

10-code or “clear text”?

Posted on [December 1, 2009](#) by [Bill Gabbert](#)

For some of us the debate about whether to use the 10-code or “clear text” for radio communication ended in the mid-1970s when the [Incident Command System](#) (ICS) was introduced in southern California. In 2003 the ICS morphed into the [National Incident Management System](#) (NIMS) with the signing of [Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5](#) which mandated all federal, state, and local agencies to use NIMS (which is based on the ICS) to manage emergencies beginning in 2005 if they were to continue to receive federal funding for “grants, contracts, or other activities”.

The ICS and NIMS require that “clear text” be used instead of number codes which are not standardized across jurisdictions. Here is an excerpt from IS-100, the Introduction to the Incident Command System:

Use of Plain English:

- Communications should be in plain English or clear text.
- Do not use radio codes, agency-specific codes, or jargon.

and:

Common Terminology: Example

Which is the example of common terminology?

A.
This is Unit 1, we have a 10-37, Code 2.

B.
Unit 1, the flood waters are rising and we need additional resources for sandbagging.

Visual 3.7
Basic Features of ICS
Version 2.0

From IS-100

But many agencies, especially those involved in law enforcement, are still using codes for routine and emergency communication. Here is an excerpt from an article in the [Ventura County Star](#) in California:

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If federal Homeland Security officials have their way, the next time a police officer arrives on scene, he'll simply radio back "I'm here" rather than saying "10-97."

Police have long used "10-codes" to communicate with each other and dispatchers. The codes were developed in the 1930s, when radio channels were scarce. They allowed police to succinctly relay information through a four-digit number rather than clog the airwaves with wordy descriptions.

But problems developed over time. For starters, there is no universal code. To one agency, a "10-50" might mean "officer down," while to another it stands for a routine traffic stop.

The problem became especially evident during big emergencies, such as the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., where police and fire agencies from across the nation rushed to help.

"When they got there, many of them were unable to communicate with each other effectively," said Chris Essid, director of the Office of Emergency Communications for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Many agencies faced the same problem four years later when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Essid said.

Federal officials now require that officers use "plain language" when responding to a crisis involving multiple agencies.

"Very often, it doesn't take anymore time to just say it in English," Essid said.

Federal officials are also urging departments to replace their jumble of codes with "plain language" in their day-to-day operations.

Essid and others point to a 2005 incident in Missouri in which a local police officer radioed late one night to his dispatcher that he had just seen a state highway patrol officer's car with a door open stopped along a highway. The officer said he was going to go back to make sure the patrolman was OK.

It turns out the Missouri Highway Patrol officer was lying in a ditch, barely alive, having been shot eight times with a rifle. The local police dispatcher decided to use plain English in sending out a call for help.

Had she said "10-33," her department's code for "officer down," it would have meant something very different to the Missouri Highway Patrol: "traffic backup." Instead, every state trooper within miles responded, and the officer lived.

In many cases, "being able to communicate quickly and effectively can mean the difference between life and death," Essid said.

About Bill Gabbert

Wildland fire has been a major part of Bill Gabbert's life for several decades. After growing up in the south, he migrated to southern California where he lived for 20 years, working as a wildland firefighter. Later he took his affinity for firefighting to Indiana and eventually the Black Hills of South Dakota where he was the Fire Management Officer for a group of seven national parks. Today he is the creator and owner of WildfireToday.com and Sagacity Wildfire Services and serves as an expert witness in wildland fire. If you are interested in wildland fire, welcome... grab a cup of coffee and put your feet up. [Google+](#)

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