



Research Center Directorate **Perspectives**

Use of 10 – codes vs. Plain Language

Introduction

The IACP *Perspectives Series* is intended to help local agency decision-making by providing useful information gleaned from our network of information sources. *Perspectives* do not present IACP positions on the topic being addressed, nor do they replace long-term research. *Perspectives* are intended to help raise thoughtful issues regarding complex policy considerations- in this case, *Use of 10 – codes vs. use of plain language in radio communications* - to inform the debate at the local level.

Background

In the 1930's Ten-Codes (properly known as Ten Signals) were designed to represent common phrases, particularly in radio transmissions. Police radios only had one radio channel and officers needed to relay information concisely and quickly. By 1974, the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials (APCO) expanded the codes to allow for brevity and standardization of message traffic. However, over time, police agencies adopted their own agency specific use of codes, thereby resulting in several different meanings for codes among federal, state and local agencies. For example, in one jurisdiction 10-13 means "officer in trouble", however in a neighboring jurisdiction the same 10-13 code means "request wrecker." The move to plain language helps resolve this problem when more than one agency is responding: "Officer in trouble at 123 Main Street" or "Bank robbery in progress."

Federal Initiatives

During the tragic events of September 11, 2001, responding emergency personnel from different agencies were unable to communicate with each other due to having different codes and meanings. Many have asserted that the communication breakdown may have contributed to the loss of life among law enforcement and firefighters. In March 2004, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) established the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to standardize a uniform set of processes and procedures in incident management and response among emergency responders. NIMS has asserted that "the use of plain speech in emergency response situations is matter of public safety, especially the safety of first responders and those affected by the incident."

Recognizing the need for interagency communication among emergency responders, DHS has dedicated considerable amounts of money to enhance state and local interoperable communication efforts. As part of FY 2007, Homeland Security Budget, \$1.7 billion dollars in funding is being made available through grants to assist state and local agencies in counterterrorism efforts, with emphasis on interoperable communications, the ability of first responders, (fire, police and emergency medical technicians) to communicate with each other during an emergency or disaster.

In the fall of 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf States region, further emphasizing the difficulty of multi-agency communication, thus hampering the rescue efforts by emergency responders. Consequently, The United States Federal Management Agency (FEMA) discouraged the use of 10-codes due to their variability in meaning among agencies. In May 2006, FEMA issued a directive calling for the phasing out of 10- codes and replacing them with "standard or plain language". Initially, FEMA proposed that grant funding would be contingent upon agencies transitioning to using plain language, however in December 2006, FEMA provided a directive clarifying their position stating that while they prefer that agencies use plain language at all times, use of 10 codes in daily operations will not result in loss of federal preparedness funds.

Transitional Issues

The following are selected issues cited by state and local law enforcement agencies who are either in the process of switching to plain English, or who have already done so:

- Currently, federal, state and local emergency responders have varying meanings for 10-codes, but many have agreed that during an emergency they will use “plain talk” to communicate with other agencies.
- Officers have complained that switching to plain language in all instances may become an officer safety issue. If a suspect is wanted or some other unfavorable information is relayed over the radio, the suspect may overhear the transmission. Agencies are encouraged to train both dispatchers and officers that any transmissions, if possible are made as discreetly as possible. For example, asking the officer if his radio is “secured” or having a secondary officer who is away from the suspect transmits radio communications. Some jurisdictions have recognized that some situations may warrant use of a code and in those situations, the agencies would utilize a limited set of established codes, communicate by telephone, or use their mobile data terminal to obtain the information.
- The use and meaning of 10 codes has been identified as a kind of jargon that set cops apart, having their own language. However, 10 codes are no longer just known among officers, many “hackers” and those who scan emergency responder radio channels know most of the codes already and there are several internet sites that list the different 10 codes.
- Many agencies transitioned to the use of plain language several years ago and have encountered little or no problems: (Idaho State Police, New York State Police), for example.
- Many agencies have identified that they use a combination of both 10 codes and plain language to communicate.
- Agencies have recognized that some codes will still pop-up during normal radio transmissions, such as 10-4, which is generally recognized as “okay, copy or acknowledged”. Agencies that have transitioned to plain language have not reprimanded officers who slip and use a code or two during routine operations.
- Agencies have been reluctant to transition to plain language citing the expense of training, updating CAD systems, and veteran officers having to learn a new system.
- Agencies are encouraged to establish training and policies and procedures for the transition from using 10 codes to plain language.
- Agencies have been given autonomy in the use of 10 codes for everyday, routine operations, but are required to use plain language when responding to multi-agency, mutual aid situations. However, most agencies recognize that in a stressful situation, officers will revert back to what they know and use – 10 codes.