

# **IAEM Bulletin, Disaster Zone Column When and Who Activates the EOC? By Eric Holdeman**

One of the challenges of being an emergency manager is deciding when to activate the Emergency Operations Center (EOC). There are clear-cut choices that are no brainers. A tornado has just impacted your community or the ground just finished shaking. For the earthquake, the power went out and your office is a total mess with cabinets tipped over and the computer monitor was thrown against the wall—Activate!

These extreme cases don't require much judgement on timing. However, every situation is not as clear. This is especially true with extreme weather events. It might be that thunderstorms are forecast, and/or a winter storm is headed your way. Do you activate for every such occurrence? Likely you don't pull the trigger on every snow flake that is forecast (unless you are in Washington, D.C. where the "hint of snow" shuts down government offices).

For weather events your local National Weather Service (NWS) Office and their warnings are your best friend. With an active program and warning officer, teleconference calls can be arranged in advance of impending storms as they move from the advisory, watch to warning status. This advanced warning gives you time to alert agencies and personnel who staff your EOC for emergencies and disasters.

I found that having three levels of activation is helpful.

- Level 1 requires that internal office of emergency management (OEM) staff will physically be present in the EOC and monitoring events from there. I recommend that at a minimum there be two personnel at this level just to allow for continuous staffing and appropriate breaks without leaving the EOC unstaffed.
- Level 2 includes OEM staff and select departments to your government and perhaps key outside agencies or companies. These core EOC members typically included law enforcement; fire department; public works; utilities, and Public Information Officer (PIO) staff.
- Level 3 means – everybody comes! You will need all departments and functions represented, to include policy level representation.

Having pre-established levels allows you to tailor your EOC staffing to the known threats that can be reasonably forecast. Here I must tip my hat to the NWS which in my 31 years of emergency management experience has gotten much better at forecasting significant weather events.

For no notice events, you will have to rely on your notification system to recall personnel to respond to the EOC. I've found for the big events, it is not hard to get the required people to respond. It is the "iffy events" that have not revealed themselves yet that people will try to find excuses not to respond—basically, they want to be home and not sitting in an EOC. Their spouses also want them home—so there can be a tug and pull about needing to be physically present in an EOC. Even in my own family, for snow events my wife would always ask me, "Why do you need to go into work?" My response, "It's my job honey!"

Besides the "when to activate" there can be the question of "who decides to activate" that can be an item of discussion if it is not made clear, practiced, and implemented.

If you are the emergency management director, I highly recommend that you be the person to order an EOC activation. You are the one who is going to be held responsible for any outcome from the response to an emergency or disaster. You should therefore be the decision maker when it comes to activating the EOC. Write that responsibility into your comprehensive emergency management plan and into your EOC procedures so that you have that designated authority.

I know of two different instances where political pressure was brought to bear concerning activating the EOC. In both cases it appeared that the senior political leaders, in one case a mayor and in another, a county chief of staff, thought that activating the EOC was the wrong message to send to constituents. Rather than seeing the step as being proactive, they believed it meant that things had gotten out of control of first responders.

My last piece of advice on activating the EOC is this, "You can only activate an EOC too late, never too early." Once an incident has occurred and you did not respond quickly by activating your EOC, it is likely you may not ever catch-up to the incident. Things have a way of spiraling out of control and once the genie is out of the bottle, you will have great difficulty in being able to gain good situational awareness and having all the appropriate agencies involved—before mistakes begin to be made.

Yes, there is a bit of art to activating the EOC, and you are the artist!

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