



# Theoretical to Practical: Documents that Take Us from Planning to Response

By David Hesselmeier

# Abstract

Little training is given to new emergency managers as it relates to the different types of documents or plans that are the foundation of preparedness and response. Over time this has led to confusion and problems in our profession. There are three main types of plans per the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 101: Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans. The three types of plans are strategic, operational, and tactical. Out of those three types of plans the most important plans we deal with in the profession are Emergency Operation Plans (EOP), Standard Operating Procedures (also called Standard Operating Guidelines), and Incident Action Plans. Each of these plans are vital to our success in protecting the lives and property of our citizens. Understanding them and ensuring that they are efficient is important.

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# Introduction

Emergency Operations Plans (also known as EOPs) are the foundational plan for emergency management and services agencies. Many, if not all, state and local emergency management agencies have and maintain an EOP, which, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency(FEMA) "describe[s] who will do what, as well as when, with what resources, and by what authority..."<sup>1</sup> This is how FEMA explained the EOP in their Guide for All-Hazard Emergency Operations Planning. This document was initially published in 1996 and through revisions became Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 101. However, one misconception is that the EOP tells agencies step by step what they are to do in every scenario. Unfortunately, this is impossible to plan so far out from a response to the steps necessary to protect our population. The good news is that more documents build on top of the Emergency Operations Plan. We need to understand the differences between EOPs, Standard Operating Guidelines (SOG)/ Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and Incident Action Plans (IAPs).

# Document Explanation

## **Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs)**

In the FEMA guide mentioned above, EOPs are documents meant to accomplish three main tasks which are to

serve as the basis for an effective response to any hazard that threatens the jurisdiction, facilitate the integration of mitigation into response and recovery activities, and facilitate coordination with the Federal Government during catastrophic disaster situations that necessitate the implementation of the Federal Response Plan (FRP).<sup>2</sup>

The Federal Response Plan has gone through revisions over time leading to multiple name changes. Currently it is called the National Response Framework. These documents are meant to be the backbone of emergency management—they lay out roles and responsibilities—one of the very early steps in emergency planning. From there, this plan sets forth the concept of operations for the jurisdiction. An EOP is developed in the preparedness phase of emergency management before an emergency occurs. It is more of a theoretical type of document that assigns responsibilities and outlines the overall concept of operations for that jurisdiction.

An example of an Emergency Operations Plan that I have used as a reference many times is the Wilson County (NC) Emergency Operations Plan. This plan is broken up into several sections which lay the groundwork for all other planning and preparing. It starts with what I call the prefix, which includes the Approval Document, Contents etc. Next comes the Basic Plan. In this section, the EOP describes situations and assumptions from which the Plan is built, demographics for the County, and Concepts of Operations. One might call this section the foundation of the Plan. Following the Basic Plan are the EOP sections. Another name for these would be functional annexes. These cover Health and Medical, Fire Rescue, Animal Control, and many other elements to designate which agency has the lead for those incidents and the general legality, accountability, and resources known for these events. Finally, the Plan has Field Operating Guidelines. This section contains Emergency Management's SOPs for their responsibility.

### **Standard Operating Guides/Procedures**

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines standard operating procedures as “established or prescribed methods to be followed routinely for the performance of designated operations or in designated situations.”<sup>3</sup> Within a jurisdiction in an ideal world, every agency or department should have a set of standard operating procedures (SOP). The purpose of this would be to develop further the roles and responsibilities they are assigned by the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). These SOPs would describe which legal authorities, if any, they have for the assigned roles. They would explain what resources that they have and how they can be used for the assigned roles. SOPs are also developed in the preparedness phase of emergency management, and they give some idea of what the response would look like when it occurs. These SOPs take us to the junction of theoretical and practical, providing a more in-depth discussion of how things will occur when activated.

An example of an SOG is the Johnston County (NC) Health Department's (HD) Emergency Response Standard Operating Guidelines which I had a hand in creating. The County EOP designates health and medical emergencies to be under the lead of the Health Department and County EMS. This does not give specifics of how to do things in the EOP, but designates the lead agencies for these types of incidents. The HD Emergency Response SOGs describe the type of emergencies for which they are the designated lead, how command and control will work, steps to mitigate emergencies, and how the HD will respond in a larger emergency where multiple agencies will be involved, yet the HD will be the lead agency.

### Incident Action Plans

The United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) explains that an incident action plan (IAP) “formally documents incident goals, operational period objectives, and the response strategy defined by the incident command during response planning.”<sup>4</sup> As emergency managers we must rely on our education, experience, and more to develop how we can minimize the impact of the disaster on lives and property in our jurisdiction. The IAP guides how we make decisions and helps us establish what we want to achieve during this operational period to minimize those impacts. In creating an IAP, we determine the objectives, strategies, and tactics we will use to address a specific dilemma. Incident Action Plans are created specifically for the incident. They are not as granular and preplanned as Emergency Operations Plans and Standard Operating Procedures are; instead, they are incident specific. Those who are building IAPs should have a good knowledge of the EOP and SOP from their jurisdiction. The IAP brings the preplanning from EOPs and SOPs into action by applying their high-level concepts to an emerging real-world incident, giving direct and actionable guidance to response units and agencies.

One IAP example which may be familiar to emergency managers during the pandemic would be County or Parrish level COVID response Incident Action Plans. Over the last year or so, starting when the pandemic was first determined to be in the United States, many local government agencies begin writing IAPs to aid them in performing task-level work. In general, at the outset of the COVID response, these IAPs focused on tactics such as ensuring communication flow between agencies, performing press releases to the public, and maintaining situational awareness. As time continued and we got the ability to perform testing, these IAPs focused more on the tactics of being able to perform testing, especially mass testing for COVID and are now more focused on mass vaccinations. An example IAP for this period would include objectives such as “provide 1300 vaccines to the public at the County Community College between 0900-1500 hours on Tuesday.” This would be followed up with other ICS forms to designate what resources they have on hand to perform this task and what resources they need to order. These IAPs are the step-by-step documentation of how to achieve the objectives.

## Document Comparison

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) compares these three types of documents in Version 3 of their Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 101: Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans. FEMA describes these plans as strategic, operational, and tactical plans. CPG 101 states that operational plans (e.g., Emergency Operations Plans) “provide a description of roles and responsibilities, tasks, integration, and actions required of a jurisdiction or its departments and agencies during emergencies.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast, tactical plans “focus on managing personnel, equipment, and resources that play a direct role in an incident response.”<sup>6</sup> Standard Operating Procedures and Incident Action Plans both fit into this tactical plan category. The difference between them is that SOPs are preplanning documents, whereas IAPs are completed during the response.

**Table 1:** Visual Comparison of Plans

|                                       | Emergency Operations Plans  | Standard Operating Procedures   | Incident Action Plans   |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>Number of Plans (per agency)</b>   | 1   | 1   | 1 per operational period  |
| <b>Operational or Tactical</b>        | Operational   | Tactical (Pre-event)  | Tactical (During event)   |
| <b>Time of Development</b>            | Pre-event   | Pre-event   | During Event  |
| <b>Tactical Action Items Included</b> | No  | No  | Yes-describes tactics to achieve objectives   |
| <b>Revision Period</b>                | At least once per five years; preferably simple review annually and major review every 3-5 years                | At least once per five years; preferably simple review annually and major review every 3-5 years                | Never really revised but created once per operational period as determined by the Incident Commander (IC)       |
| <b>Type of Coordination</b>           | Horizontal (between agencies under the same jurisdiction) and Vertical (between different levels of government) | Horizontal (between agencies under the same jurisdiction) and Vertical (between different levels of government) | Horizontal (between agencies under the same jurisdiction) and Vertical (between different levels of government) |
| <b>Describes Legal Authority</b>      | Yes   | Yes   | No  |

## Conclusion

Unfortunately, many are confused about these three documents or, in error, lump them into one. These documents are meant to achieve very different things and do so for efficiency's sake. We must use these plans for their purposes. The Emergency Operations Plan sets forth who does what and is responsible for what situations but stops short of directing tactical actions. This leads individual departments and/or agencies to build their Standard Operating Procedures that outline their tactical responsibilities and generalize how they will accomplish them. In a county for example, these two documents, when completed and coordinated properly, establish the background needed for planning for our responses. This is done with departments creating their own SOPs and the emergency management agency creating the EOP. This allows the Incident Commander and their command and general staff to use that foundational information to build the Incident Action Plans focusing on minimizing the impacts. These actions or tactics are developed from the EOP and SOPs combined with their knowledge and experience. When these documents are built and coordinated correctly, it allows us to be as successful as possible during a response.

# About the Author

David Hesselmeier started his emergency services career in 1997. He is credentialed as a Firefighter, Paramedic, Rescue Technician, North Carolina Executive Emergency Manager, and as an International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) Certified Emergency Manager. He graduated from East Carolina University with a Master of Public Administration (MPA). He owns On Target Preparedness, LLC which is an emergency services consulting firm serving public and private agencies in preparing and responding to disasters. He is a member of the Buies Creek Fire Department in North Carolina. He writes for multiple emergency services publications. He may be reached at [dhesselmeier@ontargetprep.com](mailto:dhesselmeier@ontargetprep.com).

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## Notes

1. "Guide for All-Hazard Emergency Operations Planning," *FEMA Online*, September 1996, <https://www.fema.gov/pdf/plan/slg101.pdf> Page 3.
  2. "Guide for All-Hazard Emergency Operations Planning," *FEMA Online*, September 1996, <https://www.fema.gov/pdf/plan/slg101.pdf> Page 3.
  3. "Standard Operating Procedure," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/standard%20operating%20procedure> .
  4. "What Is an Incident Action Plan?" Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, February 14, 2012, [https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/planning/mscc/handbook/Pages/appendixc.aspx#:~:text=An%20incident%20action%20plan%20\(IAP,incident%20command%20during%20response%20planning.&text=Response%20strategies%20\(priorities%20and%20the%20general%20approach%20to%20accomplish%20the%20objectives\)](https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/planning/mscc/handbook/Pages/appendixc.aspx#:~:text=An%20incident%20action%20plan%20(IAP,incident%20command%20during%20response%20planning.&text=Response%20strategies%20(priorities%20and%20the%20general%20approach%20to%20accomplish%20the%20objectives)) .
  5. "Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans," *FEMA Online*, November 2010, [https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-05/CPG\\_101\\_V2\\_30NOV2010\\_FINAL\\_508.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-05/CPG_101_V2_30NOV2010_FINAL_508.pdf), Page 1-5.
  6. "Developing and Maintaining Emergency Operations Plans," *FEMA Online*, November 2010, [https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-05/CPG\\_101\\_V2\\_30NOV2010\\_FINAL\\_508.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-05/CPG_101_V2_30NOV2010_FINAL_508.pdf), Page 1-5.
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