| **Objective #6** | **Communications** | Demonstrate, or discuss in a tabletop exercise, the ability to effectively establish and maintain communications among all appropriate response locations, organizations, and personnel. |

A Basic Intent

The ability to communicate during an emergency is commonly noted as the single most challenging aspect of the response. The challenge is not necessarily with the equipment; instead the challenge is in how the people use that equipment. Thus, the ability to effectively communicate with each other depends on how the people use the available equipment. Pre-planning, training, and actual incidents should have identified what radio frequencies, phone lines, and non-verbal signals will be used to manage operations. This applies to on-site personnel as well as off-site personnel.

B Discussing the *Points of Review*

1. Were response and support organizations able to effectively communicate with each other?

This should determine if each group was properly included into the response system via communications. It should identify if the on-scene communications allowed each group (fire, EMS, law, mutual aid) to communicate with each other or not. This should include outside groups such as state agencies, private contractors, and/or the spiller. It should note that off-site agencies (medical facilities, traffic controllers, shelters) were alerted and that a line of communications was promptly established or not. This should determine if the IC and the EOC could communicate with each other in an effective manner.

2. Were communications effectively utilized to gather and disseminate information about the incident?

This should identify if personnel properly used the equipment they had to share information. Initially, this looks at how dispatch centers facilitate the communications process and provide first response information. On-scene, the IC is the focal point and thus must establish a communications protocol. This means that individuals know who to contact and that side or long conversations are avoided. Personnel understand who is responsible to coordinate with off-site groups so those two groups are not making the same call. Also, off-site groups should know whom to call on-site for questions. This should identify if messages are relayed verbatim or were they modified or interpreted by the receiver. Finally, updates of the incident should be made in a timely manner and should go to all involved groups.

3. Were the existing communication links able to handle all necessary traffic?

This should identify if the existing equipment supported or hindered operations. The CP must determine what frequencies should be used, whether it is a tactical frequency, a common channel, or a combination of channels. An EOC should have an adequate number of phone lines and ensure response groups bring their own radio support. Personnel should identify what technique (phone, radio, or relay through dispatch) will be used to contact and inform off-site agencies. This should note how personnel overcame communications problems. Personnel should be able to identify where an equipment incompatibility exists (i.e. high band vs. low-

band). They should have a plan to provide or share compatible equipment. They may have to mobilize alternate or back-up communications (i.e. amateur radio, mutual aid with a cellular phone provider). Other problems include poor radio/phone coverage due to location, failing phone batteries, or overloaded dispatch centers. Whoever discovers the problem (i.e. dispatch, off-site, CP, EOC) should work to create a solution to the problem.

4. *Did personnel take appropriate steps to alleviate the communications problems?*

This should note how personnel overcame communications problems. Personnel should be able to identify where an equipment incompatibility exists. They should have a plan to provide or share compatible equipment. They may have to mobilize alternate or back-up communications (i.e. amateur radio, mutual aid with a cellular phone provider). Sometimes face-to-face communications or hand signals can overcome an equipment/personnel incompatibility.

5. *Were records kept to document the key communication activities?*

To assist in managing communications, the command staff should be monitoring transmissions and documenting these conversations. Not every radio or phone conversation needs to be recorded; staff should only note key events. This documentation will show when certain calls were made (i.e. to the spiller, OEPA, media). It should be noted that some groups rely on local dispatch centers to track messages. But, these sites may not be able to record every message and they cannot be easily replayed or reviewed by on-scene personnel.

6. *Were the actions taken based on existing plans and/or operating procedures?*

The LEPC's plan must contain procedures and/or guidelines for a reliable and effective communications system between emergency response groups and to the public. Also, many response agencies have their own communications protocols. These procedures and the lessons learned from past incidents should ensure groups effectively communicate among one another.

C Exercise Design and Control Issues

This Objective is best tested under field conditions. It can be tested in a Tabletop setting, but it will require a comprehensive discussion of procedures and/or guidelines. The Controller will need to ensure personnel adequately explain how they employ communications, discuss their limitations and resolve common problems. The Tabletop exercise may help responders identify common misuses of equipment and redefine procedures and/or guidelines to overcome those problems.

When evaluating this Objective in a Functional or Full-Scale setting, the Exercise Design Team will need to discuss a few concerns in its pre-exercise meetings. It is possible to congest radio frequencies with exercise activities and thus interfere with normal operations. The Exercise Design Team may consider running the exercise on one frequency and leave the rest available for real emergencies. This will consolidate radio traffic but it may not completely evaluate the communications system. Some will say that no emergency ever happens alone and thus use all of the local communications. This can lead to confusion when a real incident occurs at the same time as the exercise. The Exercise Design Team must determine which communication systems will be utilized and what limitations apply if any. They will then need to brief Players on these limits. Also, Players should be briefed to initiate each radio/phone call with "**This is an Exercise**" in order to avoid any confusion between exercise and real calls.

Finally if this Objective is to be evaluated solely at an EOC, the Exercise Design Team will need to ensure all of the site's communications capabilities are for use. This includes the activation and use of dormant phone lines, which may need to be specifically activated. Also if there is no field play and this is an EOC Functional exercise, the Exercise Design Team will also need to setup communications to simulate the emergency. For example, Controllers with radios will act as the IC, Hazmat Team, Law Enforcement, or other groups who are working in the field. Meanwhile, other Controllers with phones act as the Medical facility, Shelter, Media, or other applicable agencies. These Controllers then act as Players to simulate the emergency.

D Evaluation Needs and Issues

The Evaluator for this Objective should be familiar with the local response system and know how communications are typically managed for emergencies. Typically, this person should have a fire, law enforcement, dispatch, or EMS background.

If using a single Evaluator, the Exercise Design Team needs to provide them access to radio equipment that can monitor the local frequencies during the exercise. The Evaluator should also move about the various command positions to observe how they manage communications on-site and off-site. The Evaluator may also need to query Players as to whom they are routinely talking with if they are using communications other than radios.

Also, the Exercise Design Team may use more than one Evaluator to observe this Objective. Evaluators can be assigned on-scene as well as in the various off-site locations (dispatch centers, EOC). Multiple Evaluators can watch their location more closely and this should generate a more complete review of the communications process.

This Objective can be evaluated along with Objectives #1 and 9. Or, the team may elect to have this Objective evaluated as a second Objective by each Evaluator.