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PRACTICE NOTE

Emergency Operations Centers: Iowa State Emergency Operations Center's Executive Office Support Staff

PRACTICE

The Iowa State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) has established an executive office support staff to assist the governor, lieutenant governor, and the Homeland Security and Emergency Management Division (HSEMD) administrator during activations.

DESCRIPTION

The governor of Iowa is responsible for the protection and well-being of the state's citizens. In 2007, Governor Chet Culver appointed Lieutenant Governor Patty Judge to serve as his homeland security advisor and to oversee all Iowa homeland security activities. The Iowa Department of Public Defense, comprised of the HSEMD and the Iowa National Guard, reports to Lt. Governor Judge in her capacity as the governor's homeland security advisor. HSEMD serves as the main coordinating body for homeland security and emergency management activities throughout the state.

The 2007 Winter Storms

The state of Iowa experienced two consecutive winter storms of historic severity during a week-long span in late February and early March 2007. The first storm struck Iowa on February 24, bringing freezing rain and sleet to eastern and central parts of the state. The second storm arrived 5 days later, blanketing central and western portions of Iowa with blizzard conditions and record snowfalls in some areas. The storms destroyed electrical lines and caused roads to become ice covered, creating unsafe driving conditions. The amount of ice accumulation necessitated the closure of roads and the re-routing of traffic. Over 134,000 Iowans lost power during the 2 storms.

The SEOC worked with federal, state, and local agencies to coordinate simultaneous response and recovery operations across the state during the hazardous conditions. Lt. Governor Judge and the HSEMD administrator staffed the executive office at the SEOC during the response to the winter storms. They maintained the onsite executive decision-making roles when Governor Culver was not present. Governor Culver operated from a separate room adjacent to the main SEOC area as weather permitted and when he was not visiting areas affected by the storms. This enabled the governor to issue clear mission statements directly to agency administrators and to obtain the necessary information about response operations. The governor's presence at the SEOC marked a departure from previous governors, who typically visited the SEOC but did not operate from it.

The Iowa winter storm after-action report (AAR) found that the executive office required a dedicated staff to help manage the flow of conference calls and briefings and to redirect public information requests. It recommended that the SEOC "provide additional dedicated

support to gather and present information necessary for enhancing a common operating picture for the executive office.” HSEMD took a number of steps to implement the recommendations of the winter storm AAR. HSEMD redesigned the room for the executive office and its support staff to include additional monitors, projectors, and work stations to support executive office members and support staff. The SEOC filled executive office support staff positions based upon the recommendations of the winter storms AAR.

The 2008 Summer Storms

During the summer of 2008, the state of Iowa experienced a series of severe storms that produced several tornadoes and a large amount of rainfall. The heaviest period of storms began on May 25, 2008, and lasted until June 25. Rains caused flooding that overtopped levees and dams and inundated Iowa localities near rivers. Over a 4-week period, flood waters moved across Iowa, which required the state to undertake extensive preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery operations. Overall, the 2008 summer storms resulted in 17 fatalities, forced the evacuation of approximately 38,000 Iowans, and impacted over 21,000 housing units. HSEMD activated the SEOC shortly after a tornado struck the town of Parkersburg on May 25.

The 2008 storms were comparable to the 1993 floods as the most destructive natural disasters in Iowa’s history.

During the summer storms, the governor’s office’s representation at the SEOC consisted of the lieutenant governor and her senior advisor, the governor’s office’s press secretary, and the governor’s public information officer. HSEMD personnel filled three positions in the executive office support staff. The staff members produced staffing plans and shift schedules, conducted update briefings, and performed administrative duties for the executive office. Shift schedules were posted in an Excel spreadsheet 2 to 3 hours before the shifts started. The executive office support staff proved an effective means to support the needs of the executive office during the summer storms. The summer storms AAR noted that the scope of executive office support staff responsibilities, procedures, and guidance remain largely informal. The AAR recommended that the SEOC develop position descriptions, job aids, and protocols to serve as guidelines for the executive office support staff.

CITATIONS

Lessons Learned Information Sharing. *Iowa 2008 Summer Storms After-Action Report*. 27 Apr 2009.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=36042>

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