

TRAINING AND EXERCISES IN THE NEW NORMAL

INTRODUCTION

The National Council of Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (NCSWIC) Planning, Training, and Exercise (PTE) Committee developed *Training and Exercises in the New Normal* to help Statewide Interoperability Coordinators (SWICs) and State Training Officers (STOs) design and conduct future trainings and exercises (T&E) given anticipated budget cuts and a new virtual environment due to the pandemic and long-term effects of the response efforts. The NCSWIC PTE Committee gathered comprehensive information from across the country to inform this guidance document by hosting five regional roundtables in December 2020. Participants in the roundtables included SWICs, STOs, exercise coordinators, and other public safety personnel, who were encouraged to share best practices and lessons learned. *Training and Exercises in the New Normal* summarizes the information collected from those discussions.

What is the “New Normal”?

Many emergency communications practitioners view the “new normal” as the post-pandemic (COVID-19) response operational environment. As many agencies, including emergency communications personnel, remain focused on supporting pandemic response with other large-scale incidents, the “new normal”—as it is described in this document—is not yet widely accepted. In this transitional phase, many states have decreased T&E, not because of challenges with distance learning or because of budget cuts, but rather because stakeholders in the emergency management and public safety spheres are concentrating efforts on balancing pandemic responses efforts with their day-to-day operations. As operational tempos normalize, agencies are anticipating that T&E will be affected by future budget cuts and will have a large emphasis on distance learning, even as pandemic risks decrease.

Prioritizing T&E in the New Normal

As it is necessary for SWICs and agency leadership to ensure emergency communications trainings and exercises remain a priority, the following considerations may help agencies decide which T&E to conduct in the current environment:

- Partner with the STO, who can open opportunities to include emergency communications objectives in all-hazard, whole community trainings and exercises
- Conduct T&E that can easily be transitioned to a virtual offering
- Focus on the needs of the agency, including capabilities that arose due to the current operating environment, like continuity of operations and alerts and warnings
- Consider hybrid delivery for T&E that may not be feasible or would lose value if delivered virtually
- Access grants specific to state training objectives or leverage the CISA Technical Assistance Program on T&E offerings





The [COMM-X Joint Training and Exercise Portal](#) for Emergency Communications is a one-stop shop for emergency communications-specific training and exercise material, collaboration, coordination, and resources. The portal serves emergency managers, emergency communicators and operators, training and exercise personnel, and anyone who will contribute to the information contained therein from federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial governments and industry partners.

The NCSWIC PTE Committee collected resources from various agencies and states throughout the roundtables, and uploaded the documents on the COMM-X Portal for reference. Members are encouraged to add additional documents to the COMM-X Portal to share with other public safety communicators.



VIRTUAL TRAINING

Training via web conferencing platforms has become a common workaround to providing T&E while social distancing protocols and travel restrictions are in place. While benefits from this mode have been realized, virtual platforms cannot support all necessary aspects of emergency communications. Some challenges associated with virtual T&E have eased as its use has become more frequent, however other challenges remain.

 VIRTUAL TRAINING CHALLENGES	 VIRTUAL TRAINING BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires technical expertise that may not be held by emergency communications staff. • There are many virtual conferencing platforms available, and engaging functions for each platform is different. • Maximizing a virtual platform requires more instructors and support staff than in-person courses • Without a standard platform, staff must become familiar with multiple platforms to be able to communicate with all participating agencies. • Virtual conferencing may create challenges due to firewalls, cybersecurity, and network broadband capabilities. • Adequate network bandwidth or Wi-Fi are necessities if instructors are to observe participants demonstrate skills. • Virtual conferencing may reduce or remove hands-on activities, and as such, signing off on task books following a training is often not an option. • Adapting in-person designed courses is challenging for virtual delivery due to instructors needing a new set of skills to teach from behind a camera. • Facilitating natural-flowing conversations and keeping participants engaged and attentive can be difficult on virtual platforms. • Limited personal interaction hampers relationship development critical to real world collaboration and information sharing • Converting any course to virtual requires permissions from the originator of that curriculum being converted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate within the agency—an agency’s Information Technology (IT) or cybersecurity department should be involved in choosing the platform to maintain a cybersecurity posture. • Plan to include platform usage training ahead of the scheduled emergency communications T&E event. • Ensure fluency with multiple systems, which will ease engagement with stakeholders who may operate on different platforms. • Ensure platforms are interoperable with stakeholders’ systems. • Call all participants ahead of time to ensure they have the proper equipment, bandwidth, and comfort with the platform. • Take advantage of the virtual platform to invite experts from out-of-state to provide more perspectives for T&E. • Understand the full capabilities of the platform—many have ‘raise hand,’ chat, and advanced features that can further engage participants and may appeal more to certain types of adult learners. • Break trainings into smaller sessions to increase engagement. • Hold one-on-one sessions for demonstration of skills requirements. • Host sessions across multiple days for shorter hours on each day. • Record and share your T&E to broaden audience—people that could not attend, people that would like to review, people that would like to learn more about the profession all can benefit from the recordings.

IN-PERSON TRAINING

In-person T&E is a staple for emergency communications practitioners, and in many instances, it is a necessity. For example, specialized equipment may only be available in limited quantity or within a facility, and some activities require staff to work as partners or in teams in order to accomplish all necessary tasks. It is often necessary for instructors and evaluators to fully observe a participant’s demonstration of skills in order to validate the training and capabilities being demonstrated. In the current operating environment, travel restrictions and safety protocols have affected agencies’ ability to host these events. As risk factors diminish, it is anticipated that some in-person training will begin again with safety precautions in place.

 IN PERSON TRAINING CHALLENGES	 IN PERSON TRAINING BEST PRACTICES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety precautions vary from state to state, or agency to agency. • While most agencies are taking health and safety precautions, it requires discipline for agencies to make large investments in T&E in the current operating environment. • It will be necessary for attendees and their home agencies to mandate precautions in the period before the T&E is conducted. • After-hours get-togethers must be carefully considered, as well as break times and lunchtime activities during the event. • Proper distancing measures must be in place for the safety of the participants. • Ensure the appropriate level of cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) is available for all participants. • Attendees’ home agencies may require additional approvals, including a legal/risk management review. • Coordinating in-person training requires coordination with the host facility and its point of contact to ensure protocols and additional services are available to ensure participant safety. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have medically trained staff on hand or nearby to conduct daily temperature and wellness checks. • Ensure distancing and protective barriers be available for participants. • Have cleaning staff available for daily intensive cleaning, even if the T&E is conducted when cleaning personnel aren’t usually onsite. • Collect participants’ contact information. Should an attendee test positive during or immediately after an in-person T&E, the host agency will be able to inform all attendees of potential exposure. • Consider forming a safety/wellness committee (or equivalent) to meet weekly and establish protocols/personnel restrictions for attendees and staff. • Advise staff attending an in-person T&E to consider teleworking the 7-10 days before and after the event. • Conduct follow-up surveys to determine participant comfort and safety throughout the T&E. • Provide precautionary onsite and offsite exposure prevention guidance during the T&E as well as demobilization procedures in writing to participants and staff. • Set up event registration well in advance to accommodate the time it takes to obtain necessary approvals.

COSTS AND FUNDING

To better address T&E budget shortages, agencies may consider several possibilities. Finding ways to reduce the costs of T&E can bring benefits, as can finding funding sources outside of the agency's normal budget process.

Virtual Cost Considerations

On paper, virtual T&E seems to be a cost-saver; however, an agency must consider hidden costs when comparing it to in-person T&E.

- Necessary user licenses, equipment, and virtual software operating costs
- Adequate numbers of virtually trained instructors, facilitators, note-takers, and IT support staff on hand for the event
- Additional time is necessary to develop courses and prepare to deliver virtual T&E

Having one unit within an agency or jurisdiction be responsible for the standardization of converting curriculums over to virtual and providing the necessary trained instructors to conduct courses can result in considerable savings. Similarly, assigning a single office to take the time to research the best platform for all intended purposes, including functionality and features, and promoting the usage of a single platform across agencies can save money in the long run.

For some, the allure of not paying for instructor and participant travel, materials, and facility support for in-person T&E could pressure emergency communications agencies to only support virtual T&E. However, blended trainings—capitalizing on the best aspects of self-lead, virtual and in-person training—are finding success. A blended curriculum includes students completing a workbook then taking an online test, prior to taking an in-person or virtual class. This approach, if feasible, reduces the time needed to conduct face-to-face in-person or virtual courses. In addition, pre-work can be done at a pace convenient to the student resulting in less time away from daily responsibilities.

In-Person Cost Considerations

Adopting cost savings ideas can help promote T&E in the new normal operating environment.

- Identifying low cost facilities such as college campuses or government-operated parks can generate savings.
- Piggybacking onto other T&E is a cost-effective way to build and sustain communications capabilities. Exercises related to the Radiological Emergency Preparedness Program (REPP) and FAA-required exercises for airports are held on a rotating basis and include emergency communications.
- Partner with neighboring jurisdictions and partner agencies to share costs.
- Utilize public resources not typically earmarked to support emergency communications T&E to help lower costs; for example, fire departments grants or the Urban Areas Security Initiative Program.

Cost-Saving Tip

Using state parks for in-person T&E provides lodging, ensures isolation and enough space for social distancing, and encourages participants to bring their own meals so that they do not need to leave the park.

Grants and Federal Support

CISA provides a number of resources and grant guidance documents.

- The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) provides T&E support through its Technical Assistance program.
- The [FY 2020 SAFECOM Guidance on Emergency Communications Grants](#) document discusses requirements for applying for federal grants to support emergency communications.
- The [Funding Public Safety Communications Systems](#) guide provides ideas for agencies to pursue funding streams that may not be in their existing budgets.
- To support the current operating environment, the U.S. Government passed the [CARES Act](#). This law provides funding for many reasons to support pandemic response, some of which may support emergency communications. The applicability of the CARES Act and the availability of its funds would need to be explored by each agency individually to mesh with program goals.

GENERAL RESOURCES

The NCSWIC PTE Committee collected resources from various states and agencies that are found at [COMM-X Portal](#). To request access to the COMM-X Portal, please email comm-xportal@hq.dhs.gov.