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LESSON LEARNED

Incident Command: Understanding Roles and Responsibilities During Hospital-Centric Incidents

SUMMARY

Emergency management, response, and hospital leaders should collaborate to develop an understanding of incident command roles and responsibilities during hospital-centric incidents, such as an evacuation of the facility.

DESCRIPTION

In the third week of July 2010, very hot and humid weather severely taxed the air conditioning systems of the Lebanon VA Medical Center in Pennsylvania. Temperatures within the center continued to rise even as weather forecasts predicted higher temperatures later in the week. On the evening of July 21, 2010, center administrators decided to evacuate inpatients from the facility beginning the next day. Center administrators consulted with Lebanon Emergency Management Agency representatives and together they decided to begin the evacuation immediately because of the lower overnight temperatures and reduced road traffic.

The Lebanon County Emergency Management Agency immediately recognized the magnitude of the evacuation and notified the First Aid and Safety Patrol to conduct an initial Unified Command meeting. Patrol officials requested transport vehicles and staff from regional emergency medical service (EMS) task forces through the South Central Task Force (SCTF) to support the evacuation. EMS task force leaders notified task force member organizations and team members of the evacuation by telephone. Over the next 26 hours, 50 ambulances successfully and safely transported 79 patients to 14 healthcare facilities, some as far as 200 miles away.

Personnel from the First Aid and Safety Patrol, the Lebanon County Emergency Management Agency, and the Lebanon VA Medical Center collaborated to establish an incident command capable of managing the transport of 79 patients. The organizations developed an incident action plan for the second operational period and used standard incident command system forms during the incident. Further, the First Aid and Safety Patrol assigned a liaison officer to the Lebanon VA Medical Center.

The [First Aid and Safety Patrol](#) serves as the primary emergency medical service (EMS) provider for Lebanon, PA. The patrol is a non-profit organization and does not receive funding from federal, state, or local governments.

The State of Pennsylvania established the SCTF to facilitate a regional response to major incidents. The task force's operations span more than 5,200 square miles and more than 1.8 million people. The SCTF sponsors a variety of specialized regional response teams.

Despite these efforts and the overall success of the evacuation, several issues related to incident command were encountered during operations. First, the after-action report (AAR) observes that the First Aid and Safety Patrol, the Lebanon Emergency Management Agency, and the Lebanon VA Medical Center did not establish a Unified Command staffed by co-located personnel from each agency. Further, the First Aid and Safety Patrol liaison to the medical center did operate from the hospital command center. The liaison officer also encountered problems communicating with the command center. Second, the AAR notes that, even after the incident, it is not clear who was the incident commander or what the incident objectives were for the first operational period. Officials considered but did not request support from the SCTF Incident Management Team (IMT). Participants at the after-action conference commented that the SCTF IMT could have helped to create a more effective incident command structure during the first operational period.

The AAR recommends that the SCTF brief all members on incidents in which a hospital facility would have a central role. The AAR also recommends that in such incidents, the incident command should assign an assistant liaison officer or a deputy operations section chief to be embedded within the hospital's command center. Finally, the AAR recommends that the SCTF should further examine the issue of command for hospital-centric incidents and develop a general understanding of who will ultimately be recognized as the incident commander in such incidents.

Emergency management, response, and hospital leaders should collaborate to develop an understanding of incident command roles and responsibilities during hospital-centric incidents, such as an evacuation of the facility.

CITATION

First Aid and Safety Patrol, Inc. and South Central PA Task Force. *Lebanon Veterans Administration Medical Center Evacuation – EMS Operations After Action Report/Improvement Plan*. 30 Nov 2010.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=48347>

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