

Basics of ICS

Introduction

There has been considerable debate about the new requirements for ICS certification for all personnel responding to emergencies. Some of the comments I have seen are of the theme of “why should I have to learn yet another thing I will never need to actually use?” ICS is being mandated due to failures of emergency responses in the past such as 9/11, Katrina, etc.

The History of ICS

ICS is a direct derivative of FIRESCOPE (Firefighting Resources of California Organized for Potential Emergencies). FIRESCOPE came about after a series of devastating wildfires in California in 1970 caused destruction of property and loss of life, including firefighters. The resulting investigation revealed that a contributing factor as to the severity of the event was the lack of a unified command structure. This caused a disorganized response to the fires. The State of California had the resources to combat the fires, but with no unified command structure, they could not be used to the fullest extent. If you have ever seen a wildfire in Southern California, you will know two facts. One, a brush fire can go from only one acre to a huge fire threatening life and property in an astonishingly short time frame. Two, the sheer size of a brush fire mandates a multi jurisdictional response, which was a root cause to the lack of a unified command structure in the 1970 wildfires.

Why ICS?

When you first see an ICS organization chart, you are intimidated by the number of positions that appear to be necessary to have an ICS. Actually, one of the benefits of ICS is that you only need to fill the positions that are necessary for the response. For instance, ICS can be used on both a dumpster fire in which a pumper truck is dispatched, and a series of wildfires threatening Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, and Ventura Counties simultaneously. For the dumpster fire, all you need is the Incident Commander (the Captain or Lieutenant of the pumper) and the Operations Section (the pumper and the rest of the crew). For the wide scale fire emergency, you would implement the entire ICS structure. ICS can also be scaled up or down in response to the incident. A California wildfire can go from one manageable by a single pumper truck and handlines to a multi jurisdictional event requiring not only pumpers but also bulldozers (for firebreaks) and air assets and law enforcement (for traffic management and evacuations) very quickly. ICS also requires common terminology so all responders know what each other is saying. Another benefit of ICS is a clear command structure -- everybody knows who the superiors and subordinates are. This also eliminates conflicting orders. Of course, the big reason is it is mandated by Federal law. Not only is ICS mandated by DHS, it is also mandated by OSHA and the SARA (Superfund Appropriations and Reauthorization Act of 1986).

Why do we need to learn ICS?

Since one of the tenets of ICS is the common terminology, all responders within ICS must know what the common terms are. The reason that all firefighters (paid and volunteer) must learn ICS is that the first-in company will by definition assume command of the incident. For all responders, this standardization means that they (and us) know where to go to for whatever need. If we need an incident map, there is one part of ICS dedicated to maps. If we need a copy of the Incident Action Plan, there is another part of ICS dedicated to the documentation. If we need to supply food and potable water to responders, there is yet another part of ICS dedicated to this task.

Basic Tenets of ICS

By definition, ICS requires an Incident Commander, who is the final authority in the Incident Command. All personnel involved in the incident report either directly or indirectly to the Incident Commander and there is a clear Chain of Command in all Incident Commands. This means that all orders and other information pass in an orderly manner from the individual responder to the Incident Commander and vice-versa. Another tenet is Span of Control. Span of Control is how many subordinates are under each manager. Span of Control ranges from 3 to 7 with 5 being optimal and it is determined by complexity of the task, geographic range of the responders, etc. Span of Control prevents a manager from either overwhelmed or underwhelmed, which leads to too many personnel being tied up by managerial tasks rather than response tasks. People work the worst when under either sheer boredom or sheer terror. Another tenet of ICS is Unity of Command. Unity of Command means you receive orders from one, and only one, superior. Unity of Command prevents conflicting orders which destroy the cohesiveness of a response. For instance, you are providing communications support (which is under the Logistics Section of ICS) to an engine company (under the Operations Section) that is staged outside a HazMat hot zone. The wind shifts so that the engine company is now in danger from the HazMat and the superior to the engine company tells them and you to get clear of the situation while your boss in the Logistics section tells you to stay put. Which orders do you follow? Personally, I would be jumping in the fire engine and getting out of Dodge, but the cohesiveness of the response has just been impacted. At worst, conflicting orders cause a person to freeze up which is very bad in an emergency response. Another tenet is Management by Objectives. This means that an Incident Commander prepares either personally or via a subordinate the Incident Action Plan which includes what is to be done. This IAP is communicated to the entire ICS and everybody involved knows what is to be done this operational period.

This presentation is based on the FEMA ICS-100 on-line course.

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