

Here are some recent interesting public safety radio calls I've heard and some encouragement if you are a first responder.

FD: When clearing from an incident, "Everything's kosher at the pickle plant."

FD: Dispatched as "fire in the pool". Responding engine: "Is the water on fire?" Dispatcher: "No they're burning debris in an empty pool."

FD: Dispatched to jail for inmate that put drug paraphernalia in rectum, and is now bleeding.

FD: "subject armed with a stapler"

FD: "...patient put a ring on his penis, for 8 hours, and is combative."

FD/PD: Homeless person in attic at self storage. I guess he took "self storage" literally.

EMS: Sometimes I only hear part of the dispatch, and have to laugh. "patient is unable to walk after being on commode for an hour"

*Please note, as funny as it is to hear some of these calls and the wording, I realize there are real people experiencing real emergencies behind these.

Please, keep reading if you're a first responder.

What's in your radio?

For most of my life, I've been fascinated with listening to firefighters, police officers, EMS, and other first responders on scanners. As a result, I've come to appreciate the fine, brave, and dedicated people in those professions even more so, than had I not enjoyed hearing their radio communications. As a scanner listener, often I am able to hear more than what those frontline heroes and dispatchers are able to hear on their own radios. After all, they have to focus on the channels they are assigned to, working whatever incidents come their way. While I listen comfortably out of harm's way. One thing that occasionally frustrates me while listening to the scanners is when some first responders and dispatchers are not able to communicate with others outside of their agency. When it works, it's called "interoperable" or "interop" communications.

After the 9/11 attacks and other big disasters, interoperable communications have often been the answers of questions like "What didn't work?" and "What can we do better?". There has been lots of money and effort put into standardizing, building infrastructure, and allocating channels, so that when emergencies grow beyond the everyday scope of a particular agency, city, or region, they can communicate with the help that comes from outside of the area. I honestly believe that there is now plenty of hardware, software, and standardization for effective interop. What I find frustrating is when there has not been enough training, knowledge, and PRACTICE, shared for the systems to actually work. To get to my point, I challenge my first responder friends who may have read this far to explore your radios. Do you know how to get to the interoperable channels? Which ones should you use? I'm not talking about finding a neighboring city's channels. I'm talking about being able to communicate with a resource you do not normally work with. Below are some examples of when you might need interop to effectively communicate and manage whatever incident you're working.

Law enforcement

A pursuit goes outside of your radio's range, and through other jurisdictions. If you have the resources and time, have someone switch to an interop calling channel and make an announcement, so that other cities can have a heads-up. Hopefully, surrounding dispatch centers are monitoring the calling channel, and will relay the details to their officers, without having to make phone calls to each department.

You're searching for a missing person or perp and an outside K-9 team is coming to assist

You need air support from a helicopter, but the helicopter does not have your channels

Fire

You've been dispatched as part of a taskforce to the other side of the state, country, world.

You need to set up an LZ for an EMS helicopter that does not have your channels

You need a special apparatus from a department you do not normally work with (ARFF, Big Fans, tankers, brush trucks, etc.)

EMS

MCI incidents where outside services are being brought in to supplement or when you get assigned to help outside of your normal response area.

Those are just some examples to get you thinking. Below are some other things to consider.

When necessary, can your dispatchers or mobile command post officers patch efficiently and effectively?

Just finding a common channel that everyone involved has in their radios is not all you need to know. You also need to know that the channel will work where you are. Some channels are "direct", meaning they do not go through a repeater. Those can be used virtually anywhere, but have a very limited range. Other repeater channels are standardized and will work in many metropolitan areas and over a broader range. Then there are regional interop channels that might cover the metroplex, but will not work outside the range of the system. In some cases, a handheld in dispatch or in an EOC may not work for interop.

If the stuff has really hit the fan, who has priority, and on what channels? There may be others trying to use the shared interop channels. Always listen, before you talk when first tuning to a particular channel. In some cases you might need to go through the proper authorities, to have a channel assigned for your incident.

When all else fails, do you have your spare radios charged and ready to hand out to outside agencies?

"LAWIO Call" and LAW10" look almost identical on some radios. What's the difference? "Law IO IC1" and "Law IO 1" are different too.

Several of the interop channels might be good backup for when your own radio system has failed. Which one should you tune to if you can't raise dispatch or other units on your radio system?

So what's in your radio? If you don't know, please check it out and ask for help from your communications people.

Have a Safe and Happy New Year!

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