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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Operations Center: Designating a Separate Area for Call-Takers

SUMMARY

Emergency managers should review auxiliary areas in emergency operations centers (EOC) to determine whether they can accommodate phone banks, if necessary, during an incident. This will allow call-takers to work from auxiliary areas and will reduce noise in the main EOC area.

DESCRIPTION

During the first week of December 2007, Mason County, Washington, experienced a county-wide winter storm that caused record flooding, extreme landslide conditions, and utility failure. Debris flow from the floods closed roads and destroyed several county and private bridges. The severe weather also caused power and telephone outages that isolated many residents for up to a week. Mason County activated its EOC on December 3, 2007, and issued a proclamation of local emergency within 2 hours of activation. For most of the next 2 weeks, county staff and agencies responded to the event. Public Works organized crews to build temporary bridges and to clear landslides. The county landfill also accepted debris removal vouchers issued by the Department of Emergency Management for household items damaged in the storm. On December 15, President George W. Bush issued Disaster Declaration 1734 for this disaster.

The EOC staff was overwhelmed by the number of calls requesting assistance shortly after EOC activation. Other county departments provided their employees to assist the EOC as soon as they could be released from their normal duties. These county employees received calls and recorded damage assessments, requests for supplies, and notifications of road closures. The call-taking continued 14 hours a day for the first 3 days, then scaled back to 8- to 10-hour shifts thereafter. Approximately 5,000 calls were received in the EOC within the first week. However, the EOC lacked sufficient seating or desk space to accommodate the additional call-taking staff members. The regular EOC staff found it extremely difficult to concentrate on normal functions with the call-taking staff in the room. Managers were unable to conduct regular briefings of the EOC staff, which resulted in some miscommunication among the staff members. The after-action report concluded that auxiliary rooms, such as training rooms, should have adequate telephone access to allow them to be used as call-centers, if necessary.

Emergency managers should review auxiliary areas in EOCs to determine whether they can accommodate phone banks, if necessary, during an incident. This will allow call-takers to work from auxiliary areas and will reduce noise in the main EOC area.

CITATION

Mason County, Washington. *Mason County After Action Report/Improvement Plan December 2007 Winter Storm (FEMA-1734-DR-WA)*. 26 Mar 2008.
<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=32544>

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