

PUBLIC SAFETY INTEROPERABLE COMMUNICATIONS

Position

The County supports increased Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Grant funding with a portion of UASI funding targeted to high-risk urban areas with major unmet interoperable communications needs, such as the Los Angeles region.

Background

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks highlighted the importance of interoperable communications -- the ability of law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services, hospitals, and other first responders to talk and send data to each other on demand using radio communications systems. Improved interoperable communications is especially challenging in the Los Angeles region where there is a patchwork of separate stand-alone communications systems which use separate radio towers, equipment, and frequencies primarily designed to meet the needs of each of the 50 law enforcement agencies and 31 fire departments that serve different jurisdictions and areas of the County. Much of the equipment used by these systems is out-of-date and incompatible. As a result, first responders have a limited ability to communicate with those in other public safety agencies, which hampers emergency response when there is a major disaster which affects multiple jurisdictions, such as the urban riots in 1992, the Northridge earthquake in 1994, and last year's Chatsworth train crash.

Recognizing the Los Angeles region's need for a shared regional radio interoperable communications system, the public safety community has begun to plan the development of such a system -- the Los Angeles Regional Interoperable Communications System (LA-RICS), which will cost an estimated \$600 million to complete. Their initial plans to meet the region's interoperability needs were reviewed and approved by the Interoperability Communications Technical Assistance Program staff of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The joint powers agreement for the LA-RICS Authority has been finalized, and, to date, the County and 81 cities, which represent 98.4 percent of the County's total population, have joined as Authority members to develop the regional communications system.

Federal Grant Funding: The Department of Homeland Security administers three grant programs -- the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) Grant, State Homeland Security Grant Program (SHSGP), and Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program (IECGP) -- which provide funding that may be used by state and local governments for public safety interoperable communications. The single most important interoperable communications funding source for both California and the County is UASI because all UASI funding is targeted to a limited number of high-risk urban areas. In contrast, SHSGP and IECGP grants are allocated to all states and have small state minimum requirements that reduce the amount of funding provided to California. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2008, the Los Angeles area's \$70.4 million UASI allocation was more than triple the size of its \$23.3 million SHSGP allocation. The

IECGP was not funded in FY 2008, and the County will receive relatively little IECGP funding in FY 2009 because the State's total IECGP allocation is only \$6.1 million.

The County, City of Los Angeles, and other local jurisdictions have given high priority to the use of UASI and SHSGP funding for interoperable communications. Most recently, a total of \$37.1 million in FY 2008 funds were allocated for LA-RICS development and implementation, including \$30.3 million in UASI funding -- an amount that is \$7 million more than the County's entire FY 2008 SHSGP allocation.

To help finance the implementation of the greatly needed LA-RICS, the County, therefore, supports increasing UASI funding in FY 2010. We also urge that a portion of UASI funding be allocated to eligible urban areas with major unmet interoperable communications needs, such as Los Angeles. Under current policies, UASI funds are allocated based on DHS' assessment of the relative risk of terrorism and anticipated effectiveness of each area's strategy for using UASI funds. There is no special consideration given to the amount of funding needed by eligible urban areas to meet their interoperable communications needs even though the cost of meeting such needs can be substantial and vary greatly among urban areas.

The Los Angeles region faces far greater interoperable communications challenges due to its relatively large size (4,084 square miles); challenging topography, which includes mountainous terrain; and large number of law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical services agencies and first responders who must communicate with each other. Moreover, Los Angeles County not only has the most residents and first responders of any county, but also faces the greatest risk of being struck by a wide variety of natural and man-made disasters, ranging from earthquakes and wildfires to terrorist attacks and refinery explosions.

Status

The Obama Administration has not yet released its FY 2010 budget requests for individual programs, such as UASI and other homeland security grants. Congress also has not yet begun action on the FY 2010 Homeland Security Appropriations Bill.