

CITYGATE ASSOCIATES, LLC

■ FOLSOM (SACRAMENTO), CA

MANAGEMENT CONSULTANTS ■

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF

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Dear Public Sector Manager:

Citygate Associates, LLC, founded in 1990, is dedicated exclusively to providing assessment and improvement services for public sector agencies.

Citygate's Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Services practice area conducts Standards of Cover (SOC) analyses, deployment and station location analyses, performance audits, organizational studies, consolidation feasibility analyses, staffing studies, GIS, and strategic and master plans for cities, counties, and fire protection districts throughout the United States. Additionally, Citygate has expertise in the development and implementation of training programs for emergency operations and the fire service.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, much has been said and written about emergency preparedness. On the following pages, we present a reprint of an article written by one of Citygate's Senior Associates addressing training for Emergency Operations Center staff.

If you would like more information on how Citygate might structure a training program for your organization, please feel free to contact me by phone at (916) 458-5100, extension 101 or by email at dderoos@citygateassociates.com. For more detailed information on Citygate's services, you may also visit our web site at www.citygateassociates.com. This web page offers a list of former clients in addition to a description of our services, our corporate partners, links to publications, and video clips of our Final Report presentations to elected officials.

Sincerely

David C. DeRoos, MPA, CMC
President

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF

BY WILLIAM SAGER, SENIOR ASSOCIATE

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When a disaster strikes a community and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is activated, non-emergency personnel fill some key positions. Librarians, finance officers, park maintenance personnel and custodians, just to name a few, are included in the list. For the purposes of this article, the term “generalist” is used to describe these participants. Much like the militia of American history when farmers and silversmiths dropped the tools of their trade to take up arms, this modern militia stands ready to drop their regular assignments to work alongside the regular army of firefighters, paramedics and police officers. Like firefighters, the generalists also want to be perform well.

This modern militia needs proper training to successfully perform their vital tasks. The training needed by this group covers many areas that are second nature to firefighters, such as what to do with their families during a disaster, how to behave in the emergency operations center and what is expected of them in the emergency environment. They also have individual training needs such as their specific assignments and their working relationships with other components of the emergency organization.

Most often, these people are assigned to supporting roles in the EOC such as logistics and finance, although public works personnel often have operational assignments. They bring to the EOC lots of talent from their regular assignments. Their general enthusiasm and natural intelligence makes them top performers in the EOC.

FAMILY FIRST

Firefighters have generally prepared their families for the inevitable times that they are held on duty, sent to a disaster scene or in other ways have their lives inconvenienced. Generalists usually come to work with the expectation that they will go home at the end of the day unless they have an evening meeting or other activity that they can be planned in advance. To be activated during the day when the children are in school or at night when all are asleep is a big disruption in any family’s routine, especially if there is no plan in place to care for that eventuality.

Because an emergency is such a rare event for generalists, they need to have a more formalized plan in place to ensure that their families are secure. Among their concerns are childcare and elder parent or relative care, care for their pets and security of their homes. They also need to plan in case the family is evacuated and the employee member of the family cannot be there to assist. Many families are single parent families or both spouses work outside the home. This adds the complication of picking up the children after school. They need a central information point to inform their families and to be informed about their families’ status. All of these complexities can create an even more stressful situation unless they are managed in advance. For firefighters, this may be prearranged but for this “militia” it is not.

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

By using an Emergency Response Family Plan such as in Figure 1, emergency responders families, firefighters as well as generalists, will be well prepared to deal with that eventuality. Like any plan, it is of no value unless it is current. Reviewing and updating should be done at least twice a year, when people change clocks and service smoke detectors. Also any time the family moves, a child changes schools or a parent changes jobs the plan should be revised and brought up to date.

RESPONDING TO THE CALL

It is second nature for firefighters to note the time, location, radio frequency and other important information when dispatched to an emergency. When a generalist receives a call in the middle of the night to respond to an emergency, knowing what information is critical is not second nature. Not only will they not know what information to capture they will also not likely know what questions to ask before they respond.

Two actions can really help with this. One action is to complete an initial activation checklist containing a list of the critical items an emergency responder needs to record when activated. Figure 2 is the Initial Activation Checklist. Completing this form helps the responder capture essential response information. Most of this information comes from the ICS Field Operations Guide and is second nature to firefighters.

The second action is to conduct response drills with simulated scenarios using the typical alert system used in the jurisdiction. For example, contact generalists by cell phone with a simulated dispatch to the secondary EOC for a major earthquake. Give them only part of the information they need plus some extraneous information about the disaster but unrelated to the assignment. Allow them to use the crib sheet to get all the necessary information. At the end of the drill, go over the essential information with all the participants and allow them to evaluate their own performance. This is a simple drill that does not take a lot of time but can pay off in big dividends.

PLANNING FOR EVENT

Generalists also need to develop a survival kit to take with them to the EOC so that their stay there will be easier. The survival kit is just that – something to see the person through for the first few hours or day of the disaster. It should be kept simple and small. Everyone assigned to a section should have a kit, not just the leader. This builds in redundancy, which is essential for a disaster situation.

The contents of the survival kit are fairly basic and consist of the things most firefighters have readily available. Figure 3 lists the basic components of the EOC Survival Kit. The kit should carry enough essentials for the first few hours. The EOC probably has a kit of basic materials for each section. That works well until the EOC is unreachable or is relocated due to the disaster. Often a disaster also affects the people responsible to abate it. They will need a small stock of materials until the EOC is fully activated.

As employees develop their kits, they should talk with people experienced in EOC operations to find out what works and what does not. They should take their kits with them to EOC exercises to ensure that they really work. Finally, the EOC survival kit should also be checked when the clocks are changed. This is also a good time to replace summer clothing in the kit with winter clothing and vice-versa.

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

FOLLOW THE RULES

Many people are a little uncomfortable in the EOC, even first responders. It is rarely activated and many participants are unsure of the expectations. EOC participants are expected to be competent in their individual assignments even though they seldom use those skills. They also behave according to unfamiliar norms. The EOC behavior conventions are as follows:

Be on time to everything; in fact arriving a little early is helpful. Arriving just five minutes late for a critical briefing at an incident involving 500 emergency workers can result in over forty hours of lost work time. Lateness is the first sign that discipline is suffering and no incident can tolerate sloppy discipline.

Attend meetings as required. Emergency operations stretching over a long period involve many meetings and briefings. These meetings call for the intelligent contribution of all those expected to attend. Attendees are to be prepared so that it goes quickly and efficiently. Know the times of the meetings and briefings. For example, the planning meeting involves all the command and general staff. This is the most critical meeting in the operational period. Attendees need to be able to articulate those issues that are their responsibility and that affect the planning cycle. They also must be able to respond quickly and correctly to issues others raise at the meeting. Briefings are just that, brief. Only bring up issues not contained in the plan that have a serious impact on operations. Discuss this with the Planning Section chief prior to the briefing.

Staff the assignment. There is an old saying, "If everyone does their own job, no one has to work too hard." Sometimes it is impossible to get every essential position filled for proper functioning. That is when the second old saying comes to play, "If it was easy, anyone could do it." Section chiefs should do everything in their power to staff their functions effectively.

If it is not written it did not happen. That was already stated in the Emergency Response Checklist, but it bears repeating. Use the Unit Log (ICS 214) to record significant actions. Carry a notebook at all times to record events and to jot down ideas and inspirations. Be sure to always note the date and time. Remember that anything written in the notebook is discoverable in a legal proceeding.

Visit during breaks and meals. The EOC is a business office of the highest order and the place where important business of the people is occurring. Often this business involves real life and death decisions. There can be a lot of dead time separated by moments of panic. The dead time may seem like an opportune time to visit. Use it productively to maintain the unit log, ensure that the workspace is neat and take care of the little things that often are neglected.

Eat and take breaks outside the EOC. A well-organized EOC will have an area outside and close by set up for meals and breaks. This is where casual conversation should take place.

Speak in a low voice. Nothing can raise the level of tension and excitement faster than a loud voice. The EOC should be the island of calm in the sea of confusion. Decisions in the EOC are very critical; they need to be made in a calm deliberate manner. At the same time, people are trying to hear telephone conversations and radio traffic; loud noise makes that impossible.

A disaster is no joke. Nor is it the time or place for jokes. Often there are people either visiting or working in the EOC who have lost property or loved ones, and persons working in the EOC must be sensitive to these situations.

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

Have an activation plan. While that has already been partly covered in this article with the Emergency Response Family Plan and the Emergency Response Checklist, the activation plan includes other times as well. The final part of this article will cover that in some detail.

Know your common responsibilities. The Field Operations Guide¹ lists all the Common Responsibilities for all personnel assigned to emergency incidents as well as the responsibilities of Unit Leaders (and higher). EOC participants need to be very familiar with these responsibilities and take them seriously. There is an expectation among all participants that each person will do their part.

THE ACTIVATION PLAN

Figure 4 is a handy checklist that forms the core of the Activation Plan. Some of the items on this checklist have already been discussed in this article and some are self-explanatory. A few of the items require additional discussion and clarification.

Begin the Unit Log (ICS 214) with initial activation. The unit log is the source document for disaster specialists, historians, lawyers, FEMA and anyone else with an interest in the disaster. There is a tendency to shortchange the unit log as the pace of the incident increases and staff becomes busy. At that point, it is doubly important to keep the log current. It does not have to be a work of literature or calligraphy, simple statements of fact with the time notated is adequate. A complete log with short accurate statements is infinitely more valuable than long excuses for not having a log after the disaster is stabilized.

Establish contact with EOC as soon after the activation as possible. This lets the EOC know positively that the activation message was properly received. It also is an opportunity for the responder to receive up to date information and any change in orders.

Direct section staff to assess and report on problems, resources, shortfalls, needs and options. It is critical that everyone up and down the chain of command be armed with as much information, “good news as well as bad news,” as possible. In emergency situations, decisions will always be made without full intelligence concerning the incident; however, the more informed the command structure is, the better the decisions.

Review the position checklist. People should review their position checklists and those of their subordinates at least twice during the operational period. This ensures that critical functions are not being overlooked. Actions on the checklist that are the source of trouble can be identified and dealt with appropriately by the staff.

Ensure that Resources Unit has current status of staff. The resources unit is responsible for tracking all personnel assigned to the EOC. Plans are developed around the information that the resources unit prepares. This is another case where accuracy prevents missteps.

Unit leaders and section chiefs maintain accountability, safety and security measures for staff and resources. Last, but certainly not least, on the activation list is the safety and security of assigned personnel. During disasters, even EOCs can be dangerous places. Often they are within the disaster perimeter and may be in the path of a flood or fire or compromised by earthquake damage or operating without commercial power or direct transportation access. The only foolproof way to assure safety is through an accountability system. The fire service learned that lesson and the other participants in the EOC could benefit from that experience.

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

RETURNING HOME

After the emergency is abated and the EOC is deactivated, participants are demobilized and sent home. In all likelihood, their homes are intact and life goes on as before with an exciting experience to add to their family history.

However, there is also the possibility that the homes of EOC participants were affected by the disaster. In that case, a few guidelines originally developed by FEMA are in order.² Return home only after authorities advise that it is safe to do so. Avoid loose or dangling power lines and report them immediately to the Power Company or fire department. Enter the building with caution. Open windows and doors to ventilate. Check refrigerated foods for spoilage. Take pictures of the damage, both to the house and its contents for insurance claims. Drive only if absolutely necessary and avoid damaged roads and bridges. Use telephone only for emergency calls.

Check for gas leaks. If the odor of gas is detected or a blowing or hissing noise can be heard, open a window and quickly leave the building. Turn off the gas at the outside main valve and call the gas company from a neighbor's home. If the gas is turned off for any reason, a professional must turn it back on. Look for electrical system damage. Sparks or broken or frayed wires or the smell of hot insulation are all indications to turn off the electricity at the main fuse box or circuit breaker. Do not step in water to get to the fuse box or circuit breaker; call an electrician first.

CONCLUSION

Generalists play a useful and important role in the functioning of an EOC. Properly prepared and trained they will perform right alongside the firefighters and other first responders. They will know that their families are safe, that they have the information and training to make correct decisions and they will not do anything to impair the operation of the EOC. Remember the six "P's:" "Proper prior planning prevents poor performance."



William R. Sager, Senior Associate, is a fire services specialist with more than 35 years in the fire service. A retired Naval Officer, he graduated from the University of California with a Bachelor of Science degree in forestry, with a minor in landscape architecture. Mr. Sager's last assignment with CAL FIRE was as the Butte Unit Chief, and the Butte County Fire Chief. He is recipient of the 1991 Executive Fire Officer (EFO) Outstanding Research Award.

Mr. Sager has done course development work for the EFO curriculum and taught at the National Fire Academy, National Interagency Fire Center, the U.S. Coast Guard, and community colleges in California. He regularly lectures and teaches fire management at community colleges and conferences throughout California. He was the editorial consultant for Vision 2020, the Office of State Fire Marshal's new statewide training plan for the California Fire Service. He has authored articles in Fire Engineering, Fire Chief, and Wildfire magazines.

During his career, Mr. Sager participated in numerous personnel and finance projects, including streamlining Worker's Compensation Case Management. He was also a CAL FIRE Type 1 team incident commander and planning section chief on a National Interagency Incident Management Team. He has participated in community wildfire protection planning and worked closely with local fire safe councils on wildfire protection. He is a certified fire chief, and in 2003 he was designated a Chief Fire Officer. Mr. Sager retired from the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection in 2003.

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

Figure 1

Emergency Response Family Plan

Item	Activity	Phone numbers	Notes
Alert	<input type="checkbox"/> Family members alerted to the emergency <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver(s) alerted to the emergency <input type="checkbox"/> School, church, senior center alerted <input type="checkbox"/> Information point alerted <input type="checkbox"/> Vehicles fueled, disaster supplies loaded† <input type="checkbox"/> If emergency shelter needed, establish its location <input type="checkbox"/>		
Action	<input type="checkbox"/> Family members packed, ready to go § <input type="checkbox"/> Medications packed <input type="checkbox"/> Minors have emergency care permission slips signed <input type="checkbox"/> Pets caged, with food supply‡ <input type="checkbox"/> House secured <input type="checkbox"/> Family members all have information point phone number # <input type="checkbox"/> Route of travel to relocation established <input type="checkbox"/> Caregiver (s) enroute to pick up children, elders <input type="checkbox"/> Newspapers, Mail, etc. handled <input type="checkbox"/>		
Response	<input type="checkbox"/> Family members enroute to caregiver(s) via established evacuation route <input type="checkbox"/> Pets enroute to caregiver(s) <input type="checkbox"/> Responder has emergency response kit <input type="checkbox"/>		
Follow-up	<input type="checkbox"/> Family members relocated <input type="checkbox"/> Pets relocated <input type="checkbox"/> Responder providing frequent updates (at least daily) to information point <input type="checkbox"/> Stay tuned to local emergency radio for information. <input type="checkbox"/>		

† Flashlight and extra batteries, portable, battery-operated radio and extra batteries, first aid kit and manual, emergency food and water, non-electric can opener, essential medicines, cash and credit cards, sturdy shoes
 ‡ Pets may not be allowed into emergency shelters for health and space reasons. Contact the local humane society for information on local animal shelters.
 § Teach family members how and when to turn off gas, electricity, and water and which radio station to tune to for emergency information. Teach children how and when to call 9-1-1.
 # Designate an out-of-state relative or friend to serve as the "family contact." After a disaster, it is often easier to call long distance. Make sure everyone in the family knows the name, address, and phone number of the contact person. ³

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

Figure 2

Initial Activation Checklist

- Receive assignment from your agency
 - Job assignment _____
 - Resource order number and request number _____
 - Reporting location _____
 - Reporting time _____
 - Travel instructions including specialized route _____

 - Special communications instructions _____
- Alert family and follow the Emergency Response Family Plan
- Retrieve emergency survival kit
- Check-in at designated check-in location
- Briefing from immediate supervisor
- Acquire and assemble work materials in assigned work space
- As subordinates arrive maintain accountability as to location, safety and welfare
- Organize and brief subordinates
- Know assigned frequencies of the disaster communications system
- Document everything, complete all forms and reports—"If it isn't written it didn't happen."⁴
- Demobilize

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

Figure 3

EOC Survival Kit

Information

Pocket EOC checklist

A map of the community and surrounding area

Telephone list of the personnel assigned to the section and the key leadership people in the community.

An ICS Field Operations Guide

Supplies

Notebook or logbook (steno pads work very well)

Spare pens and pencils

Pocket calculator

A small stock of the ICS forms for use in the section

Identification

Vest/armband or similar EOC position identifier

Official employee identification card

Essential

A complete change of comfortable clothing and underwear; suggest jeans

Seasonal jacket, hat and plastic raincoat

Sturdy comfortable shoes

Trail mix, energy bars, canned juice, nuts, and dried fruit

Tylenol, Pepto-Bismol, personal hygiene items

Flashlight with spare batteries

Optional

Cell phone

Pocket tape recorder

Camera (essential for Finance)

TRAINING FOR THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER STAFF (CONTINUED)

Figure 4

Activation Plan

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Begin unit log (ICS 214) <input type="checkbox"/> Establish contact with EOC <input type="checkbox"/> Check-in at EOC <input type="checkbox"/> Receive briefing from supervisor <input type="checkbox"/> Acquire work materials (section kit) <input type="checkbox"/> Chair section meeting and brief subordinates <input type="checkbox"/> Direct section staff to assess and report on problems, resources, shortfalls, needs and options <input type="checkbox"/> Set reporting procedures <input type="checkbox"/> Begin liaison with other sections <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain unit log <input type="checkbox"/> Review position checklist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Activate family emergency plan <input type="checkbox"/> Tell family destination and contact information <input type="checkbox"/> Take contact list of section personnel <input type="checkbox"/> Take medications, toiletries and clothes (personal kit) <input type="checkbox"/> Mentally review your role and responsibilities <input type="checkbox"/> Take cell phone, pager, radio and/or personal tape recorder <input type="checkbox"/> Note book; note times and first actions <input type="checkbox"/> Other items to remember <hr/> <hr/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Participate in planning meetings, as required <input type="checkbox"/> Determine current status of unit <input type="checkbox"/> Confirm ETA of staff and supplies <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that Resources Unit has current status of staff <input type="checkbox"/> Assign duties, shifts and supervise staff <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain accountability, safety and security measures for staff and resources <input type="checkbox"/> Obtain necessary supplies for unit <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain unit records including unit logs (ICS 214)
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¹ FIREScope. Fire Service Field Operations Guide-ICS 420-1. Sacramento: Incident Command System Publication, January 2001.

² Federal Emergency Management Agency. What Should I Do? Washington, D.C. 2/11/2003 www.fema.gov/hazards/hurricanes/whatshouldido.shtm 5/16/2004

³ What Should I Do?

⁴ Gordon Graham. Lecture presentation on Risk Management. Santa Rosa. 1998.