Plain Language

Whitepaper

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Abstract

Clear communication can mean the difference between life and death in emergency situations. When multiple agencies respond to an incident, using plain language ensures that everyone—regardless of their background—understands critical information quickly. This paper explores why plain language is essential in multi-agency emergency response, the challenges in adopting plain language, and how the Iowa Statewide Interoperable Communications Systems Board (ISICSB) can help implement plain language policy effectively.

Introduction

First responders must communicate vital information quickly and accurately. Historically, many agencies have used coded language, which can create confusion when different agencies work together. Plain language is communication that can be understood by the intended audience and meets the purpose of the communicator. In alignment with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) using plain language for standardized communication across jurisdictions to eliminate or limit the use of codes and acronyms, as appropriate, during incident response involving more than a single agency is a best practice.

Why Plain Language Matters

Prevents Miscommunication:

Jargon and codes can be misinterpreted, especially when responders from different agencies work together. *Example:* A law enforcement officer using "10-50" for a traffic accident may cause confusion if fire personnel interpret it as something unrelated. Instead, saying "traffic accident with injuries" eliminates ambiguity.

Speeds Up Response Times:

When everyone immediately understands the message, there's no need for clarification, leading to faster decision-making during high-stress events. *Example:* "We have an active shooter at Main Street Mall, first floor" conveys urgent, clear information rather than coded language that may require decoding.

Aligns with Federal Guidelines:

NIMS and FEMA recommend using plain language for better interoperability and coordination.

Reduces Mistakes:

Studies show that using clear, direct language in emergency communications lowers the risk of errors that could put lives at risk. *Example:* A paramedic hearing "code 3" might need time or further instruction to interpret it as "urgent response," whereas "proceed with lights and sirens" is immediately clear.

Challenges in Transitioning to Plain Language

Breaking Old Habits:

Many responders have used codes for years, and change can be difficult. *Example:* "U42" could indicate a canine handler for one agency but an

ambulance for another. Simply adding "Ambulance U42" or "(Agency Name) Unit42" will help responding units properly identify each other. Many Iowa agencies have gone away from coded language, and the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) does not use nor educate students on these codes. Keep in mind outside agencies may not know special verbiage for various unit types. Ensuring you are properly identifying the assets ensures understanding during multi-agency events.

Training and Consistency:

"*You train how you fight*" training should reflect the real conditions responders will face, emphasizing consistency, repetition, and preparedness for the most challenging situations rather than just rehearsing for ideal or one-time events. It is essential for agencies to train personnel to be comfortable using plain language in high-stress situations. *Example:* Agencies can implement scenario-based training exercises where responders must relay information without using codes.

How to Make Plain Language Standard Practice

Comprehensive Training Programs:

ISICSB can develop training sessions that show responders how to use plain language effectively in real-world scenarios.

Policy Implementation:

Agencies should formally adopt plain language policies and ensure accountability.

Policy Development:

An agency policy is highly recommended to ensure a required standard of communication when events become multi-agency. These policies should adopt the following best practices:

1) Agency identity prior to mobile identifier (example: ISP 492 instead of 492)

2) If a mobile unit uses a 10-code, repeat their traffic using plain language. *Example:* "Dispatch from 492, I have a 10-80. We are going Northbound on 2nd Avenue from Grand." Dispatcher should relay, "Copy, ISP 492 has a pursuit traveling Northbound on 2nd Avenue from Grand."

3) When patching to a statewide talkgroup like IATAC2, it is important to make an announcement so officers are aware they have moved to a statewide talkgroup and may hear communication from outside agencies. This helps ensure everyone involved stays informed and prepared for potential interagency coordination. For example, a dispatcher might say, "(Agency Name) patching a pursuit into IATAC2, northbound from 2nd Ave and Grand. ISP492 is pursuing a (vehicle description and plate)."

Practice Through Drills:

Conducting regular joint exercises with different agencies will reinforce plain language use.

Performance Tracking:

Measuring response times and accuracy before and after implementation can highlight the benefits and identify areas for improvement. *Example:* Agencies can compare incident reports from pre- and post-plain language adoption to track improvements in clarity and response efficiency.

Conclusion

Using plain language in emergency communication saves time, prevents mistakes, and ensures that all responders work together efficiently. By making plain language the standard, ISICSB can help create a safer, more effective emergency response system for Iowa. Training, policy guidance, and regular practice will be key to successful implementation. Agencies who follow NIMS and FEMA guidelines will further strengthen interoperability and enhance life-saving coordination efforts.