



# Minnesota Fire Service

## Communications Best Practice Guide

Statewide Radio Board, Operations & Technical Committee, Interoperability  
Committee, Fire Services Best Practice Workgroup

**Approved by the Statewide Emergency Communications Board**

**September 2016**

This document describes recommended best practices, statewide standards, and contact information for Minnesota fire agencies and regions to assist in planning for interoperability with fire and other public safety disciplines.



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### DOCUMENT REVISION HISTORY

<b>Date</b>	<b>Revision</b>	<b>Notes</b>	<b>Name</b>
8-19-2016	Entire guide		Workgroup



## Section I: Introduction

The Fire Services Communications Workgroup was created in 2012 to assist and coordinate radio use for fire service providers across the state of Minnesota during and after migration to the ARMER radio system. As ARMER has grown throughout the state, fire service providers need assistance, clarification, coordination, and best practice guidance. This guide was created to specifically address fire-related issues and to assist with planning for fire regions and agencies. Common fire communications paths include the following:

- Fire units to dispatch
- Fire units to fire units
- Fire units to EMS
- Fire units to law enforcement
- Fire units to air ambulance

The highest and most effective level of interoperability is achieved when users share the same radio system and have shared talkgroups directly accessible to them in their radios. A best practice recommendation would be for all users to operate on and share the same radio system. Realizing the difficulty in achieving this goal statewide, this guide will set forth best practices for using the current systems for the best interoperability solutions to address incidents and events. The Minnesota Fire Service Communications Best Practice Guide is a living document, and suggested changes may be submitted to the Emergency Communication Networks (ECN) Standards & Training Coordinator.

NOTE: Questions regarding State Standards or clarification of these standards should be directed to your Local System Administrator, your Regional Interoperability Coordinator (RIC), or the Statewide Interoperability Program Manager.

For current ECN contact information, please see Staff Contacts on ECN's website:  
<https://dps.mn.gov/divisions/ecn/pages/default.aspx>.

## Section II: Participation in ARMER

Should agencies choose to participate, Statewide Standard 1.10.0, Requesting Participation and Participation Plan Changes, details the requirements for participation. Statewide Standards may be found on ECN's website under ARMER and ARMER Standards.

The decision to participate in ARMER must be made in conjunction with county officials, local public safety, and adjacent Fire Agencies. This must also include an evaluation of interoperability with other radio systems. For questions, please utilize the points of contact in this document.

It is recommended that each agency either link to or attach their Limited or Full ARMER Participation Plan to this document.

Copies of Participation Plans may be obtained from the Local System Administrator, Director or Supervisor of the City, County, or Tribal Dispatch Center or PSAP or from the Regional Advisory Committee (RAC), Regional Emergency Services Board (ESB), or Regional Emergency Communications Board (ECB).



### Section III: Statewide Fire Communications

Statewide fire radio communications were developed in Minnesota in the early 1970's to provide radio channels for mutual aid interoperability. The original oversight of the VHF mutual aid frequencies was the responsibility of the Minnesota State Fire Chiefs Association. This responsibility was assumed by the

Statewide Radio Board in 2010, which later formed the Interoperability Committee to work on and coordinate interoperability issues throughout the state. The Interoperability Committee formed the Fire Service Communications Best Practice Workgroup to develop this Best Practice Guide, which will assist fire services across the state.

#### VFIRE23 (Statewide FIRE)

The State of Minnesota VHF infrastructure will remain available, regardless of ARMER migration. Since issues may arise as the result of bordering states and fire departments continuing to remain on a VHF system, this workgroup recommends that all agencies consider interoperable solutions between ARMER and conventional radio systems.

### Section III: Statewide Fire Communications Minnesota Fire Users Statewide Available Talkgroups & Channels

Minnesota Fire Users - Fire Specific Talkgroups & Channels	
Talkgroup/Channel	Intended Use
<b>ARMER 800 MHz -All Fire Users</b>	
Region Specific TAC	Regional Interop Resource
STAC's	Statewide All User Tactical channels 1-12
FSOA 1 & 2	Fire Scene of Action channels 1 & 2
TC OP1	Tribal Statewide Talkgroup (Tribal Gov't Use Only)
<b>VHF CONVENTIONAL</b>	
VFIRE23	VHF National Fire/Statewide Fire
MNFIR2	VHF Statewide Fire Tactical
MNFIR3	VHF Statewide Fire Tactical

It is recommended that agencies preplan for use of an SOA channel in case users lose trunking coverage or are in an area without trunking coverage.

### Section V: Fire Service Related Statewide Standards

Statewide standards are available on ECN's website.

#### Current, applicable statewide fire related standards

- State Standard 2.16.0, Emergency Button
- State Standard 3.15.0, Use of Scene of Action (SOA)
- State Standard 3.16.0, 800 MHz Statewide Incident Response Talkgroups: STACs, ETACs, FTACs, & LTACs
- State Standard 3.16.2, Use of Statewide 800MHz STAC 1-12 Talkgroups - Air Ambulance Emergency Landing Zone Coordination
- State Standard 3.16.3, Cross Spectrum Interoperability System 800 MHz National Mutual Aid Resources
- State Standard 3.16.4, Cross Spectrum Interoperability System VLAW31 Resources



- Statewide Standard 3.16.5, Cross Spectrum Interoperability System VHF Variable Frequency Station (VFS) Resources (replaced Standard 3.5.0, National/Statewide VHF Interoperability Resources VLAW31, VMED28, VFIR23, MIMS)
- Statewide Standard 3.32.0, Statewide Interoperable Plain Language Policy

## **Section VI: Fire Service Interoperability**

### **Applicable statewide standards**

- Statewide Standard 3.16.5, Cross Spectrum Interoperability System VHF Variable Frequency Station (VFS) Resources (replaced Standard 3.5.0, National/Statewide VHF Interoperability Resources VLAW31, VMED28, VFIR23, MIMS)
- Statewide Standards 3.16.0 through 3.36.0, Interoperability Standards

The highest and most effective level of interoperability is achieved when users share the same radio system and have shared talkgroups directly accessible to them in their radios. Shared, interoperable talkgroup resources exist in a variety of forms and may be called common, pool, or tactical. It is imperative that fire agencies plan effectively with mutual aid, law enforcement, EMS, and hospital partners. Fire agencies must be aware of local, regional, and statewide interoperable radio resources and procedures. Best practice is to use shared, interoperable resources by progression, beginning with internal resources, progressing to local/county, regional, and utilizing statewide resources last. Some progression may need to be skipped, depending on the situation – i.e., using an STAC for fire mutual aid.

### **Planned Events**

Planned events require consideration for the jurisdictions that will need to communicate. If shared, interoperable resources are required, planners should start by considering local/county talkgroups first, then progressing to regional and statewide talkgroups as necessary, given the agencies and the type of communications needed. This planning must be coordinated with the controlling dispatch center. Regional and statewide talkgroups need to be checked for availability and reserved by a dispatcher via the StatusBoard.

### **Emergency Incidents**

Emergency response communications also requires pre-planning. Talkgroup progression should also be used and must be assigned by the controlling dispatcher, based on availability. It is important to work closely with the dispatch center to ensure a shared resource is not already in use. Regional and state talkgroups need to be checked for availability and reserved by a dispatcher via the StatusBoard.

Based on the scope of the incident, the controlling dispatcher and the incident command structure must communicate effectively to ensure the most appropriate resource is assigned that matches the radio resource requirements of all responders. Dispatchers and incident commanders may choose to patch local resources or VHF and ARMER resources to manage an incident.

### **Wildfire and Interface Fires**

Initial response to wildfire reports may be done by local fire departments, MN DNR, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Services, BIA/ Tribal, or National Park Service crews, and will vary based on jurisdiction, land ownership, fire type, and crew/equipment availability. Reports may come to the local PSAP, DNR, and United States Forest Service (USFS) dispatchers directly. Responding agencies will be operating on ARMER and/or



VHF systems from DNR or federal agencies. Due to the highly variable responses possible, it is difficult to describe a typical or model scenario.

The best practice is for agencies in wildfire affected areas to do an annual pre-fire planning session involving the local fire department(s), PSAP representative, and affected State/Tribal DNR and Federal wildfire agencies in the area. Review of communications equipment types, fleet maps and channel lists, system coverage, and patching capability for each of the agencies should occur. Pre-incident development of written incident communication resource lists and incident communications plans is highly recommended and will serve not only in the initial period of wildfire response, but also as a resource for incoming Incident Management Team's (IMT's) if the incident expands to higher Type levels. Pre-incident exercise of those plans is also highly recommended to identify technical or training issues that should be resolved.

### **Communications Unit Leader (COML)**

The Communications Unit Leader, or COML, is responsible for developing plans for the effective use of incident communications equipment and facilities, installing and testing of communications equipment, supervision of the Incident Communications Center, distribution of communications equipment to incident personnel, and the maintenance and repair of communications equipment. The State of Minnesota has instituted a COML program to provide a ready cadre of trained communications unit leaders to assist Incident Commanders (ICs) in providing and maintaining effective incident communications. An IC can request a trained COML through the Minnesota State Duty Officer.

### **Communications Unit Technician (COMT)**

The All-Hazards Communications Technician, or COMT, is responsible for practices and procedures common to radio communications technicians during all-hazards emergency operations. COMTs work within the Incident Command System (ICS) organizational structure.

COMTs may be federal, state, local, tribal emergency response professionals, and/or coordination/support personnel with communications backgrounds. COMTs have a technical aptitude and are responsible for managing a Strategic Technology Reserve (radio cache, mobile communications vehicle, or other deployable communications assets).

The major responsibilities of the COMT are:

- Support COMLs in the design of the communications plan.
- Stand up equipment in support of the communications plan.
- Assign and track radio caches.
- Document all communications activities.

### **Incident Management Team (IMT)**

An Incident Management Team, or IMT, is a multi-agency/multi-jurisdiction team for extended incidents, formed and managed at the State, regional, or metropolitan level. An IMT is deployed as a team of 8-24 trained personnel to manage major and/or complex incidents requiring a significant number of local, regional, and state resources, as well as incidents that extend into multiple operational periods and require a written Incident Action Plan (IAP). An IC can request an IMT through the Minnesota State Duty Officer.



## What An IMT Can Do For You

Provide individuals or an entire team with expertise in the following areas:

- Operations
- Logistics
- Incident Commander – Liaison officer
- Planning – Safety
- Finance- personnel cost, equipment cost, etc.
- Public Information Coordinator
- Perform specific functions, manage a designated part of an incident, or manage the entire incident through a Delegation of Authority.

Provide the following to your jurisdiction:

- Frequent updates on activities
- Detailed records of incident costs
- Tracking of resources
- Documentation of expenditures, claims, labor, and legal issues for the incident
- A written incident action plan for each operational period that includes objectives, strategies, tactics, current resources, and plans for communications, safety, and logistics for the incident.

## Incident Dispatch Team (IDT)

The IDT is comprised of dispatch professionals from around the Metro Region. The team represents multi-discipline PSAP personnel (police fire, EMS) ready to deploy and bring the unique skills of the dispatcher to augment incident management at an incident or event. The IDT also serves as Minnesota's Telecommunications Emergency Response Taskforce (MN-TERT) under the National Joint TERT Initiative and is recognized nationally.

The Metropolitan Emergency Services Board (MESB) supports the CRTF and IDT/MN-TERT. The CRTF or MN-TERT can be requested for assistance at an emergency event by contacting the Minnesota State Duty Officer. If you have a planned event, please contact the MESB to make arrangements for the IDT.

## Section VII: Aeromedical Interoperability

### Applicable Statewide Standards

- Statewide Standard 1.13.0, Aircraft Radio Installations and Operations
- Statewide Standard 3.16.2, Use of Statewide 800 MHz STAC 1-12 Talkgroups - Air Ambulance Emergency Landing Zone Coordination

### Responder and Aircraft have ARMER radios:

If the aircraft and personnel on scene coordinating the landing both have STAC talkgroups, they may use the STAC that has been assigned to them by the appropriate, controlling primary PSAP.

### Responder or Aircraft that do NOT have ARMER radios:

If the aircraft does not have an ARMER radio, but personnel on scene coordinating the landing does, then the controlling, primary PSAP will assign the first available STAC and patch the responding air ambulance to VLAW31 if being landed by law enforcement personnel. If being landed by fire personnel, VFIRE23 is an option. If landing by EMS personnel, VMED28 can be used. If both the responder and the aircraft have VHF radios, they will use the appropriate VHF channel.



## **Section VIII: ARMER Communications and Interop Training**

### **Applicable Statewide Standards**

- Statewide Standard 1.11.1, Training System Administrators
- Statewide Standard 1.11.2, Training Technical Staff
- Statewide Standard 1.11.3, Training Telecommunicators
- Statewide Standard 1.11.4, Training 800 MHz Users

Training and training standards continue to evolve across the state. Metro region fire agencies have been training personnel since 2002 and can be a wealth of information and assistance. Training materials are widely available and can be tailored for individual agency application.

Whether or not your fire agency will be changing radio systems, field and dispatch personnel need proper training on the ARMER system. In addition, they need training on communications and interoperability basics, as outlined in the State Standards, and also in accordance with regional standards and protocol.

## **Section IX: Radio Equipment Guidance**

Equipment authorized for use on the ARMER radio system is outlined on the ECN web site. Also available on the web site is the state contract, R-651, for communications vendors and equipment suppliers. Purchases should be coordinated with your Local System Administrator.

### **Applicable Standards**

- Statewide Standard 1.7.0, Subscriber Radio Standards
- Statewide Standard 2.6.0, Fleetmap Standards
- Statewide Standard 2.7.0, Use of Shared Talkgroups

Mobile and portable radio fleetmap development should be coordinated with the Local System Administrator to ensure cooperative planning with mutual aid, law enforcement, EMS, and hospital partners.

## **Section X: Statewide Interoperability Zone**

ARMER Standard 3.16.6, 800 MHz Statewide Uniform Interoperability Radio Zones, establishes policy and procedures for the implementation of two 800 MHz uniform interoperability zones in all subscriber radios throughout the state. This policy will guarantee standardized Statewide and Nationwide interoperable communications capabilities for all service branches.

This uniformity will provide dispatch centers, Incident Commanders (ICs), and Communications Unit Leaders (COMLs) the ability to develop and adapt incident radio communications plans quickly and effectively without having to rely on reprogramming radios, swapping radios, or establishing patches in the field.

Based upon Standard 3.16.6, all subscriber radios shall have these two statewide interoperability zones (unless a waiver or variance has been granted):



STATEWIDE INTEROP		
ZONE DISPLAY NAME	ROTARY CHANNEL SELECTOR	CHANNEL DISPLAY NAME
MN	1	STAC1
MN	2	STAC2
MN	3	STAC3
MN	4	STAC4
MN	5	STAC5
MN	6	STAC6
MN	7	STAC7
MN	8	STAC8
MN	9	STAC9
MN	10	STAC10
MN	11	STAC11
MN	12	STAC12
MN	13	STAC13E*
MN	14	STAC14E*
MN	15	
MN	16	

CONVENTIONAL INTEROP		
ZONE DISPLAY NAME	ROTARY CHANNEL SELECTOR	CHANNEL DISPLAY NAME
8C	1	8CALL90
8C	2	8TAC91
8C	3	8TAC92
8C	4	8TAC93
8C	5	8TAC94
8C	6	8CALL90D
8C	7	8TAC91D
8C	8	8TAC92D
8C	9	8TAC93D
8C	10	8TAC94D
8C	11	8SOA1
8C	12	8SOA2
8C	13	8SOA3
8C	14	8SOA4
8C	15	FSOA1*
8C	16	FSOA2*

\*STAC13E and STAC14E: Required in all DES-equipped radios (or waiver). Must use Statewide Common DES Encryption Key.

\*FSOA1 and FSOA2: Required in Fire and EMS only (or waiver). Not allowed in non-Fire and EMS radios.

Personnel should familiarize themselves with ARMER Standard 3.16.6. Specifically the areas of technical background, operational context, standardized policy, and standardized procedure. Your Local System Administrator should be contacted if you have any questions related to technical background and encryption.



## Section XI: Standard Minnesota VHF Interop Resources\*

CH #	Channel Name	Short Name <sup>1</sup>	Mobile TX	Mobile RX	TX/RX Mobile CTCSS <sup>2</sup>	TX/RX Base CTCSS <sup>3</sup>
1	VCALL10	VCAL10	155.7525	155.7525	156.7/CSQ	156.7/156.7
2	VTAC11	VTAC11	151.1375	151.1375	156.7/CSQ	156.7/156.7
3	VTAC12	VTAC12	154.4525	154.4525	156.7/CSQ	156.7/156.7
4	VTAC13	VTAC13	158.7375	158.7375	156.7/CSQ	156.7/156.7
5	VTAC14	VTAC14	159.4725	159.4725	156.7/CSQ	156.7/156.7
6	MNCOMM	MNCOMM	155.3700	155.3700	156.7/156.7	156.7/156.7
7	VFIRE23	VFIR23	154.2950	154.2950	156.7/156.7	156.7/156.7
8	MNFIRG2	MNFG2	154.0100	154.0100	156.7/156.7	156.7/156.7
9	MNFIRG3	MNFG3	153.8300	153.8300	156.7/156.7	156.7/156.7
10	DNRTAC1	DNRT1	151.4750	151.4750	156.7/156.7	N/A <sup>4</sup>
11	VLAW31	VLAW31	155.4750	155.4750	156.7/156.7	156.7/156.7
12	VMED28	VMED28	155.3400	155.3400	156.7/156.7	156.7/156.7
13	IR 2	IR 2	165.9625	170.4125	167.9/167.9	167.9/167.9
14	VTAC14R	TAC14R	154.6875	159.4725	156.7/156.7	156.7/156.7
15	NGRPTR*	NGRPTR	Rest.	Rest.	Rest.	Rest.
16	LE 2*	LE 2	162.2625	167.2500	\$68F/\$68F	\$68F/\$68F

## Section XII: VFIRE23 (Statewide Fire) State Planning

The workgroup recommends that fire users maintain VHF radio capability if there is a need for continued interoperability with other states or Minnesota VHF users.

## Section XIII: Bordering States Considerations

VHF frequencies, such as VFIRE 23, are widely used by EMS in the adjacent states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Each of these states' interoperability plans include some provisions for use of the national VCALL and VTAC channels, as well as all the current, primary VHF interoperability channels used in Minnesota. The one exception is MNCOMM (155.370MHz), which is not widely licensed or used in South Dakota.

EMS agencies that may require interoperability with hospitals or EMS across state lines need to carefully consider 800MHz and conventional interoperability.

<sup>1</sup> For use with limited character display radios

\* Local option channel if not implemented with LOA or MOU for use of federal channels.

<sup>2</sup> CTCSS or NAC for subscriber radios. For VCALL10, VTAC11, VTAC12, VTAC13, and VTAC14, use receive CTCSS of 156.7 if needed to mitigate interference.

<sup>3</sup> CTCSS or NAC for fixed stations.

<sup>4</sup> There are no permanent, fixed stations on DNRTAC1.



## Section XIV: Other Best Practices Guides

Law Enforcement  
Emergency Management/Public Health  
Dispatch  
Public Works  
EMS/Hospitals

These guides have been created as a result of diligent work by the groups involved. Members of the workgroup who contributed to the most recent update of this Guide: Ulysses Seal (Bloomington Fire Chief), Andrew LaVenture (Firefighter/EMT/COML, Edina Fire Department), Rod Olson (Manager of Radio Communications Electronics, City of Minneapolis), Monte Fronk (Mille Lacs Tribal PD/Tribal Emergency Management), Keith Ruffing (Police Officer, City of St. Peter), Randy Donahue (Southern MN RIC), Pat Wallace (Blue Earth County Communications center Administrator), Dave Thomson (Police Officer, City of Rochester), and Cathy Anderson (Standards & Training Coordinator, ECN). These guides provide guidance for their respective public safety disciplines and are available online. Access to completed Best Practice Guides is available on ECN's website under ARMER and Guide Books.

## Section XV: Grants Guidance

All ARMER grant information is located on ECN's website.

The following grants are applicable to EMS for ARMER and VHF equipment. Agencies should contact their RAC for more information.

- IECGP Grants, Interoperable Emergency Communication Grant Program
- SHSP Grants, State Homeland Security Program grants
- PSIC Grants, Public Safety Interoperable Communications grant program
- Other, there are other available grant dollars

## Section XVI: Fire Points of Contact for General Assistance

For further information about anything in this Best Practice Guide, please contact your Regional Advisory Committee (RAC), Emergency Communications Board (ECB), or Emergency Services Board (ESB).

## Section XVII: Assistance from Minnesota National Guard

Assistance from the Minnesota National Guard, including communications requests, may be obtained via the State Duty Officer. The assistance must be requested by the County Sheriff and/or the Mayor in Cities of the First Class. For planned events or exercises, communications assistance may be obtained by contacting:

SFC Thomas J. Simota  
J6 JCP Systems NCOIC / Trainer  
8076 Babcock Trail  
Inver Grove Heights, MN 55076  
Communications: 651-268-8055  
DSN: 825-8055  
Mobile: 651-336-7515



Additional information about Criteria for Usage of the National Guard in Emergency Operations and Procedures for Requests may be found on ECN's website under ARMER and Guide Books and Best Practices.

## **Section XVIII: Minnesota Emergency Communication Networks Contacts**

Current email contact information can be found on the ECN website under Contact and then Staff Contacts.

## **Section XIV: Regional Radio Board and Advisory Committee Contacts**

Fire agencies across Minnesota must be involved with their respective radio regional governance structure. There are radio regions that do not align with fire regions. Be aware of which regions may affect your primary response area.

Contacts for the Regional Emergency Communications Boards/Emergency Services Boards (ECB/ESB) and Regional Advisory Committees (RAC) can be found on ECN's website under ARMER and ARMER Standards.

## **Section XX: Radio Affiliated Acronyms**

You can find a link to commonly used radio-affiliated acronyms on the ECN website.