Chapter 20
The Incident Command System:
Applying Emergency Response Best Practice to Your Disaster

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ABSTRACT

The Incident Command System (ICS) was created in 1970 to provide a standardized protocol for managing incidents that threaten life and/or property. Although the ICS grew out of a disaster that involved 20,000 responders, and was envisioned as a way to coordinate response for major disasters, it was designed to be scalable. As a result, the ICS can scale down. This chapter describes how ICS can be a valuable tool for responding to incidents even within the confines of a single repository. During a disaster, librarians and archivists who understand ICS are better prepared to initiate their internal response, interact with emergency responders, and manage any extended recovery phase that may follow the disaster.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to

- Introduce the Incident Command System (ICS) to librarians and archivists;
- Explain how the ICS scales to address even small-scale disasters;
- Highlight some key ICS principles that archivists and librarians can adopt to more effectively handle incidents in their own repositories;
- Demonstrate how the ICS management structure can be used to make disaster response more efficient and cost-effective by
  ◦ Adopting the ICS common terminology;
  ◦ Creating a modular, scalable organization structure to address disasters; ;
  ◦ Learning how to manage span of control;
  ◦ Creating Incident Action Plans;
  ◦ Understanding the meaning and importance of unified command;

      ∘   Organizing dedicate incident facilities; and,

●   Describe ways in which librarians and archivists can learn and practice ICS.

BACKGROUND: CREATING THE INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEM

In 1970, California wildfires destroyed more than one half million acres and overwhelmed the 20,000 men and women who eventually arrived to battle the flames. In the face of hurricane force winds and scorching heat, the attempt to coordinate the work of responders from 500 separate departments and agencies became almost as large a battle: each responding agency arrived with its own leadership, each had its own plan for attacking the crisis, each created its own base of operations and transmitted commands using its own radio frequencies and jargon. Priorities shifted wildly and confusion reigned. In the aftermath, Congress ordered the California Forestry Department to create a system to prevent such chaos in future (Rowley, 2010). The result was the Incident Command System (ICS).

The Incident Command System, as explained in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) official training materials, "is a standardized, on-scene, all-hazards approach to incident management. ICS allows all responders to adopt an integrated organizational structure that matches the complexities and demands of the incident while respecting agency and jurisdictional authorities. Although ICS promotes standardization, it is not without needed flexibility" (IS-100.b, p. 2.3).[1] In short, the ICS provides a consistent way to manage incidents, especially in crises that require response from multiple jurisdictions and disciplines. It creates an organization chart and management protocol that supersedes those of all the responding agencies. Under the ICS, responders fill positions beginning with the Incident Commander (the person in charge) and expanding to include other positions as required. These pre-defined positions, such as Liaison Officer, Operations Section Chief, and a host of others, are understood by all responders, who may not use the same titles in their everyday management. For the duration of the crisis, the ICS imposes a quasi-military structure on the responders, who suspend their normal methods of management in order to cooperate, prioritize, and focus resources on critical problems.

The Incident Command System applies in all kinds of natural and human-caused disasters, including fires, floods, earthquakes, terrorist attacks, hazardous waste and chemical spill incidents, search and rescue operations, and similar emergencies. The ICS eases coordination between responders, such as firefighters, police officers, ambulance crews, and emergency managers from local, state, and federal governments. The system creates a common organizational structure that allows responders to organize themselves rapidly and avoid battles over jurisdictional and operational responsibilities; it provides a common language through well-defined terminology that supersedes the acronyms and jargon each responding agency may use in ordinary circumstance; it stipulates the communications standards to be used by all responders; requires a common focus for planning; and holds responders to a common standard of accountability. Very importantly, it minimizes the disruption that can be caused by people—often well-meaning—who descend on the incident scene, eager to volunteer their services, anxious to be given a task, or convinced that they know how best to go about the business (as demonstrated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina).

The first responders to arrive on the scene can implement the Incident Command System with the people on hand. If the incident grows the ICS expands, and incoming responders fit more seamlessly into an ongoing response because they arrive knowing the ICS, which orients them to the response and sets

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