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## **Saving Lives, Saving Money: Indiana's Pragmatic Approach Solves Interoperability Crisis**

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### TECHNOLOGY TALK

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ive years ago terrorists attacked the United States, searing a permanent scar of pain upon the country. One year ago, hurricanes destroyed centuries-old cities and took countless lives. Each day, police forces in communities across the country are fighting battles to protect families. These events, and countless others, serve as a daily reminder of a lesson we have yet to learn: lives can be saved and suffering can be lessened if first responders involved in protection and recovery missions can talk with each other.

Indiana is well under way toward providing a state border-to-border interoperable communications system for first responders. In typical Hoosier fashion, we're solving the problem creatively, pragmatically, and frugally. Instead of building a system from the top down, visionary law enforcement and state officials convened local police, sheriffs, firefighters, elected officials, and other interested users in a series of statewide summits. A clear message came from these summits: Interoperability is not about technology. It is about money and cooperation. A cutting-edge system is useless if communities cannot afford the equipment to use it or if they simply do not want to cooperate.

#### **What is SAFE-T?**

As a result of the locally driven planning process, Project Hoosier SAFE-T evolved into a realistic, wide-berth network that allows almost all local systems, from older VHF to the newest digital systems, to interoperate. SAFE-T operates on a Motorola 4.1 Astro Smartzone OmniLink 800 MHz trunked voice and data system. It supports both analog and digital radios, providing 95 percent mobile radio coverage statewide using 126 communications sites connected by T1 lines and microwave.

Project Hoosier SAFE-T is building and maintaining the system backbone: towers, antennas, shelters, generators, transmitters, base stations, cabling, and frequencies. Participating agencies provide their own user equipment, including dispatch consoles, radios, and computers, which they can buy at a 20-25 percent discount through the state. Participation is voluntary and agencies pay no user fees. The goal is to make interoperable

communications affordable for every community.

### **Funding for SAFE-T**

The 2002 Indiana General Assembly authorized funding for Project Hoosier SAFE-T. No new funding source was created and, as of 2005, approximately \$39.9 million in funding has come from the state. In addition to paying for site construction and equipment, these funds pay for operating costs and site maintenance.

To date, more than 40 percent of the build-out has been funded by federal sources. Project Hoosier SAFE-T's long-term strategy is not to own towers but rather to share space on existing state-owned facilities or lease from third-party commercial vendors. SAFE-T partnered with the Indiana State Police, the Indiana Department of Transportation, and counties to share facilities where possible.

### **Who SAFE-T Serves**

Officially, Project Hoosier SAFE-T serves each of the 6.2 million Hoosiers who live and work in Indiana. Specifically, the network is available to an estimated 600 police chiefs and town marshals, more than 1,000 fire departments, 92 sheriff's departments and emergency management agencies, countless emergency medical services providers, and other first responders across Indiana.

SAFE-T also provides a critical communication link for the thousands of local, state, and federal workers who transport prisoners, plow snow, monitor parks, and perform numerous other daily public service jobs.

### **Why Is SAFE-T Successful?**

The system was designed from the bottom up, with local users dictating their needs. It is all-inclusive: state and federal agencies are on the system and all local agencies that provide any sort of public safety service can join as well.

The system balances the need for technological advancement with financial reality. Locals pay no user or connection fees to access the system. Recent financial revisions put the final cost of construction and maintenance of the SAFE-T system at \$79 million, notably less than the original \$98 million project estimate.

Perhaps most importantly, SAFE-T has stopped turf battles that prevented interoperability in the past. Those who have been carrying the interoperability banner for years know that the term means much more than passing out cross-platform capable radios. The word "interoperable" implies cooperation, connection, and interdependence. In the truest sense of this word, Project Hoosier SAFE-T has sparked unprecedented cooperation between public safety agencies and localities. Indeed, SAFE-T has become much more than a technological advancement of communications equipment; SAFE-T represents an unprecedented integration of people working toward a common objective.

### **2006 SAFE-T Status**

As of summer 2006, the Project Hoosier SAFE-T has 95 active communications sites, and 21,000 user radios are registered in the system database. It covers first responders in 77 counties; 17 state agencies (including 3,600 state police officers, 2,300 state Department of Transportation workers, and 1,700 corrections officers); and three federal agencies.

During one six-month period, December 2005 to July 2006, the system handled more than 20,000,000 group calls.

The \$79 million final price tag is \$11 million less than original estimates. Until 2006, the system was funded with no debt incurred. The 10-person IPSC staff has aggressively pursued supplements for state money with federal congressional earmarks, homeland

security funds, and CDC Bio-Terrorism funds.

Professor Viktor Mayer-Schönberger of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government cited the SAFE-T approach as a "most laudable exception" to the typical patchwork approach to achieving interoperability. Perhaps a local police officer said it best. While sitting at a table discussing talk groups, he stated, " This is the best talk group there is." Indeed, by fostering communication between agencies and users, SAFE-T not only bridged the technological barriers to public safety communication, but it also helped break down the personal communications blockades that kept agencies isolated in the past. ■

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