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10-4 No More? Law Enforcement Agencies Are Phasing Out Old Radio Codes

Does “10-13” mean an officer is in trouble or is it a request for a wrecker? Is the use of 10-codes hampering your ability to communicate over the radio with officers in other departments?

The use of 10-codes originated in the early 1920s, when public safety radio was in its infancy and officers rarely had to communicate with officers outside their own department. Early radio technology did not provide law enforcement with the capabilities that are available today. From the 1920s through the early 1980s, most departments used one-channel conventional radios to communicate with officers in the field. Everyone shared the channel, which became congested when simultaneous events took place in different locations.

Thus, out of need, the 10-codes emerged, although they were not standardized. These codes enabled departments to pass concise information among officers in a minimum amount of radio time, reducing radio traffic. This traffic decrease allowed more officers to communicate when they needed to.

In later years, the use of 10-codes helped to prevent suspects who were within earshot from understanding what officers and dispatchers were saying. However, the need to communicate with other departments has grown in recent years, and the use of 10-codes — which vary across jurisdictions — can potentially confuse first responders from different agencies when they work together.

MIGRATING TO PLAIN LANGUAGE

Agencies must be able to communicate effectively across jurisdictional lines. Using plain language helps. The Department of Homeland Security encourages plain language in its National Incident Management System. How the migration to plain

language should occur is subject to some debate. There are, however, some essential ingredients for a successful transition.

First, law enforcement executives must commit to a plan and develop a road map that outlines the necessary steps. Executives should first get advice from the officers and dispatchers — who will be most affected by the change — and then design the appropriate training and education programs.

Second, each agency should be allowed to keep a small subset of agency-specific codes that are understood by officers but not by the public. For example, even agencies that have switched to plain language for almost everything else still retain a veiled language code that can alert officers to an undercover operation. The exceptions to plain language should include a standard word or phrase for an officer in trouble. Before the move to plain language, many agencies used some form of the number 13, such as “signal 13” for an officer in trouble. Today many agencies have replaced this with a brief phrase known only to dispatchers and officers.

Lastly, some existing plain language can become standardized. “Stolen car” may be referred to as a GLA (grand larceny auto), a GTA (grand theft auto), or some other term in adjacent jurisdictions. However, jurisdictions can agree to adopt a standard term. Law enforcement can also adopt straightforward words and phrases for situations that involve dealing with emotionally disturbed people or pursuing fugitives and suspects.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

For plain language to be effective, it must be comprehensive and compulsory. Agencies must use it for all radio transmissions, not just during mutual

aid events. Agencies have recognized that some codes will still be used during normal radio transmissions, such as 10-4, which is recognized as “okay,” “copy” or “acknowledged.”

Those agencies that have adopted plain language have not reprimanded officers who slip and occasionally use codes during this transition.

Whether or not local agencies choose to switch to plain language for everyday use, it is occasionally being mandated by some regional and national organizations. Most regional communications plans put forth by the National Public Safety Planning Advisory Committee require agencies that use the national calling channels (CAL90, 8TAC91, etc.) to use plain language when talking to other agencies on these channels. To avoid mistakes during an event, regions should promote the use of plain language on a routine basis when using the shared channels. Standardized plain language across all jurisdictions will remove the confusion that can occur when agencies do not use the same codes and signals. Law enforcement agencies that routinely use codes and reserve plain language for emergencies involving multiple jurisdictions may be more likely to lapse into code, even during emergencies, which could create confusion.

BENEFITS

Using plain language can help to create clearer communication across jurisdictional and agency lines. In addition, it may reduce the anxiety experienced by many new officers who have to memorize codes. It should also reduce training time for new officers.

Plain language is encouraged by the Department of Homeland Security, the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- **NIJ’s Communications Technology (CommTech) website:**
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/technology/communication/welcome.htm>
- **NLECTC Communications Technologies Center of Excellence:**
http://www.justnet.org/coe_commtech/Pages/home.aspx

