

# COML Success Stories

## Tennessee Flooding:

Tennessee experienced significant flooding after two days of torrential rains in May 2010. In Houston County, public safety radio networks and nearby cellular networks were lost when a critical telecommunications facility was flooded. More than 23,000 State and local emergency personnel, responders from 15 Federal agencies, 1,000 mutual aid responders and over 50,000 volunteers were involved. A cadre of dedicated COMLs coordinated hundreds of channels and talk groups across multiple bands and disciplines, working with response agencies to establish interoperability options using mutual aid and interoperable channels. Trained COMLs were invaluable in all areas of the State to establish communications plans and configure resources. This ensured that interoperable communications aided the operational aspects of the incident.



## The Joplin, Missouri Tornado:



On May 22, 2011, an EF-5 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri, killing 155 people and injuring over 900 more. The local public safety response was hampered by damage to two fire stations, a police station, and a temporary relocation of the city's 9-1-1 center. The extensive damage to the city's communications infrastructure and utilities resulted in outages affecting power, wired and cellular telephone service, DSL, data circuits, internet service, and cable television. Joplin's ten-channel trunked radio system operated near max capacity throughout the incident, allowing

local responders and incoming mutual aid agencies to communicate effectively. Early confusion regarding resource capabilities and communications needs was resolved once a COML was assigned to the incident. The COML helped coordinate equipment programming and assignment of assets to the involved agencies and streamlined overall communications operations.

## Presidential Inauguration:

In January 2009, the National Capital Region Communications Interoperability Group (NCR CIG) worked with hundreds of agencies from across the country, using an Incident Radio Communications Plan (ICS 205). The NCR CIG is sponsored by Virginia's Fairfax County, Maryland's Montgomery County, and the District of Columbia. All agencies, including the personnel coming in from across the Nation, were able to find their designated channel in the 205. The COML gathered information in advance from the participating agencies on what equipment responders would be bringing and whether the NCR CIG needed to provide radios from their cache (NCR CIG ended up handing out 500 radios). National interoperability channels and local channels were used. Additionally, NCR CIG set up a central distribution team inside the hot zone to fix radios and hand out replacement batteries as responders needed them. Each service division was able to talk; interoperability was not an issue.



# About OEC

[www.dhs.gov](http://www.dhs.gov), search keyword: OEC

The mission of the Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) is to support and promote the ability of emergency responders and government officials to continue to communicate in the event of natural disasters, acts of terrorism, or other man-made disasters, and work to ensure, accelerate, and attain interoperable and operable emergency communications nationwide.

## About The Emergency Management Institute

<http://www.training.fema.gov/emi/>

Through its courses and programs, EMI serves as the national focal point for the development and delivery of emergency management training to enhance the capabilities of Federal, State, local, and tribal government officials, volunteer organizations, and the public and private sectors to minimize the impact of disasters on the American public. EMI curricula are structured to meet the needs of this diverse audience with an emphasis on how the various elements work together in emergencies to save lives and protect property.

## Sources and Additional Information

- [COMLtraining@hq.dhs.gov](mailto:COMLtraining@hq.dhs.gov)
- [www.safecomprogram.gov](http://www.safecomprogram.gov) (click on Current Projects – COML Training)
- [www.training.fema.gov](http://www.training.fema.gov) - National Preparedness Directorate National Training and Education



Homeland  
Security



# The Communications Unit Leader (COML): A Valuable Resource for Incident Commanders

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Homeland  
Security



# How the COML Enhances Emergency Response Safety and Effectiveness

## What is a COML?

The Communications Unit Leader (COML) is a position under the Logistics Section of the Incident Command System (ICS) (see pages 57-58 of the National Incident Management System [NIMS], which is available at [http://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nims/NIMS\\_core.pdf](http://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nims/NIMS_core.pdf)).

The COML reports directly to the Logistics Chief or Incident Commander. A COML’s responsibilities include developing plans for the effective use of incident communications equipment and facilities, managing the distribution of communications equipment to incident personnel, and coordinating the installation and testing of communications equipment. The COML will supervise other members of the Communications Unit such as the Communications Technician (COMT), Radio Operator (RADO), and Incident Communications Center Manager (INCM), if those positions are filled during an incident. The COML may also supervise volunteer communicators, if available, such as the amateur radio emergency communications support team.

## Background

During all-hazards emergency response operations, radio communications among multiple jurisdictions and disciplines - including law enforcement, fire service, and emergency medical service - is essential. Unfortunately, the absence of an on-scene radio communications coordinator often has compromised critical operations. To close this capability gap, the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Emergency Communications (OEC), in partnership with the Office for Interoperability and Compatibility (OIC), developed performance and training standards for All-Hazards COML training. OEC and OIC worked with emergency responders and Federal partners - including FEMA’s Incident Management Systems Integration Division (IMSID) - to formulate curriculum recommendations for a comprehensive All-Hazards COML course. Later, OEC and the Emergency Management Institute (EMI) integrated their COML training to jointly offer a standardized COML course. “This training is for a situation where the complex technical or operational needs of the incident exceed the initial response,” says Dan Wills, Sedona Arizona Battalion Chief and a COML instructor.

The COML solves the communication issue for the incident commander.

—Dick Miller, Ohio MARCS

## The Value of a COML During Incident Response

Recent analysis of after action reports (AARs) from major incidents showed that communications was a major issue in a large majority of incidents. However, when a COML was deployed, the ability to communicate was significantly improved. Because of their training and expertise, COMLs enhance overall response effectiveness by:

- Increasing safety and reducing risk through improved communication up, down, and across the ICS
- Freeing command and operational resources
- Improving tracking and allocation of resources
- Eliminating burdens on the communications center

A COML’s operational training includes creating a communications plan, setting up a communications center, and establishing field communications between Incident Command and dispatch centers. Technical training aspects include tasks such as determining the appropriate radio channels or talk groups to be used, programming and deploying of cache radios, and interference mitigation. At any given incident, a COML will have knowledge of:

- Local communications and communications systems
- Frequencies and spectrum
- Patching technologies
- Local topography
- System site locations
- State, regional, and local communications plans
- Regional and local Tactical Interoperable Communications Plans, if available
- Knowledge of communications and resource contacts
- ICS 300 level training

“In order to have a positive impact in supporting incident communications, the COML should be involved early in the incident planning process so they can assess the operations plan for communications feasibility.”

— Lt. Chris Lombard, Seattle Fire Department

## How COMLs Work to Achieve Interoperability

COMLs are trained communications professionals that work to achieve interoperability through the ICS and among all responding agencies through:

**Coordination** – A COML can have a huge impact on an incident commander and operations chief, allowing them to manage the incident instead of managing communications. COMLs typically work directly with command staff regarding communications needs and then act on those needs to create seamless communications. In addition, COMLs are typically well networked with other communications professionals in the region and State. Those pre-existing relationships are often mentioned in AARs as making a huge difference in the outcome of the response.

**Expertise** – As dictated by their training, COMLs possess extensive knowledge of local systems and existing assets, such as cache radios, patching technologies, and other communications assets, to coordinate communications resources among arriving agencies and as needs arise.

**Planning and Management** – COMLs play a major role in the development of an Incident Radio Communications Plan (ICS 205). The ICS 205 is used to provide, in one location, information on all radio frequency assignments down to the Division/ Group level for each operational period of an incident. In addition, COMLs facilitate the execution of the communications plan and help manage and sustain all of the local, State, and Federal communications assets that are involved in an incident.

## When to Involve a COML

A COML should be used as much as possible during planned events, routine emergencies, and major incidents. During emergencies, a COML should be deployed to an incident as early as possible once the incident commander realizes the event will involve multiple agencies or jurisdictions.

Incident response is categorized into five types, according to incident magnitude and complexity. As the most complex incident, a Type I response necessitates a multi-

discipline, multi-jurisdiction response for a significant duration, such as recent large-scale natural disasters. As the least complex incident, such as a small fire or routine traffic stop, a Type V response requires limited resources and time. The current curriculum trains COMLs to manage up to a Type III event.

A Type III event includes:

- Activation of some or all of the Command and General Staff positions, as well as Division/Group Supervisor and/or Unit Leader-level positions.
- Type III Incident Management Team (IMT) or incident command organization managing initial action incidents with a significant number of resources, an extended attack incident until containment/control is achieved, or an expanding incident until transition to a Type I or II team.
- Extension into multiple operational periods.

**The Benefits of Increased COML Involvement** – Although COMLs are trained at the Type III level, there are many benefits to deploying COMLs in Type IV and V events, as well as planned events. Most emergency response professionals would agree that as COMLs are deployed to more incidents, regardless of scale, their involvement can help in the following ways:

- A COML helps solve communication problems on smaller scale incidents and can help prevent problems in the event of escalation.
- COML involvement on smaller scale incidents and planned events increases proficiency and usage of interoperability solutions when the larger scale events occur.
- Use of the COML during routine events helps responding agencies organize around the ICS structure, improving overall response effectiveness and proficiency during larger scale incidents.

The involvement of a COML on smaller scale incidents increases proficiency and usage of interoperability solutions when the larger scale events occur.

—Hank Koebler, Tennessee Emergency Management Agency

## Integrating the COML

Although the COML is positioned in the Logistics Section, including a COML in planning meetings, operational meetings and/or tactical meetings can bring enormous benefit to the overall coordination of operations. When a COML understands how an incident is being managed from an operational and tactical perspective, he or she can anticipate communications needs and allow teams to work faster and more effectively. The Incident Commander or Operations Chief make the call to include the COML in planning meetings, so it is up to them to ensure that COMLs have the information and level of participation necessary to do their job effectively.