Information Management Issues in an EOC

During any activation, the most critical function performed at an EOC is information management. Planning, coordinating, requesting resources, documenting operations, keeping decision makers informed and other activities all rely on an accurate understanding of the situation, and that understanding can only be achieved if the right information is collected, analyzed, and understood.

In fact, during emergencies or disasters, emergency mangers could really be called information managers, since the primary function of the EOC is to develop and share an accurate common operational picture (COP).

To create an accurate COP, every EOC needs an effective information management system which can collect information from a variety of sources, ensure that it gets to the right persons in the EOC, document vital information, and analyze and display critical information is user-friendly ways. An efficient information management system will enable emergency managers to quickly determine the geographic scope of the incident, identify any injuries or damage, understand the potential impact on critical infrastructure, estimate the need for evacuation or sheltering, and identify the need for additional resources.

But efficiently processing incoming information takes time and planning. While technology can help in collecting, sorting, and displaying information, the increasing use of communications technologies can significantly increase the amount of information that flows into an EOC. Having too much information can prevent careful analysis of data and can make it harder to recognize critical information.

Here are ten things to keep in mind while designing and implementing an information management system for your EOC.

1. **The first reports of any disaster or emergency will probably be wrong**. Keep in mind that responders will need some time to accurately assess the situation. Do not pass early information to policymakers, other agencies, or the public without emphasizing that this data is preliminary and has not been confirmed.

2. **You need an information management plan**. Managing the flood of incoming information is a complex and challenging task that is the foundation for everything else that goes on in the EOC. You aren't going to be able to manage the flow unless you have planned and prepared to do so. At a minimum you need to know what specific information you need, who can provide it, how often you need it, how you can contact them 24/7, how it will be provided, who in the EOC will be responsible for obtaining the information, how it can be confirmed, who will analyze it, how it will be displayed, and how it will be shared. Your information management plan, whether it is an appendix to an existing plan (EOP, EOC Operations Plan, etc.) or is organized as a stand-alone plan, should be shared with every agency that has a role in providing or receiving information from the EOC.

3. **Frequently exercise and update your information management plan**. Because information management is critical to everything that is done in the EOC, it is especially important to ensure that your information management plan is up-to-date and that everyone who will use it is prepared to do so. Special care must be taken to keep contact information for various associated agencies current.

4. **You need a way to display critical information in real time**. Everyone in the EOC should be able to access the current situation at any time. The EOC manager especially needs to have immediate access to the latest reports from the Incident Commander, responding agencies, supporting agencies, and other information sources. Accurate injury and fatality information, critical infrastructure status, transportation system impacts, hospital capacity status, and shelter status are among the critical information items that should be updated and displayed in real time. Information can be displayed on an automated information system dashboard, on whiteboards, on wall-mounted monitors, on projection screens, or on specially designed status boards.

5. **Reduce the number of ways information can be transmitted to the EOC**. As much as possible, develop information processes that reduce the ways information can be transmitted to the EOC. The fewer information channels you have to monitor, the more effective your information management system will be. Identify preferred channels for information sharing with supporting agencies. Possible channels include shared incident management systems (WebEOC, etc.), designated chat rooms, designated e-mail addresses, and special telephone numbers. Planning for critical information to be transmitted to the EOC through a small number of pre-designated channels can

6. **Limit the amount of information that is transmitted to the EOC**. Determine the type and amount of information you need from the various reporting agencies and ask them to report only the details that you need. If possible, ask them to report summarized information rather than raw data. Limiting the amount of incoming information that EOC staff members need to evaluate will make their jobs easier. If you need additional details, you can always reach back to the reporting agencies.

7. **Push out critical information. Don't wait for someone to ask**. Be proactive, push out significant information rather than waiting for other agencies to request it. Keep policy-makers and any agencies that are providing resources fully informed of the current situation. Keep in mind that decision-makers need to understand emerging patterns rather than extreme details.

8. **Assign a team or a capable individual to maintain the Common Operational Picture (COP).** Their main duties will be to collect, evaluate, analyze and consolidate information into an accurate and coherent picture of the current situation. The team should have no other significant responsibilities, so they can respond quickly to changes in the situation.

9. **Plan for untrained personnel in your EOC**. Expect that some people in your EOC from supporting agencies will be unfamiliar with EOC processes and have a plan to provide immediate assistance to help them understand their role and the EOC information processes. No matter how often you exercise your EOC support staff, some agencies will be forced to send untrained personnel to the EOC because trained are unavailable. If possible, assign an EOC staff member to assist supporting agency representatives who are having trouble.

10. **Prepare a briefing template for briefing senior policymakers and other agencies**. Prepare a briefing template to speed the process of preparing and presenting short-notice briefings to decision-makers and resource providers. Identify the most critical items of information that decision-makers need and be prepared to present it at any time upon request.

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