and, if needed, establish a decision-making body with the authority to govern cross-Component interoperability-related issues."

However, the draft communications interoperability plan has been under review since February 2014, and DHS officials have yet to establish a target date finalizing and implementing the plan. According to the DHS officials we interviewed, the draft plan has not been finalized because of the Department's lengthy review process and delays caused by changes in leadership.

Progress on Recommendation 2

Our 2012 audit had also recommended that DHS develop and disseminate policies and procedures to standardize Department-wide radio activities, including program settings such as naming conventions to ensure interoperability. DHS concurred with our second recommendation and agreed to develop a Departmental interoperability plan and disseminate policies and procedures to standardize Department-wide radio activities.

To address our recommendation to develop and disseminate policies and procedures to standardize Department-wide radio activities, DHS drafted several management directives:

- Common Channels for Interoperability,
- Plain Language Usage for Interoperability,
- Land Mobile Radio Encryption for Interoperable Communications, and
- Departmental Governance for Emergency Communications Interoperability.

At the time of our review, the draft management directives were still under review and DHS officials were unable to provide an estimated date for finalization.

DHS' draft communications interoperability plan also identifies goals and initiatives for developing policies, practices, and procedures that guide the implementation and use of interoperable radio communications.

Interoperability Testing

To determine whether radio interoperability had improved since our November 2012 report, we tested 17 radio users from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) to see if they could access and use the DHS common channel to communicate. Test results demonstrated little improvement. Although seven radio users from ICE and USCG were able to successfully communicate using the specified common channel, eight users from CBP were still not aware that a DHS common channel existed. Additionally, a radio user from ICE and another from CBP knew about the common channel, but could not access it.

We also intended to test radio interoperability at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), but the location we visited did not have the DHS common channel programmed on any of its radios. According to the TSA manager we interviewed, transportation security officers do not have the need to communicate with other DHS components by radio. If officers had to coordinate an operation with CBP in another airport terminal, they would do so over the phone or in person. Nonetheless, when asked if he had any concerns about radio interoperability, he noted an incident where all airports in the area lost Internet and telephone services and had to use the Military Auxiliary Radios Systems to communicate with other components and law enforcement agencies. The manager also mentioned that TSA radios could not communicate with other components' radios during the Boston Marathon bombings. Having the DHS common channel configured would have been useful at those times.

Equipment Compatibility and Training

During interviews, some component officials raised concerns about equipment compatibility and the lack of Department-wide interoperable communications training. Specifically, one official said that radio equipment is outdated and not compatible with the radio system used by state agencies. Another official told us that the components' radio users are not being trained to access the DHS common channel. Other officials noted a lack of DHS-wide interoperable communications testing and training exercises.

Conclusion

DHS continues to lack reliable interoperable communications for emergencies, as well as daily operations and planned events. The inability to communicate effectively during an emergency presents serious risks to the health and safety of the public. To better fulfill its mission and unify its efforts, DHS must prioritize interoperable communications and expedite the implementation of the recommended corrective actions in our *DHS' Oversight of Interoperable Communications* report.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

Our objective was to determine whether the Department created a structure with the authority to ensure that the components achieve interoperable radio communications, as well as policies and procedures to standardize Department-wide radio activities. To achieve our objective, we reviewed prior reports, DHS' draft communications interoperability plan and draft management directives related to communications interoperability; interviewed DHS officials and component personnel from CBP, ICE, TSA, and USCG; and conducted limited radio interoperability tests on DHS' common channel with 17 radio users from CBP, ICE, and USCG in the Boston, Massachusetts area. We were unable to test TSA's radio interoperability because DHS' common channel was not programmed on any of TSA's radios at the location we selected for testing.

We conducted this verification review in March 2015 pursuant to the *Inspector General Act of 1978*, as amended. This review was not conducted according to generally accepted government auditing standards. Major contributors to this report include Patrick O'Malley, Director; Robert Greene, Audit Manager; Jeanne Garcia, Auditor-in-Charge; and Kendra Starkus, Program Analyst.

Please call me with any questions, or your staff may contact Mark Bell, Assistant Inspector General for Audits, at (202) 254-4100.

Appendix A
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