

# **Statewide 700MHz Public Safety Communications System and the County Role**

## **Introduction**

The Eastern Shore Communications Alliance (ESCA) is a cooperative alliance comprised of the directors of emergency services from every county on the Eastern Shore and Ocean City that serves as the Shore's public safety communications interoperability governance body. It is ESCA's belief that legislation is needed to establish a formal, inclusive governance body for Maryland's new Statewide 700 MHz Public Safety Communication System.

## **A new statewide radio System**

The State of Maryland is in the process of building a new Statewide 700 MHz Public Safety Communication System (System), which will be used by a number of state agencies, including the Maryland State Police, Maryland Department of Transportation, and Maryland Department of Natural Resources, just to name a few. This new System promises unprecedented interoperability, and once fully deployed, should allow users to communicate throughout the entire state without using patches, relays, or other stop-gap interoperability solutions.

## **Why counties are, or should be, thinking about joining the System**

State agencies will not be the only ones using this new System – counties and local jurisdictions will also have the ability to join. In fact, Kent County is currently in the process of replacing its out-of-date emergency communications system with one that will be part of the statewide System. A number of other jurisdictions on Maryland's Eastern Shore are considering joining the System in the future, as their current systems age and need replacement. As more counties and state agencies join the System, the System's coverage area grows - allowing true interoperable communication in more places.

Public safety radio communication systems are expensive. Counties joining the Statewide System will enjoy the economic benefits that the increased economies of scale, centralized system core, and pre-existing assets bring. Joining the System will not be free for counties – they will still be responsible for deploying their individual piece of the network – which will require significant individual county investment. Joining the System, however, will likely allow counties to provide their first responders access to a System with a quality, scale, and level of interoperability, that no individual county could build on its own.

## **Why governance should matter to counties**

Joining the System will place counties in a unique relationship with the State and its agencies. While they will have significant investment in their portion of the System, they will be relying on core resources shared among all the System's users. From tower-sites to network centers, a shared System is just that – shared. Determining how exactly the assets, benefits, and costs of the System will be divided among the users will be difficult.

ESCA believes that successfully joining so many state agencies and local jurisdictions together under a single System will require a comprehensive governance structure. ESCA's primary concern is that the patchwork of agreements that will be necessary to build-out the System and bring its disparate users together might result in an unmanageable framework for future System management. The importance of having a functioning representative governance body to resolve System usage, maintenance and resource sharing issues cannot be overstated. Furthermore, as the new System begins to incur upgrade and maintenance costs, an effective governance body will be needed to make critical funding decisions.

Only by having significant representation on an effective governance body can counties ensure that resources and costs are shared equitably, their individual investments remain secure, and their first responders are guaranteed reliable, interoperable, communications.

### **Governance should be solidified by legislation**

ESCA feels strongly that the governance structure for the System be solidified in law. Currently, Maryland's Statewide Interoperability Communications Program (MSICP), as well as the Statewide Interoperability Executive Committee (SIEC) and its subcommittees, are the product of an Executive Order signed by Governor O'Malley in 2008. It is ESCA's belief that interoperability efforts in Maryland already critically depend on these institutions and that as the new System is implemented its stakeholders and users cannot risk the reversal, or removal of its governance structure by a new gubernatorial administration. ESCA believes that to be effective, the governance for the System must be solidified in law.

### **What powers should the new governance body have**

ESCA believes that to be effective, the System's governance body should be vested with the power to determine how, by whom, and at what cost the System may be used, maintained and expanded.

With respect to *how* the System should be used, maintained and expanded the governance body must have the power to:

- Develop common operating procedures;
- Determine and promote best practices; and
- Resolve any issues which may result from conflicting or inconsistent uses.

With respect to *by whom* the System may be used, maintained and expanded the governance body must have the power to:

- Determine when and how new users will be added system;
- Determine any user preferences or usage privileges; and
- Enter into partnerships with new users to share the costs and benefits of the System.

With respect to *at what cost* the System may be used, maintained and expanded the governance body must have the power to:

- Enter into cost recovery agreements or user fee agreements with System users if such agreements are needed; and
- Enter into resource sharing agreements for resources critical to System operation.

### **Who should be represented in the governance body**

At a minimum, the governance body should include a representative from each of the state agencies and regional interoperability governance bodies whose members will be joining the network. To effectively govern the System, the users must be fairly represented – however, membership should not be over-inclusive. The governing body should be made of members who have a direct interest in the day-to-day operation of the System, and should be less inclusive than the membership of the SIEC. Furthermore, the local jurisdictions that will rely on the use of this System must have a *direct* say in its governance, and not be relegated to participation through seats granted to organizations that represent the broader interests of counties, cities, or other stakeholder groups.