

# Incident Command System: The History And Need

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## Citation

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## Abstract

The concepts and principles of ICS have been in use throughout the United States, Australia, New Zealand and other countries for about 30 years. The system continues to receive acceptance and is embraced from others who learn and use the system. The Unified Command concepts simply stated is a system whereby no agency or function will divest their authority or responsibility on any incident. All agencies assign to the command or staff roles will share equally in the development of overall objectives and management of the entire incident.

## INTRODUCTION

The complexity of incident management, coupled with the growing need for multi-agency and multifunctional involvement on incidents, has increased the need for a single standard incident management system that can be used by all emergency response disciplines. The medical field, from practitioners to hospitals staff, is no exception.

Factors affecting emergency management and which influence the need for a more efficient and cost-effective incident management system follow. Not all of these apply to every incident but without a great deal of imagination application for many of these is obvious.

- Population growth and spread of urban areas.
- Language and cultural differences.
- More multi-jurisdictional incidents.
- Legal changes mandating standard incident management systems of multi-agency involvement at certain incidents (many states, the U.S. Coast Guard, Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Emergency Management Agency, U.S. Public Health Service, National Fire Protection Association, National Association for Search and Rescue, etc.).
- Shortage of resources at all levels, requiring greater use of mutual aid.
- More complex and inter-related incident situations.

- Greater life property loss risk from natural and human caused technological disasters.
- Sophisticated media coverage demanding immediate answers and emphasizing response effectiveness.
- More frequent cost sharing decisions on incidents.

These factors have accelerated the trend toward more complex incidents. Considering the fiscal and resource constraints of local, state and federal responders, the National Interagency Incident Management System, Incident Command System (NIIMS/ICS) is a logical approach for the delivery of coordinated emergency services to the public.

## DEVELOPMENTAL HISTORY

ICS resulted from the obvious need for a new approach to the problem of managing rapidly moving wildfires in the early 1970's. At that time, emergency managers faced a number of problems, many of these has yet to be universally resolved. These problems include:

- Too many people reporting to one supervisor.
- Different emergency response organizational structures.
- Lack of reliable incident information.
- Inadequate and incompatible communications.
- Lack of structure for coordinated planning between

agencies.

- Unclear lines of authority.
- Terminology differences between agencies
- Unclear or unspecified incident objectives.

Designing a standard emergency management system to remedy the problems listed above took several years and extensive field-testing. ICS was developed by an inter-agency task force through a cooperative local, State and federal effort called FIREScope (Fire Fighting Resources of Southern California Organized for Potential Emergencies). The early developmental process recognized and keyed on several requirements for the system that exist today. These include:

1. The system must be organizationally flexible to meet the needs of incidents of any kind and size.
2. Agencies must be able to use the system on a day-to-day basis for routine situations as well as for major emergencies.
3. The system must be sufficiently standard to allow personnel from a variety of agencies and diverse geographical locations to rapidly meld into a common management structure.
4. The system must be cost-effective.

Initial ICS applications were designed for responding to disastrous wildland fires. It is interesting to note that the characteristics of these wildland fire incidents are similar to those seen in many law enforcement, hazardous materials and other kinds of situations.

**Figure 1**

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| ▪ No advance notice.  | ▪ They develop rapidly.                             |
| ▪ Unchecked, they may grow in size and complexity.            | ▪ Personal risk for response personnel can be high. |
| ▪ Involve several agencies with some on-scene responsibility. | ▪ They can easily become multi-jurisdictional.      |
| ▪ Often have a high public and media visibility.              | ▪ Risk of life and property loss can be high.       |
| ▪ Cost of responses is always a major consideration.          |   |

ICS continues to expand in application from emergency and event planning and execution to increased system users who are learning the many attributes of ICS in work with people from all areas of emergency management.

One of the attributes that has been widely used with ICS is the concept and application of Unified Command. Many fire agencies use Unified Command as a matter of course whenever jurisdictional or functional responsibility may overlap. The Exxon Valdez oil spill prompted the federal passage of the Oil Pollution Control Act of 1990 (OPA-90). This act mandates the use of NIIMS/ICS and goes on to mandate that when a spill occurs, the management of the incident will use a Unified Command that includes the responsible federal official, State or local official and the responsible party. Since the responsible party will be liable for expenses in oil spills, the U.S. Coast Guard, in their drafting of the Bill, felt it essential that the responsible party share in the overall management and expenditure of funds.

Unified Command represents a management system that has proven to be effective and efficient over time. It is a management protocol for coordinating responses to emergency incidents by two or more agencies. It provides guidelines for agencies with different legal, geographic and functional responsibilities to work together effectively in any given situation. There are other helpful applications for the use of Unified Command that do not require any financial expenditures and will lead to enhanced working relationships for all personnel involved in the management of an emergency.

Within the Incident Command System (ICS), all members of the "Unified Command" structure share equally in the overall management of the incident and all personnel assigned must have a clear understanding of ICS. Managers

also need to understand their leadership role under Unified Command. Unified Command is a process that can be implemented by all agencies regardless of jurisdictional or functional responsibilities. The ICS concept follows all the known and established principles of emergency management and does not require new or untried approaches, nor change the way various parts of the actual emergency are handled. The concept is very flexible; there are no hard and fast rules to restrict experienced emergency managers. There are goals, recommendations and procedural guidelines. These assist in establishing a management framework that fits the size and type of emergency and the agencies involved.

All emergencies are different. Each has its own characteristics and problems. The Unified Command concept must be applied in a configuration to meet the needs of any given emergency. Goals and guidelines provide only general information for the assigned managers. Personnel having responsibility for the outcome of the emergency must make specific decisions and take actions that may seem to modify Unified Command.

The goals of Unified Command are to:

- Improve the information flow and interfaces among agencies.
- Develop a single collective approach to the incident regardless of its functional or geographical complexity.
- Ensure that all agencies with responsibility for the management of the incident have an understanding of their organization's goals, policies and restrictions.
- Optimize the efforts of all agencies as they perform their respective missions.
- Reduce or eliminate duplicated efforts.

Some basic guidelines to help accomplish these goals are:

- Learning the Incident Command System (ICS). It has tremendous adaptability and flexibility in emergency management and is highly accepted by many US emergency management agencies.
- Collocate and establish an on-site Command Post and other required facilities where all agencies can work together. Doing so will avoid the problems

created by separate command, planning and logistical activities.

- Start early in the implementation of Unified Command. Getting together early and staying together aids in the development of an incident by improving information flows, sharing intelligence and individual agency decision making. By starting early there will be a smoother transition to a more complex incident if the need arises.

There are several aspects of ICS that lend themselves to the uniformity essential in the effective management of an incident. All participants will use the same terminology and organizational structure. When they work together on an emergency there is a clear understanding of information and the immediate knowledge of the chain-of-command. On emergencies, if all involved agencies are using the same organization and procedures, there are few differences in operations. In essence, they are "one" organization and can be managed as such. The organization will be directed from one command post, only one Incident Action Plan will be developed and only one support organization is required.

The planning process for a "single agency incident" consists of:

- Collecting and documenting incident intelligence.
- Formulating agency objectives.
- Preparing an Action Plan to meet those objectives.
- Agency review and approval of the Action Plan.
- Activating the Action Plan.

The planning process for a unified command incident is the same as it is for a single command, except that more players are involved. The process allows all jurisdictions with either or both functional or geographic responsibility to input and combine objectives and actions. The process starts with documentation of the Incident Commander's objectives based upon the character and incident potential. Objectives stated by the Incident Commanders may vary widely depending on their agency role in the incident. Objectives are developed in an atmosphere that recognizes autonomy of each commander. It should be noted that this is not a committee process, rather it is a team process through open sharing of objectives and priorities. The team formulates a

set of collective directions that address the needs of the entire incident. Experience has shown that this collective sharing of information and objectives has led to a voluntary sharing of resources and modification of original objectives to meet the overall requirements.

The single set of objectives developed by the Unified Commanders is given to the Planning Section. Here, the staff works through the details necessary to develop an Incident Action Plan that will respond to the objectives. Needed resources are ordered and assignments are made to all components of the organization. Once drafted the Unified Commanders review and approve the plan for implementation.

The starting point of any Unified Command action is the meeting where the Commanders meet and discuss the various aspects of management that will be used during the incident. These meeting participants should only be the Unified Commanders, other staff members will only provide confusion to the agreements that need to be discussed.

- Introduction and role statement between the Unified Commanders.
- Appointment of a meeting manager or assignment a recorder if essential.
- Review the sequence of incident events.
- Identify and document agency or functional concerns.
- Evaluate concerns and resolve potential conflicts.
- Development of objectives.
- Agree on operational organization.
- Agree on informational procedures.
- Agree on Cost sharing procedures.
- Agree on strategy to be used in support of the objectives.
- Set priorities.
- Brief staff.

### **OPERATIONS**

I have discussed the development of objectives and approval of the Action Plan. I have also pointed out the Unified

Command is not a “committee” approach. If you have had experience in managing emergencies you are probably still bothered by the significant question of “who’s in charge here?” “Who makes decisions?” “Who is accountable?” To answer these questions I will now examine the duties of the Operations Section Chief and that position’s relationship to the Incident Action Plan.

Once the Action Plan has been approved by the Unified Commanders, it is presented to the Operations Section Chief (and other Command and General Staff members) for the execution of the tactical actions. If the plan has been properly prepared, it will contain all involved agencies’ input and approval. It in essence becomes the operating guide for carrying out the tactical operations for incident control or mitigation. The Operations Section Chief may have deputies to assist tactics on multi-agency incidents. Operations are the single responsible party for achieving the tactical applications of the Action Plan. He is responsible and accountable to the Unified Commanders for all-tactical decisions or changes that may be necessary to comply with the plan.

### **GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHING UNIFIED COMMAND PARTICIPANTS**

Unified Command can, and should, be tailored to meet the specific conditions, character and workload of each incident. To assist in determining the proper participants for any given incident there are two simple guidelines:

1. Agencies that respond to an incident will be filling one of two roles; they will either be jurisdictional with direct responsibility and authority, or they will be assisting agencies that have been called to help. As a general rule, only those agencies with jurisdictional responsibility will be commanders. In most cases, assisting agencies will be represented through the Liaison Officer.
2. Commanders within the Unified Command must have the authority and their agencies must have legal authority to order, transport and maintain the resources necessary to meet the objectives of the incident. Thus, fiscal authority is a determinant of Command.

These guidelines apply equally whether the incident is functional or geographic in nature. They can be modified to meet specific conditions. It should be recognized that, as an incident increases in magnitude there might be a need to

escalate the level of command.

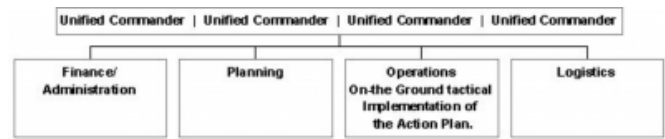
In addition, three other considerations can help determine if agencies should be represented in Command:

- Relative size of the agency involvement.
- Agency's values at risk.
- Duration of an agency's involvement.

### UNIFIED COMMAND MODEL

The options are many and more than one may be used at different periods on the same incident. The following model provides a basic structure that will apply for many incidents. This model or variations of the basic information provided can provide leadership for Unified Command in many applications. Agencies involved will need to determine the best application through preplanning, experience and even exercises.

**Figure 2**



Author: Jim Stumpf, National Association for Search and Rescue, has been active in the use of ICS since its inception in Southern California. He has worked with law enforcement, fire, emergency management and public Health agencies throughout the United States in the concepts and applications of ICS. For more information or assistance Jim can be reached at [jimstumpf@prodigy.net](mailto:jimstumpf@prodigy.net)

### TO LEARN MORE, VISIT THESE LINKS

<http://www.wildlandfire.net>

<http://oep.osophs.dhhs.gov/dmat/resource/ICS/index.htm>

<http://www.fema.gov/emi/is195.htm>

<http://www.fema.gov/emi/is195/pdf/IS195comp.pdf>

<http://www.emsa.ca.gov/dms2/heics3.htm>

### References

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