

# Public Works and the Incident Command System



Many public works employees know that Incident Command System (ICS) is used in the fire service. Few understand the value of knowing ICS or the role they play in it during an emergency.

During an emergency, few public works professionals worry about who is in charge or how the operation runs. They do whatever it takes to get the job done. They act as first responders during the initial response, and then complete the clean up. Typical PWD's are task oriented. Their strength is bringing manpower, equipment and expertise to current problems.

Public works crews frequently respond to a disaster, and wait while decision makers decide what they need done. Or, they respond and then realize that the people in charge have requested the wrong equipment, perhaps because they did not know what to ask for. These are good reasons for public works to become involved in ICS. Being involved means appreciating the design of the system and how highway departments integrate into it.

ICS builds from the bottom up as the event grows in scope and intensity. The obligation of public works resources usually parallels an event's escalation. Generally, the public works manager response coordinates with the on-scene commander of the primary emergency response agency. As the incident changes, the Incident Commander (IC) may delegate functions to an operations section and/or a planning section. A major sustained event may include sections to oversee logistics, finance and accounting.

In ICS a manager should only supervise between 3 and 7 people. The optimal number is 5. Therefore, as the operation expands, divisions or groups are required as layers. Layers contribute to public works obtaining directions from multiple sources. Sound and timely guidance on public works

capabilities and limitations work to everyone's advantage.

The first step towards PWD full involvement in ICS is to ensure training of the right personnel. Training is available through fire service agencies and through New Hampshire Public Works Mutual Aid Program. It should be mandatory for all key supervisory personnel who would respond to an emergency. Most public works departments have talented people whose normal duties are not associated with emergency response. They can be valuable to fill the public works void found in most ICS scenarios. For example; engineering staff personnel may work in the planning or logistics section during a significant event.

PW staff works well in the operations section. Here immediate plans are coordinated, executed and resources committed. They also can contribute to the planning section, which recommends future operations and commitments of resources. Planning provides the IC with the best and most comprehensive recommendations on how to proceed. It gives public works advance notice of realistic future requirements.

An incident can grow from a single ICS command scenario to a multi-jurisdictional one. It has shared management responsibilities geographically or functionally. Command is exercised through a Unified Command System. If the incident involves a terrorist act or weapons of mass destruction, federal agencies will likely be involved. This requires a Joint Operations Command focusing on "crisis management" and "consequence management."

Public works professionals can benefit being involved in ICS. They will be able to provide better service and response to their citizens.

## Source

Henry, Terence M., *Public Works and the Incident Command System*, *APWA Reporter*, Vol., 68, No. 4, April 2001, p. 48-49