

**ANNUAL REPORT ON THE  
METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON  
REGIONAL INCIDENT COMMUNICATION  
AND COORDINATION SYSTEM -  
RICCS<sup>SM</sup>**



**FY 2010 REPORT**



Metropolitan Washington  
Council of Governments

## I. OVERVIEW

The Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) is the regional association of 21 local governments in the National Capital Region. In 2002, COG members and other stakeholders developed a Regional Emergency Coordination Plan (RECP<sup>SM</sup>) in response to the events of September 11, 2001. The purpose of the plan is to facilitate coordination and communication during emergencies between all relevant stakeholders in the region. The plan, approved on September 11, 2002, is based on the Emergency Support Function structure endorsed by the federal government.

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Participants in the RECP<sup>SM</sup> development process quickly realized that timely communication between regional officials during the 9/11 crisis was a major problem. The need for rapid and secure communication cut across all Emergency Support Functions. COG created the Regional Incident Communications and Coordination System (RICCS<sup>SM</sup>) to address this central problem, and the system has become the centerpiece of the Regional Emergency Coordination Plan.

RICCS<sup>SM</sup> directly supports the structure of the RECP<sup>SM</sup>, by organizing the relevant agencies, officers, and decision makers through the regional emergency support functions (R-ESFs). This structure allows for notification and conferencing to be segmented according to the requirements of each regional incident or emergency.

RICCS<sup>SM</sup> helps local jurisdictions coordinate decisions that could have consequences across the region. If an event affects multiple jurisdictions or the entire region, RICCS<sup>SM</sup> is utilized to rapidly notify the appropriate R-ESFs and may be used to convene a conference call of decision makers to discuss the regional implications of the event. The responding entities and R-ESFs inform the decision process and during the conference call share regional information, situation reports, and discuss proposed region-wide decisions.

This concept of coordination became a reality in July 2002 when participants received the first RICCS<sup>SM</sup> messages from the dedicated network. Since that time, RICCS<sup>SM</sup> has delivered more than 4,300 messages to its users. The system sends short text messages to any text capable device – e-mail accounts, mobile phones, pagers, and Blackberrys. RICCS<sup>SM</sup> also provides a phone conferencing system which allows simultaneous calls for groups of officials.

The RICCS<sup>SM</sup> serves a variety of stakeholders organized by R-ESF or other specialty group. The system currently has about 1,500 active users in more than 50 groups. R-ESF group membership includes representatives of:

- COG's 21 local government members;
- the State of Maryland;
- the Commonwealth of Virginia;
- the federal government;
- public agencies;
- private sector and volunteer organizations;
- schools and universities.

RICCS<sup>SM</sup> is a closed system. COG controls an individual's receiving and sending authorizations. Members are unable to sign-up on the RICCS<sup>SM</sup> or become a member of any group without COG approval.

## II. SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

COG owns the RICCS<sup>SM</sup> system and the Service Mark for its name. The COG Chief Administrative Officers (CAO) Committee in collaboration with the emergency management directors of the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia oversees RICCS<sup>SM</sup>. The system functions with multiple RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Host Centers. One agency is designated as the primary or lead RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Host Center with other agencies in reserve. Reserve centers have redundant manpower capability and can function as the primary center should events prevent the lead RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Center from operating. Because RICCS<sup>SM</sup> is an essentially virtual system, a designated physical location is not essential for RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Host Center operations.

The Primary Host Center's function is to monitor a variety of information sources, to send messages through the system when appropriate, to assist COG staff with arranging conference calls on request, and to assist system users. The District of Columbia Homeland Security Emergency Management Agency (HSEMA) is the RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Primary Host Center. COG can function as a backup center. According to the 2002 RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Memorandum of Understanding, additional centers include the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Emergency Management, the State of Maryland Emergency Management Agency, Fairfax County, and Montgomery County. Currently, only DC HSEMA and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management are active as Host Centers.

## III. CAPABILITIES

The RICCS<sup>SM</sup> system for text notification is housed on multiple, identical computer servers. Each server can function independently of the other in case one is unavailable. There are currently two servers in secure hosting facilities in different parts of the country to minimize the chances of a total system failure due to server unavailability. Access to all servers is password protected and encrypted by SSL certificates. RICCS<sup>SM</sup> servers operate on the latest version of Roam Secure Alert Network (RSAN) software developed by Roam Secure, a division of Cooper Notification. The software has been tested at a delivery rate of 18,000 text messages per minute. The system will continue to operate even if the voice bandwidth allotted for mobile phones becomes jammed with traffic. Roam Secure works to enhance the software through consultation with COG and its other clients, which include several federal agencies.

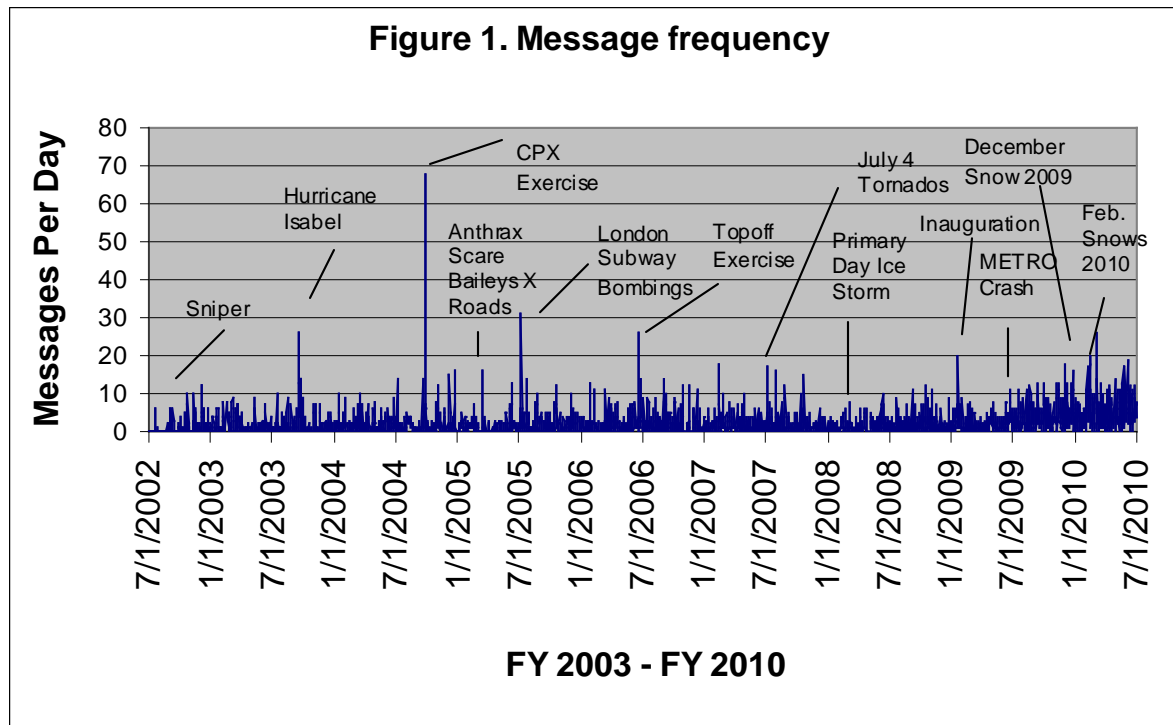


RICCS<sup>SM</sup> can send short text alerts to any e-mail account, pager, mobile phone, or other device capable of receiving an e-mailed text message. The alert may direct users to join a conference call at a scheduled time for further discussion or direct them to a secure web site containing more information. There are 50 conference call numbers available for simultaneous RICCS<sup>SM</sup> calls at all times through Premier Conferencing. System users access the system through a Web-based interface.



## IV. SYSTEM FUNDING

RICCS<sup>SM</sup> was initially funded as part of a Congressional earmark to the region for homeland security planning. Currently, the Urban Area Security Grant (UASI) is funding software licensing and associated costs. Through its role as Secretariat, COG receives UASI funding to partially pay for staff time to help maintain and manage the system.



## V. HISTORY OF USE

RICCS<sup>SM</sup> has been effectively used since July 2002 to deliver 6,200 messages and to arrange numerous conference calls. Table 1 shows 2002-2010 message traffic, which averages about 600 alerts per year including testing. Figure 1 demonstrates that the system is used daily and highlights some peak usage during major events or exercises. Participants have used the system most heavily during Hurricane Isabel, the sniper shootings, the London subway bombings, anthrax scares, the Inauguration and snow storms. FY 2010 saw a three-fold increase in message traffic due to the introduction of automated Virginia Department of Transportation alerts to the NCR Operations Center Group.

**Table 1. RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Messages Sent**

Fiscal Year	Total Messages (including tests and exercises)
2003	451
2004	552
2005	606
2006	729
2007	694
2008	604
2009	697
2010	1,825
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,158</b>

A breakdown of the FY 2010 messages in Figure 2 shows that Metrorail and other transportation issues totaled 38% of message traffic, testing and exercises totaled 22%, weather watches and warnings totaled 5%, and many other types of messages accounted for smaller percentages. VDOT traffic messages comprised 40% of all traffic, though these alerts only went to a small group with a few major incidents being passed on to a broader list of system members. Figure 3 displays that the primary sending agencies after VDOT are DCHSEMA (28%), COG (3%), WMATA (1%), and various emergency management offices. Table 2 lists the volume of messages received by the RICCS groups – many messages go to multiple groups. The NCR Ops Center group receives the most messages followed by R-ESF 5 Emergency Managers, R-ESF 1 Transportation, R-ESF 13 Law Enforcement, and the CAOs and Senior Policy Group (SPG). The NCR Ops Center was created in June 2007 to allow

federal, state, and local watch desks to monitor message traffic instead of simply individuals in those organizations.

Incidents of note during FY 2010 included the December and February snow storms.

## VI. FEEDBACK AND ADJUSTMENTS

COG staff receives feedback on the system from several channels and makes adjustments as needed. Feedback channels include:

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- E-mails from the RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Web site directed to [riccs@mwcog.org](mailto:riccs@mwcog.org);
- Replies to specific RICCS<sup>SM</sup> messages found in the RSAN software alert log;
- Exercises and trainings;
- Comments from COG committees, staff, and other individuals.

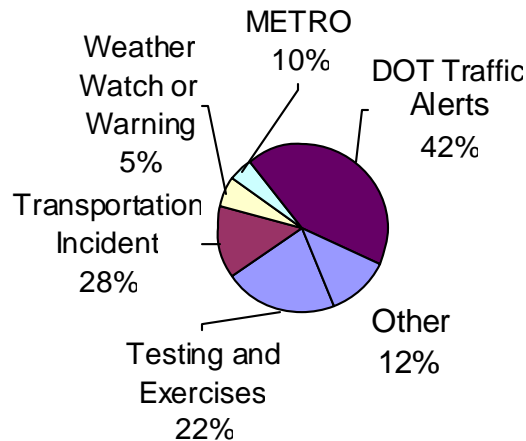
Staff received 111 e-mail messages requesting assistance with the system in FY 2010. The majority of these requests were for permission to join, but several were for technical assistance. Staff reviews requests for membership with committee chairs, lead committee staff, or emergency management staff at the relevant agency depending on the committee. Replies through the alert tracker sometimes notify staff of problems as well.

Staff holds quarterly trainings on RICCS<sup>SM</sup> at COG that are open to all users. The sessions are advertised on system-wide quarterly testing messages. Additionally, staff conducts on-site training for larger agencies and RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Host Centers.

Feedback identifies problems for staff to address. Examples are:

- Individuals that need to be removed from the system due to job changes;
- Messages not sent to all the appropriate groups;
- Unnecessary messages to a particular group;
- Technical issues with message delivery;
- Difficulty getting timely approval for membership in the system;
- Wrong people or too many people in groups;
- Issues documented in exercise after action reports, such as the Senior Leaders Seminar and the Command Post Exercise.

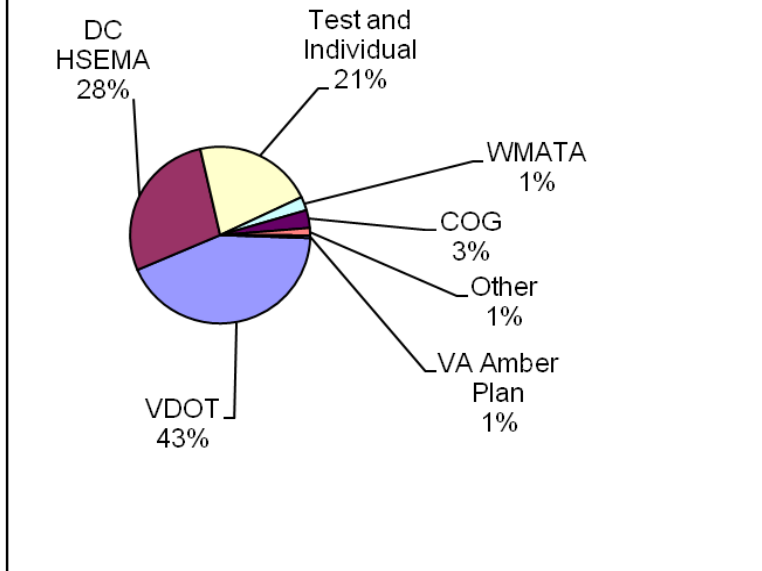
**Figure 2.  
FY 2010 RICCS  
Messages Categories**



**Other Includes:**

- Snow Info
- Building Evacuations
- Radio Cache Use
- Fire/Haz Mat
- Law Enforcement Incident
- Power/Energy Problem
- EOC Activation
- Demonstrations
- Flyovers
- Amber Alerts
- Water Supply
- Suspicious Packages
- Large Events

**Figure 3.  
FY 2009 RICCS  
Message Senders**



### Enhancements to RICCS

In FY 2010, COG staff made several enhancements to RICCS based on feedback from users:

- Replaced both RICCS<sup>SM</sup> servers with new more reliable units.
  - Relocated Virginia server to new secure Virginia location.
  - Implemented automated delivery of all Northern Virginia transportation incident messages to the NCR Operations Center Group.
  - Updated hard copy EOC Contact Book in response to requests from RICCS<sup>SM</sup> members.
  - Conducted a large-scale review of group membership
- Staff monitored message delivery and redirected messages to the appropriate groups when necessary.





## VII. RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Assessment and Future Work Program

**Table 2. RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Messages Received by Groups**

Recipient Group	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010
NCR Ops Centers	376	494	1,000
R-ESF 5 – Emergency Managers	256	326	367
R-ESF 1 - Transportation	179	268	334
R-ESF 13 – Law Enforcement	83	91	87
Chief Administrative Officers & Senior Policy Group	67	84	73
R-ESF 4 – Fire, HazMat, Urban Rescue	22	28	27
Snow Group	20	17	47
R-ESF 8 - Health	12	10	15
R-ESF 2 - Communications	6	14	28
R-ESF 15 – External Affairs	6	13	9
R-ESF 3 – Water Supply	4	6	12
R-ESF 12 - Energy	3	0	0
R-ESF 10 – Hazardous Materials	0	2	10

The region has made great strides in planning for events since 9/11, but planning documents may not always function as designed. RICCS<sup>SM</sup> is a tangible, living system that allows a dynamic response to an event by bringing the relevant parties together quickly and throughout the event's evolution. It allows key regional stakeholders to communicate information and to convene meetings in a matter of minutes.

RICCS<sup>SM</sup> is the glue that can keep the regional response in sync.

RICCS<sup>SM</sup> has continued to grow in membership over the years. Maintaining the system takes continuous work and there are several areas that require special attention:

1. The addition of third redundant server for increased reliability (scheduled for FY 2011).
2. A shortening of group names to create shorter text messages (scheduled for FY2011).
3. Work with Maryland State Highway and the regional Metropolitan Area Transportation Operations Coordination Program (MATOC) effort to add more accurate transportation information to the system.
4. A recommitment of the backup RICCS<sup>SM</sup> Host Centers that signed the original MOU to be trained and to exercise their functions.
5. A thorough review of each group's membership with committees, staff, and local partners and to make sure that the group's relevant subgroups are structured correctly (ongoing).
6. Increased emphasis on system testing and training at the committee level.

