

Dept. of Military Affairs: Annual SIMCOM exercise improves communications interoperability across first responder agencies, National Guard, and amateur radio operators

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by Capt. Joe Trovato

WAUKESHA, Wis. — The annual Statewide Interoperable Mobile Communications — or SIMCOM — exercise kicked off in Waukesha May 1 with nearly 300 participants and nearly 45 agencies representing all levels of government and amateur radio operators.

SIMCOM ran May 1-3 at four different locations around Waukesha including the Waukesha County Expo Center, local parks and sports complex. The emergency operations center in Grant County and one in Michigan also participated, in addition to amateur and military auxiliary organizations from across the country — including Iowa, Illinois, and California

Now in its 12th year, this year's edition of SIMCOM simulated a spring ice storm that

impacted power lines and critical communications infrastructure forcing emergency managers, law enforcement, first responders, and Wisconsin National Guard personnel to find ways to communicate in order to provide emergency services and life support to nearly 50,000 notionally impacted Wisconsin citizens.

SIMCOM has grown into one of the Midwest's premier communications exercises, which aims to test the ability of agencies at all echelons of government to communicate across vastly different communications platforms in a simulated emergency environment.

Capt. Marc Moonen, a patrol captain with the Waukesha Sheriff's Department who acted as the incident commander for the exercise, said SIMCOM provides an excellent opportunity for agencies at all levels of government and even to private citizens to work together to de-conflict the obstacles and challenges posed by communicating across so many different organizations.

"The SIMCOM exercise allows us to educate, test, coordinate, and check our communications platforms capabilities throughout the community," Moonen said. "This exercise allows us to test our assets that we have in place, work together with different disciplines from the community" as well as multiple government agencies.

Wisconsin Emergency Management Administrator Brian Satula echoed that sentiment and noted that one of the biggest takeaways from exercises like SIMCOM are the relationships developed between partner agencies during training that then prove invaluable during real emergencies.

"We have come a long way since Sept. 11," Satula said. "That's when we first heard the term 'interoperability.' We were always operable within our groups. But this is a great example of where we've come. It's not just interoperability with first responders — it's all levels of government and with the private sector, with the non-governmental organizations like the Red Cross. We continue to improve interoperable communications with all of our partners through exercises like SIMCOM."

Brig. Gen. Dave O'Donahue, the Wisconsin National Guard's deputy adjutant general for civil support, said SIMCOM provides an excellent opportunity for the military, and specifically the Wisconsin National Guard, to integrate its communications platforms with the civilian agencies it supports during domestic responses. The National Guard has a unique dual-mission as the primary combat

reserve for the Army and Air Force and simultaneously as the state's first military responder in times of emergency.

"It's important for us to be interoperable with our civilian partners," O'Donahue said of the Guard's mission to support civil authorities. "Sometimes our communications assets are secure, and sometimes it can be difficult. Within the military we're able to communicate, but it's vital for us to be able to communicate with incident commanders at all levels, so this is a great opportunity for us."

Kevin Wernet, one of SIMCOM's lead exercise planners from Wisconsin Emergency Management, credited the success and growth of SIMCOM to the local communities that host and support it each year. Last year's exercise occurred in Dane County in February, but each year organizers select a different location in the state in an effort to continue building relationships before an emergency occurs.

"We couldn't do it without those local hosts that are willing to allow us to come in and interface and support you to get ready for an incident," Wernet said. "So we need to recognize Waukesha County, the city of Waukesha and all of the tremendous amount of support from all of the agencies that are here."