ICF CONSULTING Perspectives

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Coordinated IT Functions Support Homeland Security Needs

Improvement of communications capabilities for emergency responders has become a top priority for officials at the federal, state, and local levels. For a number of years, various organizations and individuals have advocated using the Internet and other information technology functions as a way to expedite communications and provide greater redundancy should more traditional methods fail or are inaccessible.

The issue of coordinated communication is referred to as one of "interoperability;" the ultimate goal is interoperable communications across departmental and jurisdictional boundaries. At the same time, the increased emphasis on terrorism preparedness requires secured communications that are comprehensive in scope and accelerated in delivery.

Several efforts are currently underway to experiment with coordinated communications that would address the "interoperability" concerns. Among those efforts is the Domestic Emergency Response Information Service (DERIS), a project piloted by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD).

ICF Consulting has been engaged by DOD and the firm of Adroit Systems, Incorporated, to design and develop the DERIS Portal—a secure, Web-based information service that provides a common operational picture to support a coordinated domestic emergency response. A demonstration was recently conducted simultaneously in Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Diego to illustrate how current technology could be integrated to design quickly a coordinated communications capability that enhances, rather than replaces, local and state capabilities.

During the demonstration, DERIS users encountered many of the same communications functions and procedures currently used during response to a catastrophic event. However, those activities are most often accomplished through separate and traditional (rather than Web-based and integrated) technologies. The DERIS Portal allowed the user to maintain regularly updated incident management reports, send secure messages and conduct secure group chats, convey secure photographic and video imagery, establish multiple-user alerts, maintain a secure information library, and simultaneously track weather and news feeds. Functions that would traditionally require multiple workstations and extra equipment have been consolidated into a single user interface.

Out of this effort, observers learned existing government programs and public efforts can be leveraged to reduce overall implementation costs and increase functionality, without compromising the integrity of individual efforts. They also learned sensitive information could be passed through existing mediums without compromising security or data integrity.

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