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Incident Command: The Use of Identification Clothing

SUMMARY

Individuals with command authority at incident sites should be clearly identifiable to emergency responders. Such command visibility can be achieved through the use of brightly colored vests, arm bands, flags, or signs.

DESCRIPTION

Vests, signs, flags, arm bands, or other such devices can be used to maximize command visibility during an incident response. Such identification helps arriving emergency responders to quickly grasp the chain of command, facilitates communications, and helps avoid problems resulting from mistaken identity.

The importance of command identification was demonstrated by problems encountered during the statewide response to the tornado that struck Utica, Illinois on April 20, 2004. Arriving fire personnel reported difficulty identifying key incident command personnel during search and rescue operations at the site. The inability to easily identify command personnel contributed to confusion at the incident site and undermined command order. One fire chief cited a "lack of command visibility," and commented that "[p]roper identification of the various roles would have provided better organizational control." Another fire chief noted that "Branch/Sector leaders and Safety Officers were not easily identifiable." A third chief suggested that "Incident Command components could be better identified to ensure timely command staff interaction." All three chiefs suggested that colored command vests be used to identify command elements at the incident site.

Similarly, during the emergency response to the April 20, 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, the failure to properly use command identification led to a disruptive case of mistaken identity. A fire chief was in the process of establishing a landing site for MedEvac helicopters, but was not wearing a helmet or vest that could have conveyed his operational role. A police sniper mistook the chief's soot-covered coat for a black trench coat matching those worn by the suspected perpetrators; the chief was ordered to the ground at gunpoint before he could explain who he was. This blunder could have been avoided had the chief been wearing a command vest, as called for by Littleton Fire Department standard operating procedures.

During a large scale emergency, it may be difficult for emergency responders to identify incident command personnel at the incident site. An effective identification system for incident command personnel can enhance organizational control and improve coordination between agencies and jurisdictions.

CITATION

- Mutual Aid Box Alarm System. *Utica Tornado Statewide Plan Activation: Assessment and Critique*, October 2004.
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