

**2009 NASCIO Recognition Award Nomination  
State of Georgia**

*Nomination Category:*  
Cross-Boundary Collaboration and Partnership

*Title of Nomination:*  
Metro-Atlanta Urban Area Security Interoperability Communications  
Consortium

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## ***Executive Summary***

Radio communication interoperability among agencies and jurisdictions is a long standing problem in the public safety area. Barriers to interoperable communications are both technical and operational. Each agency typically has its own unique legacy technologies, requirements, operating environments, laws, and processes. Therefore, achieving interoperability requires that, in addition to addressing technology and disparate communications systems, agencies examine governance, procedures, training, exercises, and usage. Since it is a problem that bridges across federal, state and local agencies, it requires that either one agency step up and shoulder the burden in terms of governance or fiscal responsibility to improve communications or that a group of agencies work together. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has developed numerous programs and grants to state and local jurisdictions since 2002 to improve interoperable communications. A key element to obtaining DHS assistance is that state and local agencies demonstrate the ability to coordinate and work together toward a solution that benefits an entire region, regardless of agency jurisdiction.

In 2004, the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) team was formed by the governments of Dekalb, Fulton, and Cobb counties, City of Atlanta and three state agencies— Georgia Technology Authority, Georgia Public Safety, and Georgia Emergency Management. The UASI group was organized to define processes, build and integrate systems, and create governance that enables public safety to share information via voice and data signals in real time when needed. UASI focused on building up all states' *prevention, protection, response and recovery* capabilities by enhancing communications interoperability among federal, state and local responders. UASI was officially formed by a 50-year agreement among these governments and agencies creating the Metro-Atlanta Urban Area Security Interoperability Communications Consortium.

## ***Description of the Business Problem and Solution***

Atlanta, Georgia, is the ninth largest metropolitan area in the United States and the largest commercial and transportation hub of the Southeast. The Atlanta airport is the busiest airport in the world with over 90 million passengers utilizing the airport in 2008.

With such a heavily populated and well-traveled area, law enforcement agencies here face fiscal and coordination challenges to provide protection and also ensure Atlanta is as safe and secure as possible. The Georgia State Patrol has responsibility across the state and regularly coordinates with local public safety agencies to provide the necessary response and support to incidents. Public Safety personnel put their lives on the line on a daily basis and when a State Patrol officer requires local assistance or vice versa, having a quick, efficient and reliable means to communicate is imperative and can mean the difference between life and death for the officers as well as the public. When large events such as the 1996 Summer Olympics are held, the need to communicate and coordinate public safety personnel and other resources is imperative to providing the protection needed.

The Atlanta urban area has 26 separate radio systems that provide communications to first responder and support agencies. If an incident occurs at the Georgia Institute of Technology, the Georgia Tech security police, the City of Atlanta police and the Fulton County police may all be needed to respond successfully in a timely and streamlined manner. The Georgia Tech force is on a State of Georgia radio system; the City of Atlanta and Fulton County each have their own separate radio systems. This would mean having three agencies respond and possibly not being able to communicate. Also, the incident may only require the response of one of those agencies, but since they were on separate communications systems, all three would respond, tying up valuable resources that could be safeguarding and protecting others.

Communication interoperability among agencies and jurisdictions is a long-standing problem in the public safety area. Barriers to interoperable communications are both technical and operational. Each agency typically has its own unique legacy technologies, requirements, operating environments, laws, and processes. Therefore, achieving interoperability requires that, in addition to addressing technology and disparate communications systems, agencies examine governance, procedures, training, exercises, and usage. Since it is a problem that bridges across federal, state and local agencies, it requires that either one agency step up and shoulder the burden in terms of governance or fiscal responsibility to improve communications or that a group of agencies work together. Since 2002, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has developed numerous programs and grants for state and local jurisdictions to improve interoperable communications.

A key element to obtaining DHS assistance is that state and local agencies demonstrate the ability to coordinate and work together toward a solution that benefits an entire region, regardless of agency jurisdiction. DHS required:

- The creation and/or validation of regional Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). (This is often the first time local jurisdictions have come together to align operational communications plans for incident response.)
- Multi-jurisdictional and multi-discipline governance structures as demonstrated through the development of the *SAFECOM Statewide Communications Interoperability Planning Methodology* and the Urban Area Working Group requirements.

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- a. To establish interoperable communications among the first responder providers for the Georgia Emergency Management Agency Area (GEMA) 7.
- b. To plan for future real-time interoperable communication needs to enhance public safety, and with the goal of expanding the scope of voice and data communications, so that in the future surrounding counties and municipalities may become a part of a larger interoperable communications network.
- c. To provide regional collaborations in the prevention, protection, response and recovery of all hazard type events in the Metropolitan Atlanta Urban Area.
- d. To cooperate in the applications, acceptance, and use of federal, state, local, and private grants.
- e. To create and participate in established committees and assign sufficient and knowledgeable personnel to ad hoc committees to carry out the goals and specific projects of the UASI.
- f. To carry out any other related objectives and goals associated with achieving interoperable communications for public safety purposes among various agencies.

Douglas, Henry, Gwinnett, Clayton, Fayette, and Rockdale County have joined the UASI team, and UASI continually works to add other agencies to be able to provide the best public safety communications to the State of Georgia, regardless of jurisdiction.

The Georgia Technology Authority took the responsibility of being the procurement representative for the UASI team. This was an important role since there is a long and arduous process for applying for and receiving federal public safety grants, identifying and procuring the products and services that the grants are to be applied to, coordinating the UASI team for the long term, and maintaining the procedures and technologies obtained from the grants. The Georgia Technology Authority dedicated state personnel to participate in the UASI team, and the team secured outside help to manage the processes. The UASI team defined a governance model and matured their structure to ensure that each agency would benefit equally by the investments of grants and in-kind contributions of all participating agencies.

The group had initially focused attention on cross-system programming. Each agency operates a Motorola Smartnet System. This required agreement to share System Key information, which is held as critical and confidential to public safety agencies. Having worked in a cooperative and trusting manner to secure this agreement, the team then turned to establishing shared common talk groups and intergovernmental agreements between the agencies. This enabled a certain level of interoperability but also taxed the channel capacity of the existing systems.

On further evaluation, UASI determined that securing a communications system that would be used for command and control as well as daily interoperability for the participating agencies would be the optimal solution. The team worked to define the preferred solution and then identify funding mechanism to procure and build out a Regional Digital 800 MHz Radio Communications Interoperability System.

By 2004, UASI successfully applied for a \$9.2 million grant from the Department of Homeland Security that funded the initial build-out of the 800 MHz radio system. Cobb County integrated the system to their existing radio system to provide additional coverage to the UASI system users. The system was needed for use in the command and control of incidents (planned or unplanned) that required multi-jurisdictional response or coordination.

In preparation for the installation and rollout of the system, the UASI team had to define the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for coordinated responses and use of the shared system. The team defined the Tactical Interoperable Communications Plans (TICP) for the region to provide the first formal, region-wide communications interoperability SOP. This required the full participation and coordination of all agencies and a willingness to ensure that the overall good of the public was served regardless of the agency.

The UASI 800 MHz system was deployed and operational in 2006. UASI continued to apply for grants and agencies provided in-kind contributions to engage in training exercises that ensure proficiency in the use of the system. Shared channels in the Urban Area (UA) are reserved for situations requiring the coordination of multiple public safety agencies and were successfully used during the TICP validation exercise. For example, the exercise included state and federal agencies. When the Federal Bureau

of Investigation's equipment failed, the Atlanta UA provided the FBI with a cached radio to support communications.

"Creating a system of shared communication will not happen overnight," said Governor Sonny Perdue. "It will require access to the right technology, the right governance and adequate funding to make it happen. We are laying the foundation now to make interoperable communications a reality. This has the potential to save lives, and it is part of my vision for a safe Georgia."

Today, UASI continues to provide new capabilities to participating agencies in a cost-effective and efficient manner. Additionally, cooperation among the state and local agencies has fostered a culture of support and coordination that has continually increased citizens' safety. UASI continues to secure grant funding to identify processes and technology that expand the area of interoperability and improve first responder capabilities. UASI manages engineering assessments of system-wide issues addressing survivability, interoperability, and capacity of the UASI systems within a structure of a cooperative framework involving end users, system administrators, designers and vendors.

In 2007, in addition to operating and maintaining the UASI radio system, the team secured grant funding to conduct an operational and technical assessment of the current UASI system, and define a five-year strategic plan and roadmap for improving and expanding the system to meet public safety communication needs.

### ***Significance of the Project***

*"The Atlanta UA is reaching beyond its immediate jurisdictional footprint to embrace all nine counties that make up the metropolitan Atlanta All Hazard Fulton County Emergency Services (Area 7) Council footprint." – Tactical Interoperable Communications Scorecard - DHS*

The UASI team serves the all public agencies regardless of state or local jurisdiction in the Atlanta area and continues to expand across the state to address the needs of all regions of Georgia. The UASI efforts have provided governance, procedures and technology to improve public safety response to citizens in the State of Georgia.

The significance to the State of Georgia and the other agencies participating in the UASI team is enabling public safety to better coordinate while sharing the fiscal burden. This is also the first effort among the various agencies involved that has had such an impact on the public and been sustained for several years.

The project holds relevance for other states and jurisdictions as well, as it relates directly to the priority ranked second by state CIOs for 2009: Shared services. Further,

it addresses the fourth highest-ranked priority among technologies, applications and tools—networking, voice and data communications, unified communications.

### ***Benefit of the Project***

The first and foremost benefit of the UASI project has been a collaborative public safety radio system that enables seamless communications during response to incidents involving local and state public safety and disaster preparedness agencies. No longer are three agencies responding when only one is needed. And likewise when the support of three or more agencies is needed, each can be assured that they will have effective and collaborative coordination.

Besides the cost avoidance realized by not having each agency build its own radio infrastructure to address interoperability communications, the UASI team saw a return on investment by sharing resources across geographical boundaries and by pooling their quantity needs to ensure the best pricing available.

Collaboration and co-location of the UASI team provides savings by avoiding the duplication of radio infrastructure sites and facilities.

All agencies in the UASI team benefit from the sharing of information and resources to ensure the most efficient and effective response possible. They also get the maximum benefit from every dollar invested in governance, technology, training and exercise efforts.