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Emergency Support Functions

Misunderstood and misapplied

One of the mistaken assumptions I encounter frequently when reviewing emergency plans is the belief that plans must mirror the *National Response Framework* and that the emergency support function (ESF) concept must be included in the plan.

However, there is no mandate to do this. The National Incident Management System (NIMS), for example, merely requires that emergency management/response personnel be familiar with the *National Response Framework*. *CPG 101 Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans* lists the ESF format as just one of three example formats.

If in fact there is no specific mandate to use the ESF concept, what utility does it offer the local jurisdiction? Should it be used, and if so, how should it be used?

Historical perspective

It is important to remember that the ESF concept was developed primarily as a federal response mechanism and independently of the Incident Command System (ICS). The ESF

concept had its start in FEMA region IX in the late 80's as a planning concept for federal earthquake response and was eventually made part of the *National Plan for Federal Response to a Catastrophic Earthquake*. Eventually, the concept was incorporated in the *Federal Response Plan* and later in the *National Response Framework*.

What this means is that the ESF concept was integrated into federal response planning with no empirical evidence that it actually worked. Further, once accepted as a response mechanism, it was never questioned.

It's possible the FEMA planners were not even aware of ICS. Although it had been around since the 70's, ICS was viewed as a firefighting mechanism. In fact, attempts to integrate ICS concepts into FEMA operations in the early 90s were met with considerable resistance. Ultimately, the two systems were merged in the uneasy partnership that is now part of the *National Response Framework*.

For all that, however, the ESF concept has worked well for federal agencies and has proven itself in a number of disasters. However, does it truly work for local jurisdictions?

Issues at local level

Problems with the ESF concept begin to occur when we attempt to operationalize it at the local level. The fact that the ESF concept and ICS are two separate response mechanisms creates problems with integration. There is a tendency to equate specific ESF's with ICS branches and units which works on paper but not in reality. For example, many ICS organizational charts assign ESF 6 Transportation as the equivalent of the Transportation Unit under the Logistics Section. However, this ignores the fact that the true mission of ESF 6 is not just to provide transportation but to restore transportation infrastructure.

Another common issue at the local level revolves around the composition of an ESF. ESF's are composed of a single primary agency and multiple support agencies, not all of whom may be required in every disaster. However, the number of agencies involved and the duplication required when agencies support multiple ESF's exceed the capacity of the EOC and available staffing, at least on paper.

The result is that in actual EOC operations we revert to the traditional role of agency liaisons. This is evident even in the Federal Joint Field office where ESF's are staffed by only their primary agencies and those same agency representatives support other ESF's.

What this suggests is that within an EOC organizational structures identified in the emergency operations plan may not truly exist. Instead the organization defaults to the traditional method of agency representatives creating ad hoc solutions to operational problems. The same argument could be made by the way, for many complicated ICS organizational charts.

A valuable planning tool

One area where the ESF concept truly makes sense is in pre-disaster planning. The concept formalizes a method that is been in use for as long as emergency management has been around. Our plans are built around the idea that we can identify specific tasks, identify responsibility for those tasks, and provide resources to accomplish those tasks.

Traditionally, the development of supporting plans has been largely ad hoc. Agencies are assigned responsibilities in the emergency plan, usually in the form of the table, but generally do little within their own agency plans to plan for these responsibilities. Where planning is done, it is frequently not coordinated with the efforts of other agencies. Funding for planning activities is usually cited as an excuse for limited planning.

What the ESF concept does is provide a mechanism to formalize this arrangement. It creates a working group for the response function and clearly identifies the expectations for the working group to provide solutions and subject matter expertise in relation to the function. The ESF documentation included in the emergency operations plan becomes a blueprint for the development of supporting plans and procedures.

The ESF concept is not inherently bad nor does it truly change how we have always done business. However, at the local level its true value is as part of a formal planning process not as part of operational response. Viewed in this light, the ESF concept does not require a major rewrite of plans or rethinking of ICS. Instead, it can provide truly effective pre-disaster planning and necessary subject matter expertise during an operation. 