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- Location Flags
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Incident Command: Differentiating Command Echelons

SUMMARY

Emergency responders may encounter difficulty distinguishing between command echelons at large-scale incident sites because of the large number of personnel present. Implementing an identification system that clearly differentiates command echelons will likely decrease confusion.

DESCRIPTION

Thousands of individuals, many from different agencies, participated in the response and recovery operations following the September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon. The chaotic environment made it difficult for emergency responders to identify specific incident personnel.

The lack of an identification system that differentiated the various command levels compounded the problem. Firefighters sometimes assumed they were talking with the Incident Commander when, in fact, they were actually speaking with a branch commander. This confusion arose in part because some ancillary commanders inappropriately wore the distinctive blue Incident Command vest. A lack of readily available location flags added to the confusion. No flags marking the location of particular command functions were flown at the Pentagon.

A more precise identification system should be created by fire and rescue organizations to distinguish command echelons. In the case of the Pentagon response, Greater Metropolitan Washington Area Mutual-Aid Operations Plan, which utilizes a color-coded system to designate key functions, should have been considered as that system. Lastly, Arlington firefighters have recommended that location flags be incorporated into the identification system. Location flags, augmented by lights of a similar color during night operations, are a necessary complement to identification vests at large-scale incident sites. Flags should be lettered to reflect their appropriate functional assignment, be at least 3 feet by 2 feet, and displayed at least 12 feet above ground.

CITATION

Titan Systems Corporation. *Arlington County After-Action Report on the Response to the September 11 Terrorist Attack on the Pentagon*. May 30, 2002.

http://www.arlingtonva.us/Departments/fire/edu/about/docs/after_report.pdf

Northern Virginia Mass Casualty Incident Plan. July 1, 2003 – June 30, 2004.

<http://northern.vaems.org/Documents/No%20Va%20MCI%20Plan.pdf>

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