

## Arizona School Safety—Interoperable Communication Systems

### Special Audit

State's \$26 million investment in interoperable communication systems, which reportedly involve about 20% of public schools State-wide, has not yielded anticipated benefits, and their continued use is in doubt because of a lack of assured funding and, in some cases, poor system functionality

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### Audit purpose

This audit is the second in a series of special audits related to school safety authorized by the Joint Legislative Audit Committee in December 2023. The first report, issued in December 2024, assessed emergency operations planning at schools. This report focuses on School Safety Interoperability Fund (Fund) expenditures by law enforcement agencies, including their compliance with statutory and applicable procurement requirements and whether the systems purchased with Fund monies met statutory requirements. The next report will address schools' key physical safety infrastructure and related issues and is due by December 31, 2026.

### Key takeaways

► **State has spent millions on interoperable communication systems that reportedly will connect about one-fifth of public schools to law enforcement agencies**

Since 2019, the State has allocated \$26 million through what has become the School Safety Interoperability Fund to law enforcement agencies to facilitate improved emergency communications between law enforcement agencies, public schools, and other public safety agencies. Law enforcement agencies have used Fund monies to purchase interoperable communication systems that meet or are reportedly capable of meeting requirements specified in Arizona Revised Statutes (A.R.S.) §41-1733.

The systems purchased are reported to involve about 20% of the State's public schools, which include traditional public schools and public charter schools. Additionally, as discussed in Chapter 1, pages 6 through 19, we found that 4 of 14 law enforcement agencies that received Fund monies also reported connecting private and/or tribal schools to the interoperable communication systems purchased with Fund monies, which was contrary to statute and may have improperly benefited these schools.

Monies were spent to facilitate emergency communications between public schools and law enforcement agencies, but some nonpublic schools may also have benefited, contrary to statute.

► **Interoperable communication systems can facilitate real-time 2-way communication during emergencies**

Interoperable communication systems, such as those that offer the features specified in statute, can facilitate real-time 2-way information sharing through voice, text, video, and other means to enhance public safety responses to school emergencies. For the purchase of such systems, 15 law enforcement agencies, including 13 county sheriff's offices and 2 city police departments, were allocated monies from the Fund.<sup>1</sup> As discussed in Chapter 1, pages 6 through 19, we found that each of the 3 interoperable communication systems law enforcement agencies purchased using Fund monies generally met, or reportedly met, statutory requirements.

► **Most law enforcement agencies did not follow procurement requirements, and contracts lacked essential protections**

When acquiring interoperable communication systems, 9 of 14 law enforcement agencies and their county or city procurement departments did not comply with applicable procurement requirements and/or lacked documentation required by their procurement policies and procedures, as discussed in Chapter 2, pages 20 through 28. Additionally, several agencies did not follow recommended contracting practices. As a result, many of the resulting contracts relied on vendor-supplied proposals for contract terms and did not include essential protections for the purchasers such as clearly defined performance standards, penalties for nonperformance, and contract-termination clauses. Further, agencies' contract-monitoring efforts appeared limited, as evidenced by most contracts having been paid in full despite our finding that many systems had limited functionality, and some law enforcement agencies expressed dissatisfaction with vendors' system-implementation processes.

Faulty contracting and a lack of monitoring left most agencies with few options for addressing poor vendor or system performance.

► **Only 2 law enforcement agencies' systems demonstrated all 5 emergency communication functions we tested, and 4 did not function sufficiently for us to observe their operation**

As reported in Chapter 3, pages 29 through 32, only 2 of the interoperable communication systems we tested during our observations demonstrated all key functions that law enforcement officials considered most useful during a school emergency. Moreover, 4 law enforcement agencies reported that the systems they had acquired with Fund monies were not working sufficiently to enable us to perform any observations or testing and had not increased their communication capabilities with schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Coconino County Sheriff's Office declined to spend the \$1.25 million it was allocated from the Fund, and those monies have since been reallocated to other agencies.

► **Unrealistic vendor representations of system performance and insufficient infrastructure, training, and upkeep contributed to some agencies' dissatisfaction with their systems and poor functionality**

Unrealistic vendor representations regarding system performance and implementation timelines contributed to some law enforcement agencies' dissatisfaction with the process and with their respective systems, as discussed in Chapter 4, pages 33 through 43. Specifically, connecting public safety agencies and schools to these systems has taken longer than many law enforcement agencies had anticipated, and some reported that their systems were not fully functional across participating schools and public safety agencies in their jurisdictions. Those law enforcement agencies that reported working closely with vendors during the implementation process reported a better understanding of expected timelines and greater satisfaction with system performance. Other factors that contributed to some systems' poor functionality included infrastructure limitations and insufficient system upkeep and training for users.

As of June 2025, some agencies reported that their systems were still not fully functional across participating schools and public safety agencies in their jurisdictions.

► **Law enforcement agencies did not plan for ongoing costs and may abandon systems if ongoing State funding is not available**

Some law enforcement agencies indicated that they considered the interoperable communication systems purchased with Fund monies to be supplemental to existing emergency 911 communication systems, but not essential for their operations. Several agencies, including those that were pleased with their systems and the enhanced communication capabilities they provided, reported that they did not anticipate continuing to operate their systems if State funding is not available to pay for ongoing operating costs. As discussed in Chapter 2, pages 20 through 28, we estimated that an average rural county sheriff's office would need between \$15,828 and \$382,800 annually to pay for licensing, software, and other system costs, depending on which system they had acquired with Fund monies. This indicates that the State-wide annual cost to continue operating these systems could be a multimillion-dollar annual funding commitment.

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## **Key recommendations to the Legislature**

- Consider evaluating and revising, as necessary, A.R.S. §41-1733 to clarify whether nonpublic schools may participate in systems purchased with Fund monies.
- Consider evaluating and revising, as necessary, A.R.S. §41-1733 to clarify system requirements such as those relating to communication capabilities for all users, access controls, compatibility with existing equipment, and federal certification and connectivity.

## Key recommendations to law enforcement agencies that received Fund monies

- ▶ Comply with A.R.S. §41-1733 by establishing procedures to ensure that ongoing interoperable communication system costs, such as licensing fees, for any nonpublic schools are not paid with Fund monies and reporting all Fund expenditures for the preceding fiscal year to the Joint Legislative Budget Committee (JLBC) by November 1 each year.
- ▶ Follow applicable procurement requirements for any future expenditures of Fund monies; ensure that any contracts, addendums, or extensions that involve the use of Fund monies follow recommended practices for contracting; and establish and implement a process to monitor contracts.
- ▶ Evaluate the implementation status and functionality of their respective interoperable communication systems and work with vendors, as applicable, to resolve functional deficiencies; and establish a process for routinely testing system functions.
- ▶ Develop a detailed cost estimate for ongoing system operational costs and a plan to address ongoing interoperable communication funding needs, including actions that will be taken if the State does not provide further funding for existing interoperable communication systems, and provide the cost estimate and plan to their respective governing bodies, the Legislature, and the Governor.