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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Management: Providing Dedicated Support to Executive Decision Making during Incidents

SUMMARY

State emergency operations centers (SEOC) should consider providing dedicated support to gather and present information to executive officials during incidents. This can help to establish the development of a common operating picture among senior officials.

DESCRIPTION

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 two storms. Together, the two storms caused a combined \$65 million in state- and federally-reimbursed damages. This total was only surpassed by the destruction caused by floods in 1993.

The Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management Division (HSEMD) activated the SEOC on February 24, when the first storm arrived. It remained activated for the next week. Throughout the activation, the Iowa lieutenant governor, who also serves as Homeland Security Advisor, and the HSEMD administrator maintained on-site decision making roles at the SEOC when the governor could not be present. Several state agency directors also spent time between the two storms coordinating response operations from the SEOC. The Iowa governor conducted key media briefings from the SEOC. Executive officials operated from the executive office located in a separate room adjacent to the main SEOC operations area. The presence of the governor marked a departure from previous incidents when governors visited the SEOC but did not maintain a constant presence.

The presence of the governor and agency directors together at the SEOC proved valuable for coordinating the response to the winter storms. It enabled the governor to issue clear directions to his senior administrators. It also allowed agency directors to provide the governor with the critical information necessary to inform his policy decisions. However, the executive office was inundated with conference calls, briefings, and special requests during the winter storms. This made it difficult for the executive office to obtain a COP due to the level of activity and the various distractions.

The winter storms after-action report (AAR) recommended that the governor and agency heads "meet together to develop clear intent statements and gather the key information necessary for fully informed policy decisions" during incident response operations. The AAR

also recommended that the SEOC provide additional dedicated staff to support executive office decision making and develop a COP for the entire SEOC.

SEOCs should consider providing dedicated support to gather and present information to executive officials during incidents. This can help to establish the development of a common operating picture among senior officials.

CITATION

Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management Division. *2007 Winter Storm After Action Report: State of Iowa Response Coordination*. 07 Jul 2007.
<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=26358>

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