PRIORITY TELECOMMUNICATION SERVICES

CHAMPIONS

The following is the first in a series of four stories that explore how emergency responders are using priority services to help enhance emergency communications capabilities when they matter most.

Critical to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency's (CISA) Priority Telecommunications Services mission is ensuring statewide continuity of communications during an emergency. Supporting this mission are the Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (SWICs), who are the central coordination point for their state or territory's interoperability efforts. The SWIC works with emergency response leaders across all levels of government to implement a statewide strategic vision for interoperability and helps implement the Statewide Communication Interoperability Plan (SCIP). A SWIC understands how critical it is that calls get through and communications services are restored during natural and man-made emergencies, and many SWICs incorporate priority services into their statewide planning.

Priority services are actually a suite of three services, which include:

- Government Emergency Telecommunications Service (GETS)
- Wireless Priority Service (WPS)
- Telecommunications Service Priority (TSP)

In practice, GETS and WPS are used to help get your call through to its destination when you get a "busy" or an "all circuits are busy" tone on a wireline or wireless network. Organizations enrolled in TSP that have national security and emergency preparedness missions receive priority when requesting repairs or provisioning to their voice and data circuits.

William Chapman's Journey to Becoming the Oregon SWIC

From a young age, William Chapman knew he wanted to pursue a career in public safety; he had a desire to protect and serve. While at college in Tucson, Arizona, Chapman joined the University of Arizona Police Department in Tucson as a student officer. From there, he became a dispatcher at the department's 9-1-1 center, and later the dispatch supervisor at the University of Arizona's 9-1-1 center.

While working in Arizona, Chapman became close with the Arizona SWIC, Jeremy Knoll, and was invited to attend the state's Statewide Communications Interoperability Plan (SCIP) workshop. Here he learned all about interoperability challenges, potential solutions, and CISA's initiatives to enhance emergency communications for public safety and critical infrastructure sectors. As communications challenges were discussed, he was shocked that as a member of the public safety community he had not heard of priority services and their benefits.

Through Chapman's professional relationship with Jeremy Knoll, he learned about an opening for the SWIC position in Oregon, applied, and came on board as the state's SWIC in 2019.

Putting Priority Telecoms to Use

Fast forward to 2021. As the Oregon SWIC, Chapman has been building relationships with the state's public safety community, championing interoperable communications, and advocating for the use of priority services (GETS, WPS, and TSP). Chapman, who continues to view priority services as free, almost "insurance-policy-like" tools, has more than a few stories to share about their benefits and utility.

Most recently, during the Bootleg Fire in the Fremont-Winema National Forest in southern Oregon, Chapman recognized the monumental communications challenge that firefighters would face. Surpassing over 400,000 acres, the Bootleg Fire was one of the largest active fires in the nation in 2021 with more than 2,000 personnel deployed to combat the fire. These brave emergency responders were fighting the fire while relying on a cellphone tower fit to support the normal community population of 300. While deployable devices were added to help relieve the heavy communications burden on the lone cell tower, Chapman was quick to drive home that WPS and GETS were the best way to ensure call completion to communication leaders (COMLs) in the area.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, an Oregon tribal emergency manager was eager to host a critical COVID-19 coordination call with local public safety agencies but was having communications difficulties. A severed fiber optic cable caused a cellular tower to go down, and the local landline network was congested due to the cellular outage. Although the tribal emergency manager was eventually able to reach Chapman via a satellite phone, the audio quality was poor. As a remedy, Chapman was able to provide the emergency manager with the pin from one of his cached GETS cards and the emergency manager was able to utilize GETS to host the call.

Chapman's Best Practices

1. Practice what you preach.

Emergency communications requires routine training and practice to ensure successful incident response when it matters most. One of Chapman's strongest recommendations is to practice using GETS and WPS frequently. He recommends including GETS and WPS dry runs in statewide communications exercises and while doing simple routine drills to help commit the process to muscle memory, making it easy to use in the heat of the moment.

2. GETS/WPS isn't only for leadership.

Chapman says there is a perception that GETS and WPS are only for command staff and is a firm advocate for breaking down this preconceived notion. He describes it like this: people operating in the field need to communicate with command staff to ensure mission success. If these individuals –like field operatives, critical infrastructure partners, and other boots-on-the-ground responders—need to relay information up the chain of command, their calls must get through. They need priority services like GETS and WPS to increase the likelihood that their calls connect so that they can keep command staff informed to make the best decisions. In Oregon, Chapman ensures there is a cache of GETS/WPS enabled devices and corresponding PIN cards that can

deploy with responders operating in the field so that they can access priority services to help with their call completion to command staff and other essential workers.

3. Use TSP.

TSP is an essential service that helps ensure quick restoration of downed circuits and telecommunications equipment after an emergency. Chapman points out that TSP is an often underestimated and underutilized tool in the emergency communications toolbox. He says that only 16 organizations in the state of Oregon have applied for TSP, which can get your systems back up and running faster after an outage, regardless of whether the outage stems from a man-made incident (car accident or accidental cable cut) or a weather-related event.

4. Download the PTS Dialer App.

Chapman strongly recommends using the PTS Dialer App for error free calling at a moment's notice. It's such a useful tool! The app automatically uses the GETS access numbers and the subscriber's PIN. The PTS Dialer App can be set to automatically pull destination numbers from the subscriber's phone contacts or recent calls for ease of use and seamless priority calling during an emergency. The app is available in the Apple App Store and the Google Play Store.