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Staffing Your EOC

Five Important Considerations

In reviewing emergency plans and programs, I've note that while every plan includes provision for an emergency operations center, few plans demonstrate any real thought behind EOC staffing. The assumption appears to be that EOC staffing will mirror the organizational structure described in the plan. While this may be true for some organizations, for most it is an unrealistic assumption.

There are several reasons for this. The organization chart included in many plans represents an ideal. It describes relationships and responsibilities rather than actual staffing. Full staffing of all the positions described in these organizational charts would most likely exceed available personnel resources.

To develop efficient EOC staffing levels, we need to consider several key factors that can affect EOC operations. The following are some of the questions I ask in helping clients develop EOC staffing levels.

1. What is your EOC's primary function?

Not all EOCs perform the same function. For some jurisdictions, the EOC serves as an area command post, directing the activities of subordinate

commands. In others, the EOC is a point of interagency coordination, providing support to field operations.

The key here is to decide where decisions are made. Senior officials and department heads are used to working directly with principal executives and are sometimes reluctant to work through or at the EOC. The "policy group" included in many plans may not formally meet and the EOC may be excluded from key decisions. In these circumstances, assuming the EOC will have an executive rather than a supporting role can lead to conflict.

2. How will you organize your staff?

If we look at the organizational chart in most plans, we see a number of sections and branches consistent with the Incident Command System or the Emergency Support Function system and requiring multiple agency representatives to fill all the positions.

For example, the police or security function may support multiple branches such as sheltering, logistics, transportation, and medical. But these are supporting relationships, not physical positions. There may, in actual practice, be only a single agency representative present in the EOC.

Rather than trying to fill an unrealistic organization chart, your focus should be on functions. The five ICS functions (command, plans, operations, logistics, and finance/admin) are a starting point but how you address them and other key functions should be based on need and on how your organization deals with crisis on a regular basis. The closer your emergency organization is to your day-to-day response organization, the more effective your ability to deal with crisis.

3. How will you expand your operations?

Your EOC is too small for a major crisis. I do not need to see it and it does not matter how big it is, it will be too small. My EOC in San Francisco was designed for around sixty. Our fully staffed shelter branch alone was around fifty. To deal with the current pandemic, San Francisco has taken over a civic auditorium to house an expanded staff of over 400.

While the pandemic is unusual, the large influx of personnel in a major disaster is not. Supporting state and federal agencies, non-profit liaisons, volunteer groups – the list of agencies and representatives seeking access to the EOC during a major event increases with the size of the crisis. Your staffing plans should include the ability to shift quickly to an alternate site to accommodate this influx.

4. How will you logistically support your EOC?

Most plans focus solely on operational issues. This is understandable but it ignores the administrative and logistical support required to keep the EOC functioning.

Many EOCs are treated like office buildings; support like cleaning and garbage disposal are

handled at night by janitorial crews. How will you deal with this when you are running 24-hour shifts? How will you cope with increased security issues such as parking, badge issue, and access control? Will you provide feeding for staff? These are just a few of the issues that sustained operations can generate.

Very few plans address the need for EOC logistical support. The assumption in many cases is that this will fall to the logistics branch. However, this branch deals with operational support and is not equipped to provide support to the EOC. This suggests that there is a need for a small unit that is dedicated to EOC support and has access to things such as standing contracts, purchase orders, and vendor lists. This is an often-neglected part of EOC staffing.

5. How will you document your EOC staffing?

There is considerable work involved in developing an effective EOC staff. However, to be truly effective, it needs to be captured and shared. I usually recommend against including all this detail in the emergency operations plan. Instead, consider an EOC manual or handout intended for the user that includes basic information needed to use the EOC systems. I suggest supplementing this with a manual for EOC logistics personnel that includes information to support EOC operations, such information on critical systems, emergency procedures, equipment stockage lists, vendor lists, and so forth.

Developing an efficient EOC staff is not as simple as it seems and requires a combination of strategic thinking and operational planning. However, the payoff is a more effective team, better support, and reduced confusion in a crisis. 