

# **IAEM Bulletin—December 2018**

## **Disaster Zone Column**

### **Coordinating not Controlling**

In my professional emergency management career, I re-designated two different Emergency Operations Centers (EOC) to be called Emergency Coordination Centers (ECC). Neither of those facilities carry that designation today—having reverted back to the more familiar EOC terminology.

The term EOC comes out of the military and is the place where “command” is executed from. Military commanders are located there or in a more mobile Tactical Operations Center (TOC). In my military time in service I spent hundreds of hours over the course of 20 years in EOCs and TOCs.

Somewhere along the line early in my civilian tenure in emergency management I came across the usage of the term ECC and found it fit much better how we operate in a civilian environment. When you look at what these centers do:

1. They gather information
2. They coordinate and share that information with others
3. They share what their organizational priorities are—with others
4. They receive requests for resources, fulfill those they can, and forward those they can't to the next higher level of government
5. They coordinate the delivery of those resources
6. And, they do “direct” the use of resources that are under their authority

The last item may be close to “command” in some sense of the word, but the others are not so much “operationally oriented” as focused on coordination.

To be clear, not all EOCs are the same. For smaller jurisdictions they may in fact exert more authority over all decision making in the jurisdiction. However, typically any policy level group in an EOC should stick to “policy and strategic decision making” and let field commanders take care of the tactics. An example of a policy level decision at the EOC would be providing for the free pick-up of storm debris at no extra charge.

If you are looking for true “Command” I think you find that in the field. There you have mobile “Command” vehicles that have command over first responder tactical operations.

Within the National Incident Management System (NIMS) some consider EOCs to be Multi-Agency Coordination Centers (MACC) that help with the allocation of resources to field/ICS commanders for multi-location incidents. There is that word “coordination” again!

I'd like to throw out another concept to you for your consideration. As we look at the EOC/ECC we have had the tendency to concentrate on government centric activities when it comes to disasters. We communicate with and coordinate primarily with other government agencies, up and down the chain. This has included major volunteer organizations like the American Red Cross, especially in mass care events.

In more recent years there has been an effort to integrate our activities and make information more transparent and available to private sector companies that maintain critical infrastructure like electrical power and a broader range organized volunteer agencies active in disasters (VOAD). These activities involve coordination.

While much lip service has been paid to "Whole Community" activities in disaster response and recovery, how much attention have you paid to equipping average citizens to do their part in the disaster response—be it as individuals or self-organizing groups of people? With the advent of social media, we have segments of our general population who are ready, willing and able to take action on their own, with no direct help from you. One of the best case studies of this type of action is documented in the book *American Dunkirk*, which describes how the spontaneous evacuation of downtown Manhattan happened on 9/11—with no prior planning and no central authority directing the activities. I highly recommend it to your reading and examining the social aspect of disaster response.

I do think we need to stop thinking about the general population as individuals and families. These are neighborhoods, apartment building dwellers, clubs, and just general activists that are resources to their community. What they need from the ECC is information on the situation and what activities will be helpful to the disaster response. We moved from calling people impacted by disasters victims, to calling them survivors. Now we need to think of them as disaster responders.

My last thought for you is this, "Be willing to give up some control in order to be more effective." After all, if you are sitting in an EOC, you don't have that much control anyway!

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