



Governance in Interoperability is Key to Success

If you start assembling an item by forcing a square peg into a round hole, you might end up using all of the pieces, yet still creating something that doesn't work very well. And if you start an interoperability project by purchasing technology instead of analyzing the problems that need to be solved and coming up with a plan that involves all of the stakeholders, you might end up with a patchwork solution that doesn't address all of your area's problems.

According to George Ake, a retired major with the North Carolina Highway Patrol who is presently with the Border Research and Technology Center (BRTC)—Austin (operated by the Sheriffs' Association of Texas), overcoming jurisdictions' desire to implement technical solutions before thoroughly understanding the business needs represents one of the key challenges an agency faces in providing interoperability-related technical assistance. Kelly Harris, deputy executive director of SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, agrees.

"It's so much more important to figure out the business problems that need to be solved first," Harris says. "Too often, folks hear about the latest and greatest technology and want to use it, and that so often leads to failure. You need to define the existing communication and information-sharing needs and look at it from the perspective of what needs to be accomplished. Then, you need to get the right stakeholders around the table to make that happen and get them to make a firm commitment. You next define your operational needs and last of all, apply the technology. Too often, people identify the technology without first figuring out what problems the technology needs to solve."

"It's a real change of paradigm," Ake says. "People for years have just worried about their own issues. They need to realize they have to sit down, talk, and put away their differences, and to realize that all stakeholders must feel they have ownership in the solutions. It's got to be a partnership where people work together and everybody has input in the process."

Both Harris and Ake work for organizations that can help law enforcement agencies start the interoperability process by putting the right pieces in place first and moving on from there. Ake also provides onsite technology assistance that includes providing a notebook of samples, best practices, and models.

"I don't tell them what to do, I tell them what has worked in other areas and might work for them," Ake says. "Every State and area is unique and has its own political issues."

Ake helped draft a short article, available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/technology/communication/governance.htm, titled *Effective Police Communications Systems Require New "Governance."* This document addresses key points in the process, including challenges to developing a governance structure and lessons learned. SEARCH also offers a number of educational materials on its website, including its popular tech guide series (<http://www.search.org/programs/safety/tech-guide.asp>), which Harris describes as "sort of how-to manuals. There are a lot of best practices for planning and implementing information-sharing systems. We see the same trends over and over. People make the same mistakes, and the same best practices will overcome those."

Ake has experience working in the field and with nationwide efforts as a veteran of governance development efforts with the State of North Carolina in 1996 and with CapWIN (the Capital Wireless Information Network) in 2000. He began providing technology assistance to other jurisdictions in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and believes that governance has become a major issue in the ensuing years.

"The technology is not the issue," Ake says. "If people don't work together and partner, you won't get them to use the same technology. Governance is the foundation."

