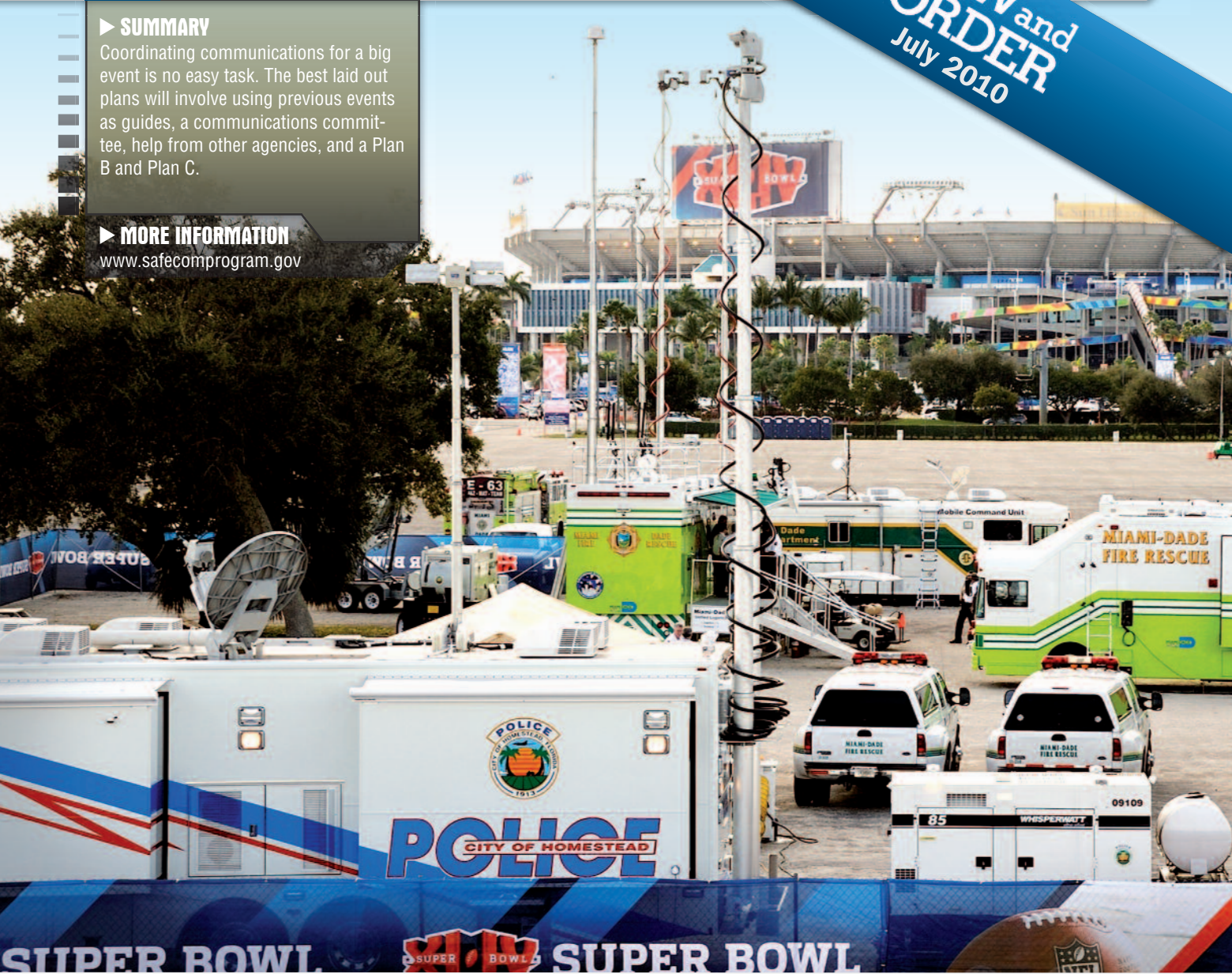


## ► SUMMARY

Coordinating communications for a big event is no easy task. The best laid out plans will involve using previous events as guides, a communications committee, help from other agencies, and a Plan B and Plan C.

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# COMMUNICATIONS

## during Large-Scale Planned Events

Planning is the key to successful communications.

By John Facella and Robert Sisley



➤ One way to get ready for a major public safety incident is to use preparation for a planned or recurring event as a guide to also begin to prepare for an unplanned event. In both cases, some of the resources and agencies will be similar, and the result will be increased familiarity with the communications systems that are available.

Almost every jurisdiction has sports, music and local events, parades, holiday festivals and annual historical events in which public safety has to work to provide security, crowd control, EMS and fire protection. These events can form the basis for improved operational planning among public safety agencies, and also test the use of interoperable communications systems.

Further, if your agency needs additional practice in using the NIMS process for operational planning, using a planned or recurring event can provide that practice. The purpose of this article is to explore the lessons learned from two such recent planned events, and share the experiences of those agencies with law enforcement and public safety agencies.

There are advantages in using planned events as “operational practice.” There is more time to do the planning, gather resources and dry run the event. Most of the issues will be well known ahead of time. You can often build on existing communications plans. You can store the operational plan for a recurring event, and then dust it off each year and continue to refine it.

### **Early Planning**

Establish the organizational structure for the Communications Committee. Keep the committee a manageable size. If possible, utilize National Incident Management System (NIMS) techniques. Appoint a qualified Communications Unit Leader (COML) to the committee. Do not let any one agency or participant overly dominate the committee.

Have the necessary constituents and agencies join the communications planning process. They don’t all have to be committee members; in fact, you don’t want the committee to be too large. You can consult with them about their needs

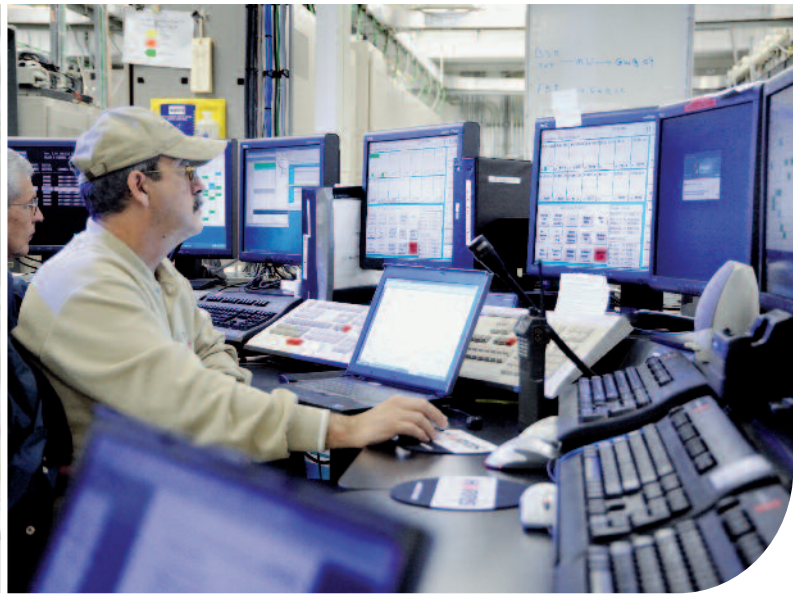
via a committee member interviewing them. This ensures that important items are not overlooked and avoids operational problems during the event.

Be aware of the balance between over-communicating and under-communicating in the committee, in terms of number of meetings, length of meetings, e-mails, etc. Everyone in public safety has a day job. If the leadership at the first meeting establishes that they intend to observe this balance, then the volunteers from participating agencies will more likely approach the work that is required with gusto.

Assign tasks and expect assignees to bring their deliverables to the committee at the appointed time. If this is not happening, and the person is overloaded, it is better to have them give you a replacement early on than to discover in the last month that major items were not addressed. Begin the communications planning early. A year ahead may not be enough time, depending on the size of the event.

The COML should be involved in the event planning and should contact the heads of the event committees (Command, Operations, Logistics, Finance, Event Organizers, etc.) to discuss their communications needs. Make sure that they have not approved any communications patches without your knowledge. Find out which agencies are going to be involved, their geographic areas of operation, and the number of personnel involved.

Be aware of what you already have: your own jurisdiction’s inventory and abilities. During spontaneous incidents and with current lean economic times, you may have to work with only what you have on hand. Learn the functions/roles of specialized units (K-9, HazMat, Technical Rescue, Sniper, etc.) to



anticipate their communications needs.

Become familiar with the communications systems and resources of other agencies in the area. Maintain a good working relationship with the COMLs of other agencies. Plan to include COML personnel in your planning and during the actual event. COML personnel have had extensive training from DHS and are a valuable resource.

Review “lessons learned” from similar events, and create a “hit list” of things you must pay attention to. Besides this article, there are others in the public safety press. This could be an early assignment for a Communications Committee team member. Include your radio vendor and your communications service providers in your planning. However, let operational needs dictate what you do, not what is convenient to them.

### Mid-Term Planning

Work with your radio vendor to identify the correct number and procurement process for additional radios, if necessary/possible. Always assume that you will need more radios than you think.

Don’t overlook the use of volunteers. Reserve law enforcement officers, Reserve Medical Corps, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs—religious or charitable—such as Salvation Army, Red Cross, etc.), etc., may need communications to support the event. The operational committees that will use such

resources should decide the communications that are needed and make the request.

Some volunteers, such as amateur radio operators or National Guard Civil Support Teams, can provide supplemental communications. They will appreciate being included, and they will be more ready to help you when you really need them at an unplanned incident.

Anticipate last minute requests and allow for adjustments. The more you can plan for in advance, the less these last minute requests will be overwhelming. No matter how much you plan, things will compress at the end. Accept it as human nature, but try to minimize its effect.

### Other Issues to Consider

Balance requests with available resources. Use local resources first, sparing the use of regional/state/national mutual aid channels if possible. Keep the communications plan as simple as possible. Don’t utilize complicated technologies or operational procedures if there is a simpler option. For example, instead of creating a lot of complicated patches to allow certain people to monitor talkgroups, it may be simpler just to loan them a radio with the desired talkgroup.

Remember that per the SAFECOM Interoperability Continuum, there are multiple technologies that can be utilized to create communications interoperability

for an event. When designing your communications plan, remember that day-to-day operations will continue and still need to be considered. Don’t overload one single system.

Multimode, multiband radios are now readily available, highlighted by the Unity XG-100 Full-Spectrum Multiband family of radios from Harris. Such radios are particularly useful for commanders who must talk to multiple systems and radios. Keep in mind that incident commanders can only monitor so many talkgroups/channels before they become overwhelmed with information. Having a chief’s aide monitor the traffic and alert the IC is often recommended.

If you have a trunked radio system with radio coverage of the event, then it is relatively easy to create unique talkgroups for the event (Crowd Control, EMS, Special Units, Fire, Command, etc.). This eliminates event chatter on your normal operational or tactical channels. However, this can be misleading, because you have not increased the capacity (number of radio channels/talkpaths) in your system.

Therefore, if you have multiple other incidents occurring on the radio system, it is possible that busy signals may occur. This can be partially handled by correct assignment of priorities to the event talkgroups. It can also be partially alleviated by reminding officers not to overuse the talkgroups. In really large events, you

may want to consider adding some additional trunked channels, or offloading some traffic to conventional channels that supplement the trunked system.

If you have a conventional (non-trunked) radio system, you will have to do some additional planning. Unless you are in a rural area and your event is small and your day-day radio traffic light, you will likely not be able to use your conventional system because the event will use up too much traffic capacity. You may be able to utilize mutual aid channels or channels not heavily used by neighboring agencies that are far enough away to not be interfered with.

Regional communications or command vans often have conventional repeater stations that can be programmed on new channels. Remember, however, that you must have written au-



thorization to use channels not licensed to you from the licensee (the public safety agency).

Coordinate the use of radio patches. A patch on a patch can multiply the number of users to an unmanageable number. An incorrectly created patch on a trunked system can take down the entire trunked system.

Have at least two layers of fallback, a Plan B and a Plan C, if things go wrong. This should include minimizing dependence on publicly available communications like land-line phones, cellular phones and PDAs. Don't dismiss the use of runners as the most basic method of communications. You can use scouts

or academy cadets for this purpose. When the "Big One" hits, land or cellular phones will be reduced in capacity, or simply not available. This has been the case with every major unplanned event in recent memory: the 2003 Northeast Blackout, the 2004 Florida Hurricanes, Katrina, the Hawaiian earthquake and the 2008 Midwest Floods.

Develop reference cards, which act as a "go anywhere" training reminder, explaining how to utilize the Plan A primary communications and the Plan B and Plan C communications backups. Any lost features or changes in operational procedures if you move to the Plan B or Plan C communications must be clearly explained. If the officers don't know what to do, all of your planning will be for naught and someone will get hurt. Some agencies (Denver) use a "color system" (gold, red, blue, white) to designate talkgroups, and these help officers to use common, easy-to-remember terminology.

Be concerned how and to whom the communications plan is released. This is critical for Incidents of National Interest. Submit all plans to the Logistic and/or Planning Committees. Keep track of staff hours and payroll records. As a manager of personnel, be aware of the personal needs of your staff, because both the planning and the execution of a major event can be very time consuming and stressful.

## Post-Event

Ensure that all loaner equipment is returned. This includes equipment that you loaned out and equipment that was loaned to you. Make sure that all returned equipment is placed in a serviceable condition. Ensure that all patches are deactivated and all radio systems are returned to their pre-event status.

Conduct a post-event committee meeting to review the event within about two weeks, while memories are fresh, and prepare an After Action Report. Catalog what worked and what needed improving. Share it broadly among both the executive and the operational levels of your sister agencies.

Write a thank you letter to the Communications Committee members and send it to their chief. You will be more likely to get help the next time around, and the participants will feel like they got something beyond just the experience for the effort they put in.

**For additional information, SAFECOM has a document dealing with communications interoperability for planned events. Go to [www.safecomprogram.gov/SAFECOM/library/interoperability-basics/1335\\_interoperablecommunications.htm](http://www.safecomprogram.gov/SAFECOM/library/interoperability-basics/1335_interoperablecommunications.htm).**

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