Transcript: Agency Communications Planning

Welcome to this Alaska Land Mobile Radio training presentation on agency communication planning.

The ALMR network is designed to provide exceptional service, quality, and interoperable communications to our member agencies. The system has been designed with a number of redundancies, scalability, and resilience in mind. However, it's important for each of our individual agencies to understand that they still must plan for their individual communication needs. In this training video, we're going to go through several steps that goes into a communication plan and teach you the various things to look through when looking at your current communications, how you may wish to improve them, and any gaps that you may have in your planning.

The first step in your communications planning is to do an in-depth analysis of your communication needs. Let's start by thinking about your normal day-to-day operations. Within your agency, who are you communicating with, and how are they separated out? For instance, do you have an agency that is separated out by function, so where you have certain members of your crew doing certain things? Are they separated out by geography, where you might have stations or beats that may have different communication needs or need to be separated out as it relates to communication?

What equipment are you using to communicate? Our ALMR members are typically using two-way radios, but what other equipment is part of the communication cycle? For instance, for a fire department, do you have some type of station alerting or other dispatch system that may use mobile phones or other devices? Do you have pagers that monitor the talk group? Do you have any type of specialized equipment that's associated with your CAD system or something similar? If you have any specialized needs for that communication, for instance, if some of your operations are sensitive, so you may be using different types of radios or may have to be communicating a bit more covertly, note those types of needs down.

Along the same vein, is encryption required for any of your communications? Is it required for all communications or is it appropriate only for some? Identify the needs for what your agency does during normal operations.

Don't forget to identify who you're communicating with internally. There may be some divisions or some crews that may only operate during certain types of events. Make sure

you're continuing to consider their needs as well as we look at the communication strategy.

Once you've looked at your own normal day-to-day operations, extend that to your dispatch center, if applicable. Again, how are you communicating with dispatch? Some agencies may have more than one dispatch center that they're affiliated with. You may have very similar protocols, but they may be slightly different depending on the dispatch center. Make sure that you're referencing any agreements, standard operating procedures or other types of documents that outline how you are to be communicating with and what the protocols for communicating with your dispatch center are. Again, take note of any equipment that you're using and any specialized needs for that type of equipment that may be tied back to a computer-aided dispatch system or something similar.

As you are continuing with your communication analysis, think about now mutual aid operations. Do you have partner agencies or mutual aid agencies that you communicate with on a daily basis? Think about who those agencies are and how you communicate. Reference your mutual aid agreements or other legal documents in regards to communication. Some may indicate whose talk group or frequency that you will be communicating on and in what situations. Make sure that you have the appropriate talk groups and frequencies programmed, which we'll talk about when evaluating resources in a few moments. Make sure that you have up-to-date information on that agency's communications plan to ensure that the information you have is still current and applicable.

Once you've done mutual aid operations and agencies, think about large-scale emergency events. What would happen if you go beyond mutual aid and were going into a larger area of response or a large disaster-type response? Again, how and who are you communicating? What talk groups or methods are you using? Are you utilizing interoperable zones? Or are there other protocols that have been put in place? When talking about interoperable zones, make sure that you know which interoperable zone you use, how to request them, and what the protocols are for using them.

Now that you have performed your communication analysis, analyze the current resources that you have. Begin with your subscriber units or radios. Do you have enough of them? Do you have the right type? Do you require additional types or additional changes to your fleet in order to accommodate the communications?

Do your current talk groups that you have assigned to your agency reflect the needs that you identified in your analysis? Do you need additional talk groups or do you have surplus talk groups? Does your current equipment support the mutual aid and emergency

operations that you discovered in your previous step? Do you require upgrades to your radios, or do you require any other type of interfaces through the ALMR system or through other systems to support those types of operations?

Evaluate what you have to identify any gaps in your communications equipment or in your communications setup. This will allow you to take action to plan for procurement, to make changes to your ALMR account, or for other actions that need to be taken.

Part of the important steps of communications planning is to plan for issues and the unexpected. If you haven't already identified these, what are the backup methods of communications that your agency uses? Can your partners, such as mutual aid partners or dispatch, function on those same types of communications systems and equipment? It may be necessary to have a collaborative conversation in your region or with your partners to ensure that any backup procedures or equipment that you choose to use is supported by all of your agencies that you need to communicate with.

We encourage everyone, when thinking about emergency and backup communication, to remember the PACE acronym, which stands for Primary, Alternate, Contingent, or Emergency. In other words, make sure that you have a system or a solution in place for communications that is your primary, and then your alternate, and then your contingent and emergent. When conducting a PACE analysis, go back to the communications analysis you did in the previous steps and find how your current equipment or how planned equipment or systems may be able to support you in your PACE planning.

It is important to go back to the who you're communicating with in this step. For instance, it's common for some people to say that they may use text messaging or a satellite phone as a backup method of communications in their pace planning. While that's certainly a valid method of communication, if all of your primary communications are to a group, in other words, instead of one-to-one communications, you're communicating with an entire shift or division, that is a one-to-many communication. It is possible that a phone call or a text message may not be sufficient because that's designed for one-to-one communication.

Look for systems that can provide as close to the current level of communications that you use on a day-to-day basis in order to more closely align them to your protocols and reduce the amount of extraneous steps or additional things that must be done in an emergent situation.

Implementing your communication plan can be a long-term strategy. If you identified resource gaps, you may wish to make a procurement plan, such as putting them into budget requests or other types of procurement for getting that equipment. If you identified

any programming changes to your subscriber units, make sure that you have a plan for updating those, either immediately or the next time an update is available through the logistical means of individual agencies.

If you have changes to your ALMAR account, contact the help desk to discuss your current talkgroup setup. If you need to add additional talkgroups, you can do that and also be sure that you have talkgroup sharing agreements with all of your mutual aid partners and other agencies. If you require encryption keys or maintenance to your encryption, talk to the ALMR help desk as well.

Be sure that when you identify any changes to your ALMR account, that any surplus ALMR items are deleted. For example, if you have unused talk groups, request that those be deleted from the system.

When engaging in communications analysis, and particularly when making changes to a communications plan, be sure your line-level personnel are involved with the discussion or receive training for the different types of methodologies or for the different procedures that they may be expected to know.

Do your line-level personnel know the pace strategy they are supposed to be using, and how and when to communicate during some type of emergency situation? At the same time, ensure your documentation is up to date, such as standard operating procedures.

Training is encouraged, and you may wish to hold training on communications issues jointly with your regional partners specifically for your different protocols as they correspond to mutual aid and emergency communication. You can also use the ALMR training resources that are available on the ALMR website.

As a final step to this process, please ensure that your ALMR account is up to date. This includes removing any unused subscriber units, encryption keys, or talk groups from the system, and ensuring that all of your talkgroup sharing agreements are up-to-date and complete. The points of contact with the ALMR Help Desk can make changes to your account.

If you have additional or new personnel, or you still have older personnel that are no longer with your agency, be sure you update your points of contact to ensure that we are able to communicate with the appropriate personnel if necessary.

For any questions or additional information on communications planning, please contact us at the ALMR Help Desk.