

Plain Language White Paper

Background

At the SAFECOM Emergency Response Council (ERC) meeting in June 2007 instituting “plain language and common terminology” was identified as an important step to addressing public safety communications interoperability. Specifically, the following action was agreed to by the ERC attendees and provided to an ERC working group (the Standardization & Accreditation Practitioner Action Team (PAT)) for execution:

Within 24 months, the standard for public safety radio communications shall be plain language and common terminology.

Practitioners Action Team Response

The PAT recognized that this is a difficult action and one that requires a multi-tiered approach. Transitioning to plain language/common terminology is a huge education/outreach effort. There are many critics; those who don’t believe the public safety community can or should transition. The first step was for the PAT to review the plain language business case (tool). This tool is in the process of being finalized by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). It will help educate all levels of government regarding the rationale and benefits of moving towards plain language and common terminology. Over time it will be upgraded to better address the myths of transitioning to plain language/common terminology and incorporate real-life lessons learned.

A second step is to actively engage public safety organizations on this topic. At the December 2007 ERC meeting the PAT agreed that the following phrase could be used to help promote the plain language effort:

“We support radio practices that minimize or eliminate coded substitutions for English.”

SAFECOM Executive Committee Action

The PAT requested the EC endorse this statement and encourage endorsement of this statement by the organizations they represent. It is the PAT’s belief that this would be an important statement by the public safety organizations regarding their willingness to move in the direction of plain language/common terminology.

At the EC meeting in Washington, DC on March 6, 2008 the EC:

1. Endorsed the phrase.
2. Harlin McEwen (IACP), Alan Caldwell/Doug Aiken (IAFC), Dick Mirgon (APCO), and Kevin McGinnis (NASEMSO) agreed to gain endorsement from the organizations they represent. The intent is to gain this endorsement prior to the ERC meeting in June.