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BEST PRACTICE

Mutual Aid Agreements: Backfill

PURPOSE

This Best Practice discusses mutual aid support for maintaining normal levels of service.

SUMMARY

Maintaining normal levels of Emergency Medical Services (EMS), fire, and law enforcement service is difficult for jurisdictions experiencing a disaster that exhausts local resources and capabilities. Overtaxed response agencies can backfill their stations with neighboring mutual aid units to maintain normal levels of service.

DESCRIPTION

Backfill, also known as “change of quarters” and “move-ups,” occurs when an overtaxed jurisdiction requires units from neighboring jurisdictions to provide normal services to local residents. Backfill was crucial during the response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. According to after-action reports, the terrorist attacks severely overtaxed the Arlington County Fire Department (ACFD) and the New York Fire Department (FDNY). In order to continue to provide normal levels of fire and EMS services, assets and personnel from surrounding jurisdictions provided backfill mutual aid to both Arlington County and New York City while ACFD and FDNY were engaged at the incident sites.

Include Backfill in Agreements

Large-scale emergencies such as these can make it difficult for an affected jurisdiction to provide normal levels of emergency services to the community. Mutual aid agreements can help ensure continuity of service by backfilling critical emergency response assets and personnel. Provisions for backfill should be included as an individual clause in the agreement or in a memorandum of understanding.

Illinois's [Mutual Aid Box Alarm System](#) (MABAS) includes backfill provisions for maintaining normal levels of service in overtaxed jurisdictions.

Backfill protection is also an important issue for jurisdictions lending mutual aid. In most agreements, jurisdictions are only required to provide what resources they can spare. It can be difficult, however, to gauge what needs may arise while units are responding to an out-of-area incident. Having provisions for backfill in interlocal and mutual aid agreements can help ease potential anxiety over lending mutual aid support.

Local Personnel

When backfill units arrive, a local responder should brief them on the area and any other important local information. If possible, a local responder should be stationed with each backfill unit to help navigate and to provide general support. When it is not possible to

assign local personnel to backfill units, radios, map books, and a call back number should be provided to backfill units to help them navigate and communicate with local responders.

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