Integration of ICS functions into Continuity Events

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The principles of the Incident Command System (ICS) are well known in Emergency Response but can also benefit management of continuity events. A component of the National Incident Management System or NIMS, ICS is a common organizational structure designed to enable effective and efficient incident management.ICS has six primary functional areas; Command, Operations, Planning, Logistics, Finance/Administration and in some cases Intelligence and Investigations. Each area oversees specific areas of responsibility and functions in which Mission Essential Functions could be organized. Although position titles used might be different than in ICS, continuity response can benefit from use of an ICS like management structure.

In order to do this, ICS cannot be viewed as rigid, but as a flexible structure that can be applied to any event. It has been said that ICS is like Microsoft Word®. MS Word® can be used to write a book or a novel. ICS can be used to manage a local traffic accident or a Type 1 Hurricane with National impacts. By applying, expanding, or contracting functions as needed, the same basic concept for management can be used regardless of size, type or event impact. It then makes sense that ICS would lend itself to effective organization and management of continuity events.

Where applying ICS may vary is in position titles. It may not be possible to assign a specific person to serve as Operations Section Chief; however certain MEFs may serve in an operational type capacity. During a continuity event, there may be certain MEFs that could be arranged by the same functional areas used in ICS. Principles such as “Unity of Command” and “Span of Control” should be followed as well as “Management by Objectives” and Delegation of Authority”. By organizing the continuity team into functional areas, it is possible to achieve all of these principles.

In any event someone must be in charge. Through a delegation of authority, someone is tasked with the overall management of a response. This is true no matter if it is the internal facing continuity response or the more externally facing response seen in emergency management. Someone needs to translate the overarching objectives of the jurisdictional leadership into response objectives that will later be turned into tactical objectives. In ICS, this is the Incident Commander or IC. In a continuity event the title of IC could be used; however, in many COOP plans the title might be Continuity or COOP Commander. Even though the name is different, the function, responsibilities and expectations are the same.

* Some MEFs may be obvious as to which functional are they should be assigned. As an example, a common MEF for many agencies is to continue payroll functions. This along with many other HR type functions would fit with the role of finance / administration. However, it might take a bit more thinking of where an MEF that deals with IT or communications might be placed. It is also possible some MEF’s may cross over functional areas. This is why it is important for continuity practioners to understand the functions of ICS as well as what is expected of and from each position. FEMA’s E/G/L 950 student manual includes a very detailed description of this however in general:
* Command is who is in charge,
* Operations is who performs the work to achieve the objectives,
* Planning is who looks at what comes next,
* Logistics finds the resources
* Finance / Admin tracks all of the cost / finds the money

Intelligence and Information is not typically used in continuity events; however, in the case of a cyber attack they could serve in command, operations or as a separate general staff position.

Unfortunately, one characteristic of NIMS that would not be consistent is common terminology. That does not mean this could not be remedied sometime in the future, but as long as everyone understands the meaning of the terms being used, it is not as critical.

Unlike emergency response there are no mandates to use ICS or ICS like structures to manage a continuity event. However, there are many advantages in doing so. First of course is the efficiencies it builds into the management structure and the opportunities to better coordinate with emergency operations centers separate from the jurisdictional continuity response. ICS better allows responders from multiple disciplines and jurisdictions to work together. Most importantly ICS allows for a better coordinated, more efficient response to all types of events. Accordingly this equates to a higher level of service for our citizens, which should be the goal for any response.