

Section 4: What Happens When Called

TOPIC 20:

The Incident Command System

Objectives

Welcome to Topic 20.

Following completion of this Learning Topic, you will understand the Incident Command System (ICS) concept and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and how they are used to coordinate and unify multiple agencies during emergencies.

Student Preparation required:

FEMA Course IS-100b, Introduction to the Incident Command System.
FEMA Course IS-700b, National Incident Management Systems

Introduction

In the early 1970s, a disorganized and ineffective multi-partner response to a series of major wildfires in southern California prompted municipal, county, state and federal fire authorities to form an organization known as Firefighting Resources of California Organized for Potential Emergencies (FIRESCOPE). California authorities had found that a lack of coordination and cooperation between the various responding agencies resulted in overlapping efforts, and gaps in the overall response. Many specific problems involving multi-partner responses were identified by FIRESCOPE. These included poor overall organization, ineffective communication between agencies, lack of accountability, and the lack of a single, universal, and well-defined command structure.

Their efforts to address these difficulties resulted in the development of the original Incident Command System. Although developed for wild fires, the system ultimately evolved into an “all-risk” system, appropriate for all types of fire and non-fire emergencies.

There are other versions of the ICS in use, but the Incident Command System (ICS), as developed by the National Fire Academy (NFA), has been widely recognized as a model tool for the command, control, and coordination of resources and personnel at the scene of an emergency and is used by most fire, police, and other agencies around the country. The use of the ICS is now required by various federal laws for all hazardous material incidents, and in other situations by many state and local laws. The ICS has also been adopted for use in many other countries.

Looking at a larger scale, the success of the ICS also led to development of protocols that would guide whole regions of the country, including non-government responders. This became NIMS — the National Incident Management System.

NIMS

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) provides a systematic, proactive approach to guide departments and agencies at all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector to work seamlessly to prevent, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the effects of incidents, regardless of cause, size, location, or complexity, in order to reduce the loss of life and property and harm to the environment.

NIMS works hand in hand with the National Response Framework (NRF). NIMS provides the template for the management of incidents, while the NRF provides the structure and mechanisms for national-level policy for incident management.

The ICS

The Incident Command System is a management tool designed to bring multiple responding agencies, including those from different jurisdictions, together under a single overall command structure. Before the use of the ICS became commonplace, various agencies responding to a disaster often fought for control, duplicated efforts, missed critical needs, and generally reduced the potential effectiveness of the response. Under ICS, each partner recognizes one “lead” coordinating partner and that person will handle one or more tasks that are part of a single overall plan and interact with other agencies in defined ways.

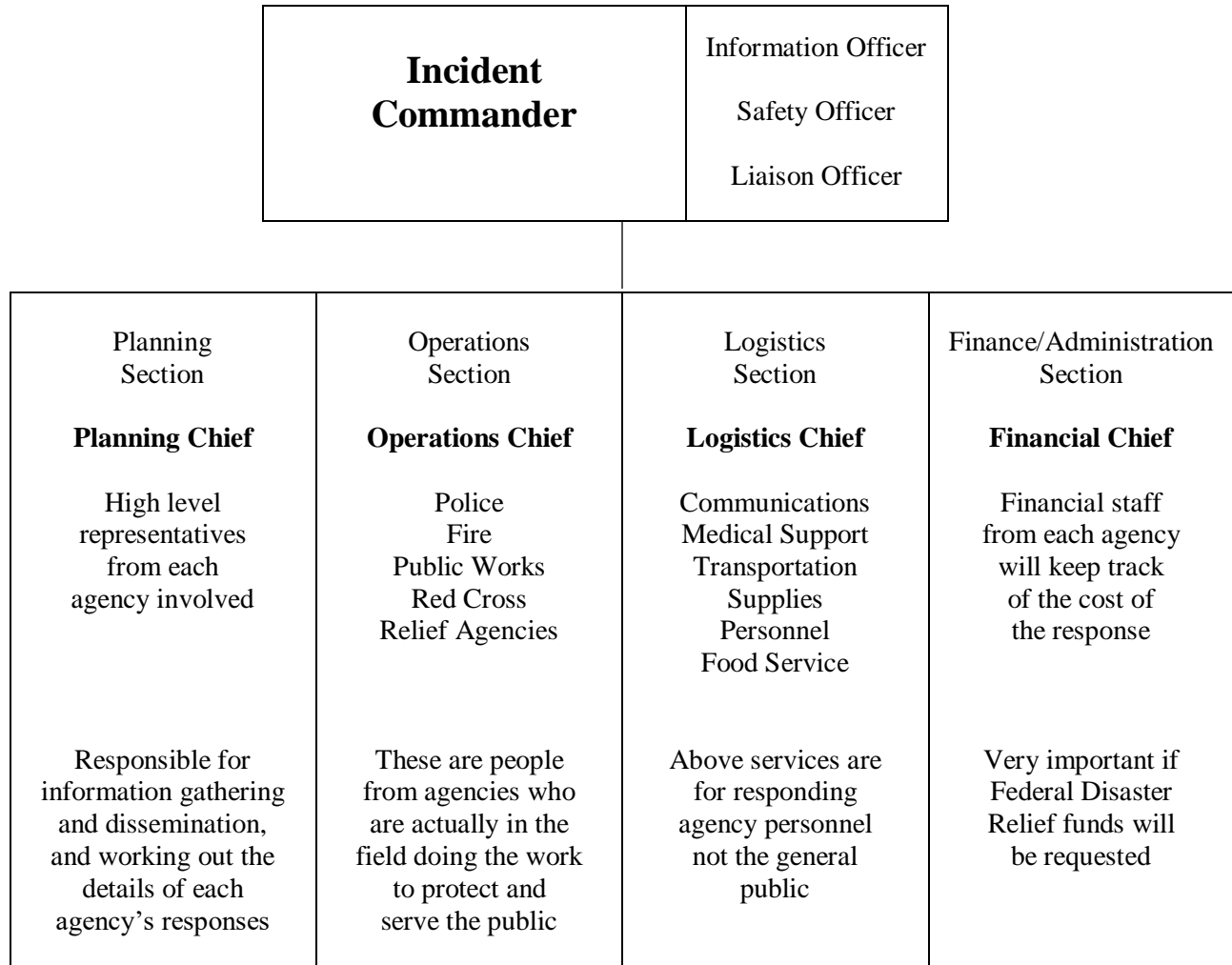
The Incident Command System is based upon simple and proven business management principles. In a business or government partner, managers and leaders perform the basic daily tasks of planning, directing, organizing, coordinating, communicating, delegating and evaluating. The same is true for the Incident Command System, but the responsibilities are often shared among several agencies. These tasks, or functional areas as they are known in the ICS, are performed under the overall direction of a single Incident Commander (IC) in a coordinated manner, even with multiple agencies and across jurisdictional lines. The ICS also features common terminology, scalability of structure and clear lines of authority.

What the ICS is Not

Many people who have not studied the full details of the Incident Command System have a variety of erroneous perceptions about what the system means to them and their agencies. To set the record straight, the Incident Command System is not:

- A fixed and unchangeable system for managing an incident.
- A means to take control or authority away from agencies or departments that participate in the response.
- A way to subvert the normal chain of command within a department or partner.

- Always managed by the fire department or the first partner to arrive on-scene.
- Too big and cumbersome to be used in small, everyday events.
- Restricted to use by government agencies and departments.



The ICS Structure

The Incident Command System has two interrelated parts. They are **management by objectives** and the **organizational structure**.

Management by Objectives

Four essential steps are used in developing the response to every incident, regardless of size or complexity:

- Understand the policies, procedures and statutes that affect the official response.
- Establish incident objectives (the desired outcome of the agencies' efforts).
- Select appropriate strategies for cooperation and resource utilization.
- Apply tactics most likely to accomplish objectives (assign the correct resources and monitor the results).

The complexity of the incident will determine how formally the “management by objectives” portion will be handled. If the incident is small and uncomplicated, the process can be handled by oral communication between appropriate people. As the incident and response become more complex, differences between the individual agencies' or departments' goals, objectives, and methods will need to be resolved in writing.

Organizational Structure

The ICS supports the creation of a flexible organizational structure that can be modified to meet changing conditions. Under the ICS, the one person in charge is always called the “Incident Commander” (IC). In large responses, the IC may have a “Command Staff” consisting of the Information, Safety and Liaison Officers. In a smaller incident, the IC may also handle one, two or all three of these positions, if they are needed at all.

Various other tasks within the ICS are subdivided into four major operating sections: Planning, Operations, Logistics and Finance/ Administration. Each operating section has its own “chief,” and may have various branches or units working on specific goals. The Logistics section handles the coordination of all inter-partner communication infrastructures involved in the response, including Amateur Radio when it is used in that capacity.

These operating sections may be scaled up or down, depending on the needs of the situation. In a small, single partner response, the IC may handle many or all functions. As the size and complexity of a response increase, and as other agencies become involved, the various tasks can be re-assigned and sub-divided. For instance, if the only responding partner is the fire department, communications will be handled according to existing department policies. If the incident expands, more agencies become involved, and other communication assets are required, a Logistics Chief may handle communication decisions along with other tasks, or assign the job to a “communication unit leader” directly or through a service branch director as his own workload increases.

The Incident Commander

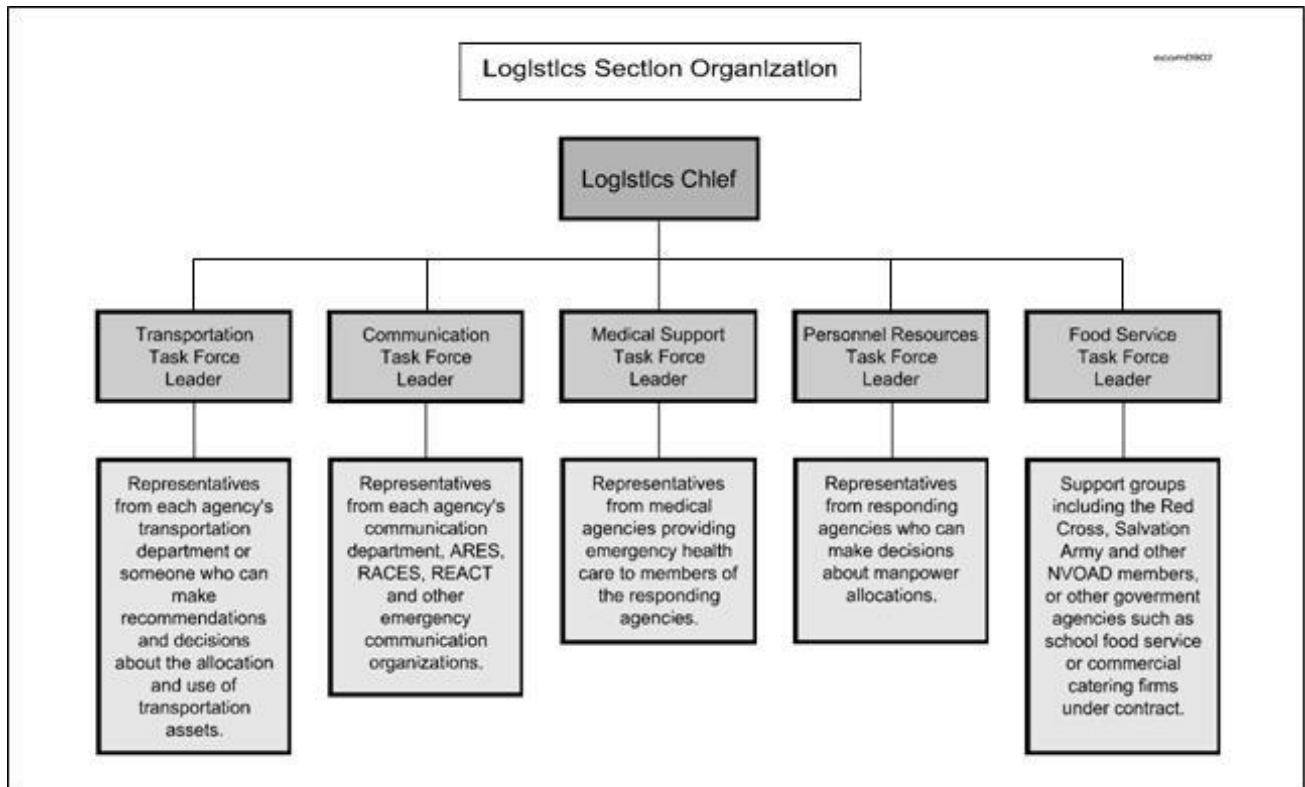
The initial IC is usually the most senior on scene officer from the first responding partner. The IC is responsible for the management of the incident and starts the process by helping to set initial incident objectives, followed by an “Incident Action Plan” (IAP). In a small incident, the IC may perform all the ICS functions without aid, but in a larger incident, he or she will usually

delegate responsibilities to others. The IC still has overall responsibility for the incident, regardless of any duties delegated.

The persons filling certain ICS positions may change several times during an incident as the needs of the response change. For instance, in the early stages of a hazardous materials spill, the Incident Commander may be a fire department officer. As the Coast Guard or other federal partner arrives to begin cleanup efforts, one of their officers will become the Incident Commander.

How an Emergency Communications Group Fits Into the ICS

Involvement in any incident where ICS is used is by “invitation only” — there is no role for off-the-street volunteers. The relationship of an emergency communications group to the ICS structure will vary with the specific situation. If your group is providing internal communication support to only one responding partner and has no need to communicate with other agencies that are part of the ICS, you may not have any part in the ICS structure itself except through your partners. If your group is tasked with handling inter-partner communications, or serves more than one partner’s internal communication needs, it is likely your group will have a representative on the Logistics Section’s “communication unit.” In certain situations, an emergency communications group might serve one or more agencies simultaneously. As the responsibility for managing the incident shifts from one partner to another, the Emergency communications group’s mission may shift to assisting the new lead partner, or simply end. In some cases, your group might begin by supporting your own partners, and end up supporting a new and unfamiliar partner. The choice of whether to use your emergency communications group’s services may be made by the partners, Communication Unit Leader, Service Branch Director, Logistics Chief, or Incident Commander, depending on the specific situation and the degree of ICS structure in use.



Reference Links

Incident Command System courses

<https://training.fema.gov/nims/>

NIMS

www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nims/NIMS_core.pdf

National Response Framework

www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nrf/nrf-core.pdf

Review

The ICS is a management tool that preserves the command structure of each responding partner, while bringing them all together under a common plan and leader. Emergency communications groups often operate as part of the Logistics section of the ICS. If the emergency communications group serves the internal communication needs of only one partner, it may not be a formal part of the ICS structure.