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Crisis Communications Planning: Establishing Joint Information Centers

PURPOSE

Provides guidance to state and local government departments on establishing and operating a Joint Information Center (JIC) during an emergency.

SUMMARY

A JIC is either a physical or “virtual” operation where public information staff representing all agencies and organizations involved in incident management activities coordinate and disseminate official, timely, accurate, easy to understand, and consistent information to the public. The [National Incident Management System \(NIMS\)](#) includes procedures on the responsibilities and operations of a JIC. State and local emergency response departments and agencies should be familiar with NIMS procedures and have plans in place for establishing or operating within a JIC.

DESCRIPTION

JICs are the single point of coordination for all public information operations during emergencies. NIMS requires that all public information provided by response organizations during incident management operations be communicated through operating JICs. JICs should include Public Information Officers (PIOs) from all agencies and organizations participating in incident management operations to ensure multi-agency and multi-jurisdiction coordination of all messages provided to the public.

This Best Practice assists state and local planners in preparing to operate or establish a JIC by providing information on:

- JIC Operations;
- JIC Organization;
- Regional or State JICs;
- Virtual JICs;
- Joint Information System; and
- Staffing Considerations.

JIC Operations

The core components of JIC operations are:

- Establishing JICs;
- Identifying and Securing the JIC;
- Essential Support Materials; and
- Operational Tasks.

Establishing JICs

NIMS states that an incident commander (IC), an area commander, or an authorized Federal official can establish a JIC. While NIMS maintains that a single JIC is preferable, it allows enough flexibility for the establishment and operations of multiple JICs. Incident commanders are responsible for establishing and overseeing the local JIC(s). If separate command structures are established to manage the incidents, then each IC can establish and operate a separate JIC. Area commanders, who typically have responsibility for managing multiple incidents, can establish a JIC at the level of area command. Federal officials can also choose to establish a Federal-level JIC.

Identifying and Securing the JIC Location

According to NIMS, a JIC is typically co-located with the Federal, regional, state, local, or tribal Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The JIC location should be easily accessible, with sufficient parking, power, phones and phone lines, and minimal background noise. Planners should identify a location that is both close to the incident and EOC, yet sufficiently removed to ensure that JIC personnel are safe and that operations do not conflict with the emergency response.

JIC personnel should be able to communicate easily with other agencies, hospitals, and emergency support services. If the main JIC facility does not contain sufficient space for media representatives, there should also be a nearby location capable of holding press conferences and other media events. Coordination with police and fire departments prior to an incident is essential for avoiding problems during the incident.

Oklahoma City officials established a JIC at the Multi-Agency Coordination Center four days after the April 19, 1995 bombing. The Center offered the opportunity for the JIC to be placed at a secure location adjacent to the response effort.

After the September 11, 2001 attacks on the Pentagon, the Federal Bureau of Investigation chose not to activate a JIC. The [Arlington County After-Action Report](#) states, "The failure to establish a JIC proved to be an impediment to the presentation of coordinated, factual, and timely public information."

Essential Support Materials

The [Joint Information Center Model](#) published by the National Response Team has a list of support materials that would be necessary to establish a JIC. These include:

- Multiple electrical outlets;
- High-speed Internet access;
- Contact information for state and local officials and media;
- Computers and printers;
- Fax machines;
- Phones and multiple phone lines;
- Local and national telephone directories;
- Radio, audio tape recorders and cassettes, television, video, and VCR;
- Clocks;
- Photocopiers; and
- Cell phones and pagers.

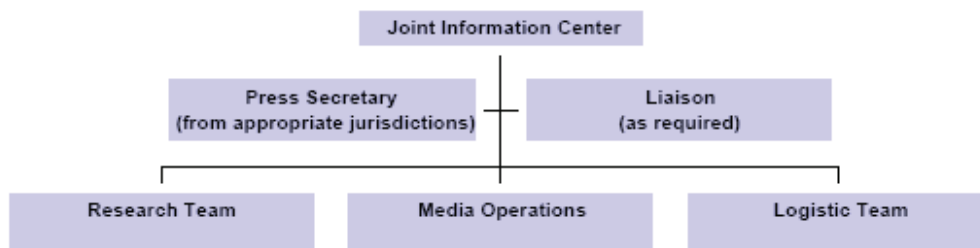
Operational Tasks

The [Public Affairs Field Guide for Joint Information Centers](#) published by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides a useful list of JIC tasks, including:

- Monitoring news coverage to ensure accurate information is being disseminated and received properly, while correcting incorrect information about the emergency response that appears in the news media;
- Managing news conferences and press operations for disaster area tours;
- Providing basic facilities to assist the news media in disseminating information to the public and to credential media representatives;
- Providing all stakeholders directly or indirectly affected by the emergency with access to timely and accurate information about response, recovery, and mitigation activities and their limitations; and
- Ensuring government communication resources are managed effectively and duplication of effort by departments is minimized.

JIC Organization

The [National Incident Management System](#) and [Public Affairs Field Guide for Joint Information Centers](#) recommend three principal teams to manage a JIC:



Joint Information Center Organization

Source: **Department of Homeland Security**, *National Incident Management System*, January, 2004.

- **Research Team** oversees preparation of news releases, daily summaries, media advisories, feature articles, fact sheets, public service announcements, and other written materials;
- **Media Operations** oversees responses to incoming media calls, provides information on latest developments, answers inquiries, monitors news coverage, manages news conferences, assesses public opinions, beliefs, and current knowledge, and provides background information on response activities; and
- **Logistics Team** ensures all JIC functions are operating efficiently, and supervises all operational and administrative activities, including staffing and inter-office communications.

Regional or State JICs

The effects of some incidents or emergencies may span jurisdictions, states, or regions. In such instances, it may be impossible to bring all entities together in a single JIC. However, when more than one JIC is established, coordination and information sharing between individual information centers and the regional JIC is more difficult. When establishing multiple JICs, states or jurisdictions should address media requests through a regional JIC so that responses demonstrate unity in leadership while also providing consistent and coordinated messages.

In an interview about TOPOFF 2, Eric E. Holdeman, Director of the King County Office of Emergency Management stated, "Public information was a huge issue here. We ended up, for various reasons, having four JICs. So, it was quite complicated. For King County we put together a regional JIC. We had over 40 agencies contributing over 120 personnel. It was the first time we had such a combined effort of people and agencies."

Virtual JICs

The establishment of a full-fledged JIC might not be an option during some incidents. For example, there may be a shortage of space, time limitations, or traffic issues hindering essential personnel from traveling. These problems may require the creation of a virtual JIC.

A virtual JIC is a connection of public information agencies or personnel connected through telephone, Internet, or other technical means of coordination. The virtual JIC provides information officers with the ability to communicate with the public without setting up, or working from, a large emergency operations center.

A virtual JIC is best when not created *ad hoc*. Government officials should plan with partnering states and localities for the possible creation of a virtual JIC prior to an incident or emergency.

The Office of Virginia Governor Mark Warner commented on the benefits of a virtual JIC in the National Capital Region (NCR): "We will work in partnership to develop a virtual Joint Information System for the NCR during response to a major emergency or disaster event. Although co-location may not be possible, creating a process and protocols for operating as a 'virtual' joint information center will achieve the goal of a coordinated voice for the public and the media. In turn, an NCR policy about communicating risk and emergency protective measures to the public in the event of an attack will be jointly developed."

Joint Information System

NIMS establishes the Joint Information System (JIS) as the mechanism for exchanging, coordinating, and integrating public information activities among JICs, incident commands, and, when established, area commands. The JIS is comprised of the protocols and procedures for exchanging information between JICs, PIOs from participating response organizations, and private sector organizations.

The JIS coordinates information between JICs and incident managers. As part of the Incident Command System (ICS), NIMS requires a command staff PIO to act as the liaison between the on-scene incident commander and the JIC. The command staff PIO provides information from the scene to the JIC where it will be reviewed, vetted, and provided to the public and the news media as appropriate. As necessary, the IC can also contact JIC managers directly to provide information for public dissemination.

Staffing Considerations

When creating a JIC, planners should consider the following staffing issues:

- Responsibilities of PIOs;
- Support Staff; and
- Staff Training.

Responsibilities of PIOs

Most state and local agencies have either a full-time PIO or someone designated to serve as the PIO. Within a JIC, the PIO is a key staff member supporting the incident command structure. In a large-scale operation, the on-scene PIO will serve as a field PIO with links to the JIC. The PIO's responsibilities include:

- Representing and advising the IC on all public information matters relating to the management of the incident;
- Monitoring and handling media and public inquiries;
- Managing the day-to-day operations of the JIC;
- Developing a written public affairs plan for the first week of operations that include daily messages, media events, and editorial products;
- Liaising and coordinating with PIOs from all government departments and organizations;
- Screening questions and identifying the correct spokesperson to answer questions;
- Managing government communication resources and avoiding duplication of efforts;
- Suggesting human interest stories for media operatives covering the incident; and
- Developing JIC staffing and organizational chart.

Support Staff

State and local PIOs will need to ensure that sufficient support staff are available to assist JIC officials and that each member of the support staff has specific tasks designated to them. PIOs can coordinate with other state agencies to evaluate which of their staff would be available to assist JIC operations (e.g., additional PIOs from agencies not directly involved or a health educator and mental health representative from the state health department). During an incident, the PIO will need to create a schedule that maximizes the use of those skills.

In the event of a large incident or one for which there is a high level of interest, it may also be necessary for the JIC to operate on a twenty-four hour basis. Should this be necessary, the [Joint Information Center Model](#) recommends that the PIO consider

establishing a relief JIC team. Each member of the relief team will assume the same responsibilities and authority as the original team, including the PIO.

The [Joint Information Center Model](#) includes a recommended structure for JIC staffing and position descriptions for all staff operating a JIC.

The [Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building Bombing, April 19, 1995: Final Report](#) states that the JIC established after the 1995 Murrah bombing was understaffed. The report recommends that, “a cadre of state-trained public information volunteers and reservists be developed to support the ODCEM on future disasters. This would allow representation at the State Emergency Operations Center and the JIC.”

Staff Training

Staff that have been identified to assist JIC operations should be provided with training prior to an incident. State and local governments are responsible for coordinating PIO training either through state/local training programs or courses organized by FEMA. Courses will provide PIOs with the opportunity to learn about and practice the skills needed to successfully execute the requirements of the

The [Virginia Department of Emergency Management \(VDEM\)](#) worked with a contractor to establish a PIO training course using a combination of VDEM and FEMA JIC guidelines. At the local level, VDEM is also considering creating a JIC training course for local PIOs to encourage local governments to establish JICs in crises.

job. The [New York State Emergency Management Office](#) Basic PIO Course includes the following:

- Oral and written communications;
- Information dissemination;
- Media interface; and
- Public information planning.

During Hurricane Isabel in 2003, the [Virginia Department of Emergency Management \(VDEM\)](#) selected an old fallout shelter underneath the state police academy as the location of its JIC. After beginning operations, JIC managers determined the shelter was not large enough to accommodate the needs of the operation. VDEM relocated to rooms in the academy and had to acquire further resources to meet their needs. VDEM also set up a virtual JIC by using e-mail to coordinate with other departments who had a stake in the response but were not participating in the JIC.

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