

A Review of the Wireless Communication Commission

CONCLUSION: The Wireless Communication Commission has successfully created and operates a durable, interoperable, emergency communications network with 97% statewide mobile radio coverage. The biggest threat to WCC's efficiency is its current statutorily required organizational relationship with the Mississippi Department of Information Technology Services, which has resulted in confusion over responsibility and duplication of efforts costing ITS at least \$168,966 annually in staffing resources that could be put to other use by the Department.

Background:

MISS. CODE ANN. Section 25-53-171 (1972) created the 16-member Wireless Communication Commission (WCC) to efficiently implement and maintain a statewide wireless communication system to ensure law enforcement and essential health and safety personnel can effectively communicate during emergencies.

Furthermore, state law grants the Commission, in conjunction with the Department of Information Technology Services (ITS), the sole authority to promulgate rules and regulations governing the operations of the system, as well as all legal authority necessary and proper to operate, plan, manage, and administer the system.

As of July 1, 2019, there were 145 MSWIN towers located throughout the state, including 84 state-owned towers and 61 towers leased from private and governmental owners.

As of July 1, 2019, there were 574 state, local, federal, and private entities participating in MSWIN using approximately 41,357 emergency communication devices, and making an average of over 7.6 million push-to-talk calls per month.

Because MSWIN user membership is voluntary, over 100 local government entities do not use MSWIN as their primary means of emergency communications, which negatively impacts the network's statewide interoperability. In addition, the network's interoperability is impacted by WCC's deficiency in training users in the effective use of the network.

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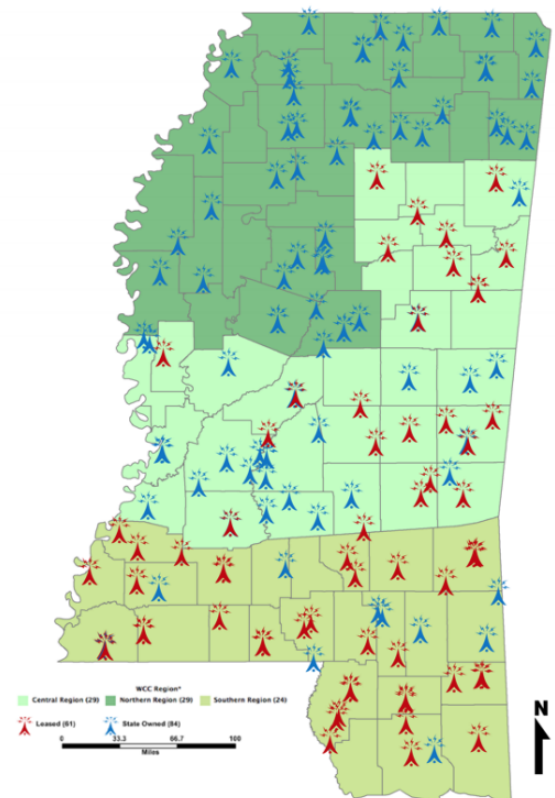
- ### Recommendations to Improve WCC's Effectiveness in Operating MSWIN:
- In conjunction with its MSWIN users, WCC should continue to expand the coverage of the network as needed and justified in relation to its cost and the number of users who would be served.
 - WCC should monitor the percentage of busies by individual tower.
 - WCC staff should continue to expand and develop training, maintain an accurate list of and contact information for all MSWIN users, and conduct an annual user survey.
 - WCC staff should develop a formal strategy to explain the benefits of user membership to entities not currently members of MSWIN so that the network would become their primary method for emergency communications.
 - Through additional funding sources or vendor assistance, WCC staff should continue to explore options to make P25-compliant push-to-talk radios more affordable to entities with limited financial resources that have prevented them from joining the network.

WCC's Effectiveness in Creating and Operating a Statewide Wireless Emergency Communications System

The Mississippi Wireless Information Network (MSWIN) is a land mobile radio trunked public safety communications network with 97% statewide mobile radio outdoor coverage and indoor coverage in critical buildings, such as courthouses. Due to its high cost and technical issues, the network does not provide statewide in-building coverage, which can pose a problem for emergency responders who typically work indoors, e.g., firefighters.

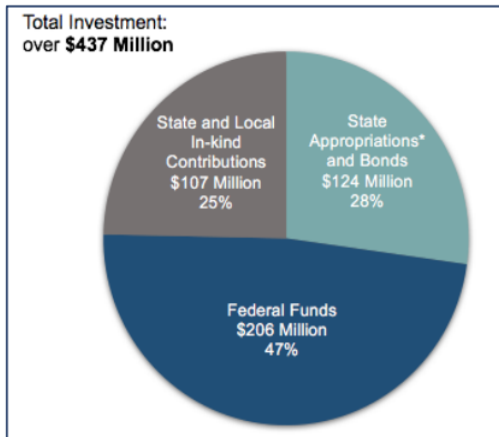
As shown in the map, as of July 1, 2019, there were 145 MSWIN towers located throughout the state, including 84 state-owned towers and 61 towers leased from private and governmental owners.

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SOURCE: PEER analysis of data provided by WCC.

WCC's Efficiency in its Expenditure of Public Resources



Source: PEER analysis of documentation provided by WCC.

Revenues and Expenditures

As shown in the chart, from inception in 2005 through July 1, 2019, \$437 million in public resources has been invested in the implementation, maintenance, operation, and administration of MSWIN.

WCC's expenditures for the period of FY 2015 through FY 2019 totaled approximately \$80.98 million.

WCC's Control over State Agency and Local Government Expenditures on Wireless Communications Systems

While WCC has implemented policies and procedures requiring all state agencies and local government entities to obtain approval from WCC's Procurement Review Committee for all wireless communications purchases greater than \$100,000, Jackson County recently entered into a \$5.8 million

WCC has statutory sign-off approval authority on all wireless communications systems within the state that are owned or operated by any state or local government entity, agency, or department.

contract to build its own emergency communications system without first seeking approval from WCC.

Inefficiencies in the Organizational Relationship between WCC and ITS

In 2005, the Legislature authorized Commission members to provide all of WCC's staff support in order to maximize funds available for MSWIN buildout. ITS was directed to administer WCC's operating fund as well as collaborate and consult with the Commission in carrying out its responsibilities. This statutory collaborative role between ITS and WCC became problematic when WCC began hiring its own staff in 2008. Now, there is confusion over authority and responsibility as well as duplication of effort.

Because WCC staff does not have access to MAGIC, SPAHRS, or MSPB's online employee recruitment system, WCC must send all of the procurement, payroll, and other information that they would otherwise directly enter into the appropriate state system to ITS staff for processing. This arrangement results in unnecessary steps that both waste time and delay processing.

Recommendations to improve WCC's Efficiency in its Expenditure of Public Resources:

- The Legislature should consider the options identified by PEER for organizational placement of WCC (i.e., stand-alone agency with current responsibilities; stand-alone agency with responsibility for all emergency communications in the state; stand-alone agency with physical co-location at MEMA; or assign a different state agency such as MEMA or MDOT to provide administrative support and office space to WCC). The Legislature should then amend the law to reflect the selected option. However, if the law is not changed regarding organizational placement of WCC, then WCC and ITS should jointly request an Attorney General's opinion to opine on the responsibilities of each entity.
- In order to clarify WCC's authority over procurement, the Legislature should amend MISS. CODE ANN. Section 25-53-171 (4)(i) (1972) to replace "sign-off approval" with "prior-authorization."
- WCC should refer Jackson County's procurement of its own emergency communications system to the Mississippi Office of the State Auditor for possible investigation and action.