



Episode 22: Emergency Support Functions and Incident Command System for Institutions of Higher Education

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Alison Curtis: We're joined here today by Ian Cyr from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Ian, hi. Welcome. Would you like to provide a little bit of background on yourself and your role at your institution?

Ian Cyr: Sure. Good afternoon, Alison. [00:01:00] Thanks for having us on. Always appreciate working with REMS TA [Center] and excited about our conversation today.

I'm a career police officer here at UMass Amherst, just finishing up my 27th year of service to our community. That's the only place that I've been a police officer. It might be the only place that I remain being a police officer as I think about retirement coming up here in the next few years. But most of my career has been on the operational side of policing and really more specifically the tactical side of policing. For many, many years, I was a member of our tactical team. And as a supervisor for most of my career, I was exposed to and responsible for the planning, supervision, and response to many of our planned events that might have turned into critical incidents or were considered major events for our campus community, whether that was move-in processes or commencement or high-activity weekends.

Over the last 11 years, I've [00:02:00] served as a deputy chief of operations and moved over in 2020 to the administrative side of our police department, so more on the inside police work, overseeing our civilian staff as well. But specific to this conversation and the Incident Command System, I serve as our representative to our emergency operations center. I work regularly with our emergency managers in planning for many of those events that I outlined above, as well as responding to those events and running our emergency operations center.

Alison Curtis: A wonderful background. Thank you for sharing. And we're so glad to kind of pick your brain and hear more about your experiences over the years. Specifically, around the Incident Command System and EOC [emergency operations center]. Do you want to provide any information on ICS or maybe, you [00:03:00] know, how it began at UMass and perhaps even how it evolved?

Ian Cyr: Sure. I think most of us in the field of traditional emergency responders understand where ICS was born and that was out of the California fire services as far back as the 1970s. And really—I'm sure that there's many different definitions between ICS purists and then those of

us that kind of come in in a bullish way and apply it to what we do—but it's really the way that I approach this as it's a way to plan for and respond to emergencies in a way that provides really consistent direction. You'll sometimes hear that is managing by objective. It also provides for personnel accountability and a supervisory span of control that is manageable. So, we have supervisors that are only overseeing a certain number of people and that's [00:04:00] for safety strategies and reasons.

But ICS does so much more. I mean, it provides us with situational awareness through regular reporting cadence—you know, we report out regularly during events with an update about what's going on and because things are changing, or things might just be remaining status quo for a period of time. And then ultimately what ICS does is it provides us a format and a structure to document what happened because, even though the event might conclude, it could be just the beginning of the recovery phase of that or the resolution or if there's any litigation that comes on down the road, as well as provide you a mechanism to record associated costs, especially important when you have a declared emergency.

Most recent to us—not recent to us, but in our geographical area—is in July, just massive flooding in the state of Vermont that wiped out a number of communities up there, and a declared [00:05:00] emergency. So, you're going to see situations like that, which could have influenced and impacted higher education.

You know, making sure that they're documenting so that they can get reimbursement, if appropriate. And I think that one of the things that when we talk about ICS, if you're new to it, it can be—it can appear formidable because it's very titled, and on its face value appears very rigid and structured, which is important to have in a situation like this and managing people and critical incidents and situations that are uncertain and changing. But it's important to understand that it's very, very well versed to be applied to planned events, as well as unplanned events. And there's certainly institutions of higher education have many, many planned events. Some of them are really of low or no consequence. Others might be very [00:06:00] highly risk, you know, entitled.

But I think it's important that we can manage it to both planned and unevent—unplanned events. It's interesting because I wish that I could take credit for this, but I used to work with the Assistant Chief at Yale University, and we were teaching critical incident management, and he used the Thanksgiving analogy and applying ICS to Thanksgiving. And I really think that it softens it a lot.

And if you look at the sections of ICS, you have a planning section. And if you apply the planning section duties to Thanksgiving, you know, those people—and it might be the same person across the board, but the planning section is responsible for where is Thanksgiving going to be held? What are the menu items? Who are we inviting? What's the time of the meal? When do

people arrive? And then you have a logistics section, and the logistics section is [00:07:00] responsible for getting all the ingredients to make the meal and cleaning up, et cetera, and providing all of those logistical things. So that is setting the table. And then you have the operations section, which is responsible for preparing the meal, cooking the meal, setting things up, delivering the meal itself. And then finally you have the finance section, which means that somebody has to pay for all of the above. And so, when you take something as simple as Thanksgiving and a planned event and apply ICS over it, you can kind of see how it works very well for many of our planned events in IHEs [institutes of higher education].

Alison Curtis: That's a really cool analogy. I like that. Thank you for sharing that. And I hope that hits home for everyone. It does for me. Are there any strategies that you've used over the years to implement or enhance ICS at your institution?

Ian Cyr: Sure. [00:08:00] You know, I think that—I recall, and—you know, I started my career in 1995 in the police academy and was actually out working as a police officer in the—in early 1996. But I recall in the mid-1990s that in our area of Massachusetts, ICS became more prominent in the law enforcement side of events and incidents.

It was always very present in the fire side. But we started to have more training made available to us in an effort to coordinate those responses with our fire department partners. And that's what we would call now as a unified command. You know, we run situations together because we share resources, and we need to have communication across those disciplines.

Once we started working within ICS, we recognized that we can use it for concepts of planning and logistics, like I said, for regularly scheduled events, sports events, concerts, major events that I referenced earlier that our university [00:09:00] sees on a regular cadence. We also incorporate ICS into a larger context of managing critical incidents on campus. And I think that's a very valuable thing for us to understand is that we have to understand what type of critical incidents our institutions are facing and what could be unique to them. Again, they can be planned or unplanned, but it helps us better prepare and manage for them.

And ideally, what this does is it puts our institutions in a better position to reduce liability. And ultimately, one thing that we get concerned about is reputational damage. Certainly, we want life safety to be preserved, but reputational damage is certainly something that we have to pay attention to.

Some of the strategies that you asked about—you know, we originally subscribed to the strict titling of ICS and then we learned that, you know, this is a shared—it's a shared campus response. It's not unique to traditional first responders. [00:10:00] And as our emergency operations center representatives grew to involve other campus stakeholders, we learned that

those non-law enforcement campus partners face challenges because they weren't accustomed to the language of ICS.

They had little to no training on it, and even if they were trained, it just didn't fit with what they were doing on the day-to-day. So, we began, successfully now, to use emergency support function titles, which really preserved our partner's regular duties. But then it applied those duties to the event. So, it made the communication of what they were doing, or what they were responsible for, much easier to complete. And ultimately, I think that we found that it's more effective.

Similarly, and unique to our role in the police department, is that we have many planned events. Every sports contest that we have officers working, [00:11:00] we have an operational plan. It outlines, you know, what the staffing is, it outlines who's in charge, it outlines the chain of command, it outlines the communication channels, it outlines the duties and what our expectations are of our staff in that event.

And when we think—we plan for a hockey game or a football game, we're not planning that this is likely going to turn into some level of critical incident or emergency, but it's just simply using ICS format to manage that event. And we don't use the specific forms that ICS outlines. We take the intent of those forms, and we change it around into much more of a narrative document for ease of consumption. It's a lot easier for our staff to read a narrative format that takes the concepts of an ICS 201 or a [00:12:00] 205 form and just puts it into real English and allows people to understand what radio channel they're on, for example.

Alison Curtis: So many great thoughts about challenges that are out there. I think that will hopefully connect with a lot of our listeners, in terms of possible solutions. And I'm glad you brought up emergency support functions because that's another example of a model that's out there, although they're used for different purposes but that can be used and modified to fit whatever your unique needs are. So, would you mind providing a little bit more information on emergency support functions, Ian?

Ian Cyr: Sure. You know, if you look at the definition of ESFs in FEMA, you know, they hit some of the larger, I guess, operational categories that any [00:13:00] community might have, whether that's a law enforcement function, a fire function, an emergency medical response function, utilities, communications, you know, things like that.

And what we do is we now take those support functions, and to your point, Alison, is sometimes we plug and play depending on the nature of the event, whether that's planned or it's a response. Case in point, just a few weeks ago, we've—here in the Northeast, we've just been getting hammered with rain, and we had a major storm rolling through. We had tornado watches in effect. So, I happened to be working that day, and I contacted our emergency

manager, and we were planning for what we were going to do should that turn into a warning because if it was turning into a warning, then we were going to evaluate whether or not we would [00:14:00] send out some level of emergency notification. But it didn't turn into a warning. We received a lot of rain very quickly, and it resulted in isolated flooding in some of the roadways here on our campus but, more importantly, some of the buildings.

And between the law enforcement ESF, the emergency management ESF, and our utilities ESF, which are really just three people that were not in the same room together but available through a Teams channel or a phone call, we were coordinating our resources to—could—our utilities folks know we have a list of buildings that are prone to flooding. Can we have the police officers actually go and check those basements and then report back to us? Sure. No problem. This is not a law enforcement event. But we're there as a resource and a support function.

The incident commander, although it wasn't officially [00:15:00] titled, really was our utilities director because they knew what their problem areas were. We went. We sent staff there. We reported back, gave them an itemized list of what was going on. They prioritized it. We helped them shut down a road. We helped them do whatever they needed to do. And we were wrapped up. So that's just on such a very small scale, but it shows—it shows how flexible and how nimble those can be.

Alison Curtis: No, I agree. That's a great example and shows you how those—how adaptable they are and how useful they can be, you know, when you find the right fit.

Ian Cyr: In addition to that, we made contact. We notified our media relations ESF representative, just to give them an update as to what we were responding to in [00:16:00] case we needed to utilize them to send out communications to the campus, you know, that would have been in under their obligations. So, while they weren't directly involved in it, again, a notification that they were aware and preparing if they needed to.

Alison Curtis: That's great. Do you have any tips for implementation of either ICS or ESF that you think other higher ed emergency managers or higher ed police departments should consider or be aware of as they approach this work?

Ian Cyr: Of course, I think we need to keep practicing these because—these concepts—the responses can be a perishable skill. If—the ways in which we do that are: we convene our emergency operations center during times of non-emergency, like for scheduled events. We will bring together [00:17:00] the EOC for major sporting events, football games, commencement activities, move-in activities.

And whether or not we have a full EOC depends on the nature of the event because we also share resources, so we have availability, even though those representatives might not be

physically in our EOC. But by getting folks together during periods of non-emergency, it reinforces the mission of our emergency operations center and the incident command process. And it allows in a relatively safe environment to apply those concepts with very little real-world consequence.

Similarly, we hold quarterly meetings for our EOC team, where we ask the EOC primary representatives and their backups to physically come to the EOC. And that continues a face-to-face contact, [00:18:00] and it also provides us opportunities for tabletop exercises. We're talking 15-, 20-minute conversation about a situation and how we might have them at least just stimulate kind of that thought process again with respect to ICS and managing critical incidents.

And really what we find is that builds and continues to build relationships across many of our disciplines here. And it fosters, I think, ultimately a respect for others. We better understand what people need to do, what their requirements are, and the way to get them into the room because we often are faced with that question: "Well, how do I get people there?" Feed them, offer them food. Nobody likes a noon meeting, but if it has the opportunity where they could get free food and come on in, we tend to have very good participation when we—when we feed our folks. It also happens that UMass Amherst happens to be like one of the best food providers in [00:19:00] the country, maybe 7 years running. So, and part of our EOC team is our dining services. So, they're very well-positioned to feed us well.

And I think that most first responders in institutions of higher education, understand the nuances of our environment. And it's not easily applied as in a one-to-one as it is in the traditional municipality. You know, there needs to be flexibility while applying some of the national practices to our environment.

Alison Curtis: Absolutely. And I love that there's a connection to, you know, award-winning food services and the emergency operations center.

Ian Cyr: Well, you know, we kind of—we kind of poke fun at it, but if you really think about this, the EOC outside of perhaps a campus leadership policy [00:20:00] group, which could be your president, vice president, chancellor, vice chancellor, whatever your governance structure is. You know, those folks are separate from the EOC, and they have to make absolute global decisions on how the university responds to it. But the EOC are the people that are directing the actions for, you know, on the ground. And those people in the EOC need to be in an environment that fosters good decision-making.

Our EOC—we're extremely fortunate because our EOC is very well equipped. It's very comfortable to work in, and we bring dining services in as a sitting member because it is an ESF that we will need to provide for our community, but those people in the EOC need to be properly nourished to make good decisions. If somebody has had, you know, a protein bar for

the entire [00:21:00] day, and this event takes place at 5:30 p.m., and they're hangry, it's entirely possible that they aren't going to make a well-informed decision. So, we hold it dear to make sure that our folks are nourished properly and that they're in good positions to make good decisions.

Alison Curtis: That's, I agree, very important and another great example of the considerations and bringing in different departments and groups within an institution. I want to thank you, Ian, so much for a very informative conversation that we've had here today. I really appreciate you taking the time to share your experience and your expertise. It was very much welcomed, and I hope everyone, you know, enjoyed it as much as I did.

Ian Cyr: Thank you so much for that, Alison. It's a shared responsibility, you know, [00:22:00] and as a practitioner, I certainly appreciate your support and continuing these conversations. So, thank you so much.