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## LESSON LEARNED

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### Emergency Communications: Using Common Terminology and Plain Language

#### SUMMARY

Exercise and incident after action reports (AARs) indicate that the use of common terminology and plain language often needs to be reinforced through training and other measures.

#### NATIONAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (NIMS) COMMON TERMINOLOGY AND PLAIN LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the incident command system (ICS) mandate that emergency communications use common terminology and plain language during incident responses that involve different disciplines, jurisdictions, organizations, and agencies. NIMS states, "All communications between organizational elements during an incident, whether oral or written, should be in plain language; this ensures that information dissemination is timely, clear, acknowledged, and understood by all intended recipients. Codes should not be used, and all communications should be confined to essential messages. The use of acronyms should be avoided during incidents requiring the participation of multiple agencies or organizations."

#### About This Lesson Learned

*Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS.gov)* reviewed exercise and incident AARs and other documents on the *LLIS.gov* system to develop this Lesson Learned. *LLIS.gov* will revise and update this document as new information is received. If you wish to contribute to this Lesson Learned, please email your data, information, or documents to [research@llis.dhs.gov](mailto:research@llis.dhs.gov).

Plain language and common terminology requirements are necessary to facilitate communication and information sharing among diverse response personnel during an incident. NIMS provides the following definitions of "common terminology" and "plain language":

- "Common Terminology: Normally used words and phrases—avoiding the use of different words/phrases for same concepts—to ensure consistency and to allow diverse incident management and support organizations to work together across a wide variety of incident management functions and hazard scenarios."
- "Plain Language: Communication that can be understood by the intended audience and meets the purpose of the communicator. For the purpose of the National Incident Management System, plain language is designed to eliminate or limit the use of codes and acronyms, as appropriate, during incident response involving more than a single agency."

Beginning in fiscal year 2006, Federal preparedness grants required that jurisdictions use plain language in incidents that required assistance from other agencies, jurisdictions, and functional disciplines. The [National Emergency Communications Plan](#), released in 2008, emphasizes the importance of using plain language and common terminology.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) SAFECOM program has developed several resources to assist jurisdictions with implementing the plain language and common terminology requirements in NIMS:

- [Plain Language Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#)
- [Plain Language Guide: Making the Transition from Ten Codes to Plain Language](#)

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) NIMS Integration Center has released several NIMS Alerts on the use of plain language, including:

- [NIMS Alert: NIMS and Use of Plain Language – September 10, 2009](#)

### TACTICAL INTEROPERABLE COMMUNICATIONS PLAN (TICP) EXERCISES

In 2006, DHS required that each of the 76 Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI) areas develop and test their TICP with a full-scale exercise (FSE). Each TICP exercise required that the UASI area “use established common response communications language (e.g., plain language, no special codes) for all relevant communications, as outlined in the TICP.”

The *LLIS.gov* team reviewed the 43 TICP AARs on the *LLIS.gov* system and determined that 27 UASI areas completed the task successfully, 11 areas partially completed the task, and 2 areas failed to complete the task (3 AARs do not indicate if the task was undertaken).

Several of the AARs report significant use of 10-codes rather than plain language, while most of the AARs report some “minor” or “sporadic” use of 10-codes, even though evaluators determined that the area completed the task successfully. Further, 25 of the 43 AARs contain recommendations to reinforce the use of plain language, primarily through training and exercises. Thus, even in many areas that completed this task successfully, exercise evaluators recognized the need to continue to promote the use of plain language rather than 10-codes, acronyms, or terminology.

### Related *LLIS.gov* Resources

The *LLIS.gov* network includes 43 TICP AARs, 26 *LLIS.gov* Lessons Learned, and many other related documents. Two *LLIS.gov* Lessons Learned address the use of plain language and related issues in the TICP exercises:

- [Emergency Communications: Using Common Identifiers for Command and General Staff](#)
- [Emergency Communications: Using Plain Language during a Multi-Agency Incident Response](#)

### USE OF PLAIN LANGUAGE AND COMMON TERMINOLOGY IN EXERCISES AND REAL-WORLD EVENTS

Exercise and incident AARs completed between 2008 and 2011 and published on the *LLIS.gov* network indicate that the use of common terminology and plain language in emergency communications remains an area for improvement for some jurisdictions and organizations. The use of 10-codes, unfamiliar acronyms, or agency-specific terminology is cited in various AARs as causing confusion among personnel during both exercises and real-world events, including:

- The [2010 San Diego County, California, Golden Guardian FSE AAR](#) notes that the use of unfamiliar acronyms and terms in posts on the county's WebEOC system made it difficult for other users to follow events and understand some information posted to the system.
- The [2010 Wide Vigilance III FSE AAR](#) describes how terminology and acronyms in communications created confusion among participants in the exercise. The AAR notes that participants interpreted medical terms in different ways, which impacted victim care.
- A [review](#) for the City of Alameda, California, of the emergency response to a suicide in the water off a public beach found that "the use of jargon led to a miscommunication which resulted in command personnel on the scene expecting the responding U.S. Coast Guard vessel to have different operational capabilities than it had."
- In a [2010 AAR, the University of Texas at Austin](#) found that emergency response agencies used the same terms during an active shooter/suicide incident, but that each agency had different meanings for the terms.

Numerous AARs recommend that agencies reinforce the importance of using plain language and avoiding acronyms and terminology in emergency communications during incidents. These AARs recommend that the use of plain language and common terminology should be emphasized in training and exercises. The [Trouble on the Tarmac FSE AAR](#) recommends that four ICS courses be conducted for all response personnel over a 12-month period to reinforce the use of plain language. Several AARs, such as the [Urban Shield 2009 FSE AAR](#), note that operational plans and procedures should be reviewed to ensure that they address the use of plain language.

#### EXTENDING NIMS PLAIN LANGUAGE AND COMMON TERMINOLOGY PRINCIPLES

Several AARs on the *LLIS.gov* network demonstrate how NIMS and ICS principles relating to plain language and common terminology have been extended beyond emergency communications during incidents. This reflects how other functional disciplines beyond emergency management and response have begun to embrace NIMS and ICS.

- **Critical Infrastructure Restoration Operations:** The [New Hampshire Public Utilities Commission After Action Review](#) for a December 2008 ice storm observes that utilities should resist using industry terminology in public information about outages and the restoration effort. The commission's report states that "customers should not have to learn technical utility and equipment terminology during a wide scale emergency. Restoration communications should be relayed in the universal language of physical addresses, e.g., streets, towns, building names, and time periods that the general public understands."
- **Point of Dispensing (POD) Terminology:** The [Maricopa County, Arizona, Department of Public Health multi-site vaccination exercise AAR](#) notes that standards and explanations need to be developed regarding the use of common terminology for exercise venues, vaccinations, and other terms. The AAR states, "There were two vaccinations whose names were very similar and it was hard sometimes to identify which vaccination a POD may be out of." The AAR also finds that standard terms may be identified and distributed to all exercise personnel to minimize any confusion. It also recommends that POD staff be trained to use common language in all radio communications.
- **Space Weather Forecasting:** A [workshop summary](#) issued by FEMA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) recommends that communication between space

weather forecasters and their customers be improved by developing a common terminology. The NOAA Space Weather Prediction Center, along with affected sector-related agencies such as FEMA, the DHS Office of Infrastructure Protection, MSB Global Monitoring & Analysis Section, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, and other relevant stakeholders, should collaborate to develop a common terminology and to educate customers on space weather phenomena and consequences.

#### **Related LLIS.gov Resources**

LLIS.gov has developed the following related Lessons Learned:

- [Emergency Public Information: Using Plain Language during Restoration Operations](#)

Exercise and incident AARs indicate that the use of common terminology and plain language often needs to be reinforced through training and other measures.

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