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BORDER INTEROPERABILITY DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

Emergency response agencies at all levels of government need to exchange voice and data communications across international borders in order to successfully coordinate critical security operations. Agencies coordinating cross border operations encounter not only traditional interoperability challenges (e.g., incompatible equipment, limited sharing of protocols, and different frequency bands), but also a host of unique complications, including conflicting regulatory processes, spectrum coordination, the protection of sensitive information, and a wide range of demographic and geographic factors.

To address these challenges, the *Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act* (P. L. No. 110-53) authorized the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) to establish the Border Interoperability Demonstration Project (BIDP), a \$25.5 million one-time, competitive program to provide funding and technical assistance to U.S. communities along the Canadian and Mexican borders. The legislation authorized DHS to select no fewer than six communities to participate (at least three along the U.S.-Canadian border and at least three along the U.S.-Mexican border), to provide technical assistance to the selected communities, and to share information among BIDP participants and other interested parties.

OEC selected seven projects involving multiple communities with varying geography and population densities. The selected projects tested approaches that involved new technologies or an innovative approach to governance, planning, coordination, training, and exercises. The projects serve as repeatable models for other border communities to achieve greater communications interoperability with domestic and international agencies. OEC worked with BIDP award recipients and communities to document lessons learned, capture challenges and successes, and share information with the emergency response community throughout the process.

Program Awards

OEC's criteria for evaluating project proposals included the results of a merit review process in conformance with overall legislative and programmatic goals, objectives, and priorities. The selected projects included:

- City of Yuma, Arizona (\$3,994,443)
- San Diego Fire Rescue, California (\$3,852,580)
- County of Washington, Maine (\$3,963,163)
- Wayne County, Michigan (\$4,000,000)
- Flathead County, Montana (\$3,895,425)
- Lake County, Ohio (\$3,998,200)
- City of McAllen, Texas (\$1,940,000)

Each community could request as many technical assistance services as needed. OEC provided a variety of services, including engineering support, standard operating procedures development, and exercise design. Prior to project completion, BIDP recipients executed functional exercises to demonstrate the deployed technologies purchased with grant funding.

Advancing Interoperable Emergency Communications

Projects generally focused on expanding the coverage and capacity of existing communications infrastructure, often showcasing innovative cross border governance, planning, and training activities with international partners. This included formalized agreements and resource sharing practices, cross border protocols and designated interoperability channels, and expanded voice and data capabilities in regional radio networks—as well as realized or future connectivity to international networks. Projects demonstrated innovation in day-to-day administrative activities, in addition to new technologies. BIDP supported OEC’s long-standing position that technology is only part of the larger challenge facing interoperable emergency communications. Interagency governance and planning are key priorities to resolving interoperability challenges.

Closeout Report and Knowledge Transfer Studies

While the grant program has closed, OEC remains focused on transferring BIDP information and knowledge to all border communities and other interested parties. OEC has transitioned its BIDP Program Office to support the development of tools, templates, and studies to benefit emergency responders operating along and across U.S. borders. The principal publication is the *Border Interoperability Demonstration Project Closeout Report*, which provides a program overview, lessons learned, and recommendations. This report includes individual grantee reports on the seven selected communities that detail project outcomes, technical assistance, and partnerships.

In addition, OEC developed knowledge transfer studies containing best practices and processes successfully demonstrated by BIDP recipients. These studies examine the feasibility of deploying tested interoperability solutions in other U.S. border communities, including:

- *BIDP Study on Implementing Interoperability Channels along and across the U.S.-Canadian Border:* OEC examined Montana’s project to expand the use of a national interoperability channel, VLAW31, by additional public safety officials spread across parts of the northern border. The study includes a five-step process to guide other communities in implementing shared interoperability channels.
- *BIDP Study on Rural and Urban Area Interoperability Solutions along and across International Borders:* OEC studied the similarities and disparities in interoperability solutions for rural and urban border areas. The intent is to assist border communities of varying sizes to plan and implement the appropriate interoperability solutions that align with the Interoperability Continuum.
- *BIDP Study on Environmental Planning and Historic Preservation (EHP) Compliance along the Border:* OEC identified domestic and international EHP requirements that may be applicable in border areas. The study includes a five-step process for obtaining EHP compliance, including resources and examples to assist public safety agencies successfully navigate EHP reviews.
- *BIDP Study on Implementing Advanced and Emerging Technologies along and across International Borders:* OEC examined San Diego, California’s project to add capacity and capabilities to its regional communications network. The study discusses common challenges (e.g., human factors, data security) and emphasizes the non-technical steps that are often overlooked when deploying advanced and emerging technologies. The study also includes a five-step process intended to guide other communities in implementing advanced and emerging technologies along and across the border.

Moving forward, OEC will continue to improve border interoperable emergency communications through outreach with state, local, tribal, and territorial public safety agencies; the development of border-focused products and services; the application of best practices to the Department’s future demonstration projects and grants; and coordination with federal agencies and grant administrators that fund border projects.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Contact BIDP@hq.dhs.gov or visit www.dhs.gov/border-interoperability-demonstration-project.