



Episode 23: 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: Good morning, Ali. Welcome. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your role within your institution of higher education?

Ali Shah: Yeah, so I work in a medium-sized community college in the southeast part of Texas in [00:01:00] the greater Houston area. Our college has about 40,000 students. That’s a mix between high school students who are completing their high school entirely on our campus through the certificate courses, associate’s degrees, and we have a few bachelor’s degrees program as well. So, we have a broad spectrum of students. We have around 4,000 employees, half of which are full time, the other half are part time.

I am a district-level office, so my responsibilities oversee all of our six campuses. My role is—I’d like to describe it as the chief pessimist for our district. I’m over all emergency management and disaster response. So, my responsibility includes all the mission areas of emergency management, planning, response, drills, exercises, as well as the after-action and recovery process of the district as well.

Alison Curtis: Thank you, [00:02:00] Ali. And Ali Shah serves as the Director of the Office of Emergency Management at San Jacinto College in Texas.

Do you have a little bit of background information as we switch gears and talk about Incident Command System? Is there anything that you think our listeners should know about it? Before we kind of dive into it a little bit more.

Ali Shah: Sure. So, cliff-notes history lesson on the Incident Command System. The philosophy behind the Incident Command System has existed for centuries in the military side of things where it’s a very defined structure of how decisions are made and how they trickle down and how, you know, the missions or task purpose are accomplished.

But there wasn’t really that—a one-to-one translation for that on the civilian [00:03:00] side. So, in the—in the 70s, within California, there was a rash of wildfires where this was discovered as a gap. And the National Forest Service, as well as the U.S. Fire Administration and CAL FIRE, they got together and developed what was the first iteration of Incident Command System that could be used in the civilian world.

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So that was in the 70s. In the 80s, FEMA picked that up as a best practice model for incident command and incident management. Post-9/11, those really took off where an integrated incident management system was developed, and ICS was incorporated as part of that. So, it's—philosophically it's a system that allows you to manage diverse groups of people who are trying to achieve a diverse set of goals that [00:04:00] link up to a higher-level uniform priority.

The structure of ICS has changed over the years to make sure that we maintain that vision. But ICS as a whole is the best practice for managing large-scale incidents and making sure that you maintain some level of control over how that incident is managed.

Alison Curtis: We appreciate that background information and historical context on ICS. Can you talk a little bit about how and why you adopted ICS at your institution?

Ali Shah: Sure. So, emergency management at our institution is a fairly new concept. So, prior to about 2015 or so, we had [00:05:00] a shared governance model when it came to incident management. And what that really means is we don't change anything when an incident occurs, we just try to run through that incident like we do day-to-day operations and see if we can manage it that way.

For the most part, smaller incidents can be absorbed in that structure, but we had a few large-scale incidents where—severe weather-related hurricanes that impacted us a bit more—where we discovered that shared governance model broke down, just based on what we were able to accomplish internally and with the resources that we had available to us.

So, a decision was made to implement a mechanism by which we could respond to large-scale incidents and that's kind of where ICS came in. We initially started with ICS mirroring our existing structure, essentially one-to-one. And we quickly realized that was what we [00:06:00] needed to get out of, and that's why we were doing this.

So, we then shift a bit more towards traditional ICS, which was adopted in about 2015. And since then, as we've become more accustomed to the traditional ICS structure, we've looked at and done some QA [quality assurance] and QI [quality improvement] on that process and realized that there's a middle ground somewhere between shared governance and ICS. That's the best fit for us.

So today, if you look at our command structure and our incident management team, it's somewhere in the middle of traditional ICS and shared governance existing hierarchy structures. And we think that works really best for us because it allows us to still follow the core principles of ICS but also not have to retrain a whole cadre of staff into different ways of managing things: one from a day-to-day perspective and one from an incident perspective. [00:07:00]

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Alison Curtis: That is—it’s interesting to talk about how you have adopted ICS in a way that works for your institution and modified it as needed. Can you talk a little bit more about what went into that modification or, you know, any other strategies that you have found helpful in implementing ICS?

Ali Shah: Yeah, I love talking about that: because it allows a practitioner to be creative in how they approach incident management, but still, you can rely on the core principles and the foundations of ICS. So, in our institution, what we discovered was that we kept on going to the same players when it came to manning our incident management team and having to train them on the technical aspects of their position.

So, you know, [00:08:00] traditionally you look to your public safety folks, your first responders, to man your ICS positions. And then you have to train them in things like finance or things like logistics, which on a small-scale incident may not be that hard to do, but when you get to large complex incidents, especially when you are talking about public institutions where there’s the intersection of Federal law and state law and really intricate requirements when it comes to fiscal responsibility and how those intersect with emergencies, it’s really hard to train up somebody in a short amount of time to know all those nuances.

So, we flipped that around, and we went out and reached out to our folks who do that on a day-to-day basis. So, we reached out to our finance folks. We reached out to our logistics folks and said, “Hey, would you be able to fill this position if we were to train you on ICS?” And what we discovered was that from a leadership standpoint, we got [00:09:00] a lot of buy-in because where in the past we would have people that we’ve had just-in-time trained for finance and they had done things the FEMA way or the ICS way and then we took all this documentation to our finance folks who weren’t necessarily familiar with that process and they had to translate that back into their language to be able to process it.

So, we got some buy-in from our leadership because they could—they just had more ownership in that process, and they could modify those processes in a way that worked for them as well as us. So, once we had that leadership buy-in, we got those positions—our ICS positions filled. We trained them on the ICS concepts and how the incident management system works. And once we had that going, we drilled it and then when it comes to an actual incident, it was seamless. The transition from day-to-day operations to incident operations [00:10:00] went really well because now you have people who knew the system, who knew what was expected, not just in the time of the incident when we’re in the operational phase but also in the long-term recovery phase, the audit phase. So, that’s how we went about manning our ICS positions.

We also made a concerted effort to limit the technical jargon. So, instead of referring to things like “ICS 202” or “the 204.” We said, OK, we have a “resource request,” or we have a “request for services.” So, we didn’t bog people down with having to remember a whole new set of

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language and tools and terms. We were able to translate those into verbiage that they were already used to so that it took a little bit of work on the front end on our part to make sure that there was that data dictionary, so to speak. But once we have that in place, it made incident management a whole lot easier. [00:11:00]

So, that's how we approach incident management and that's how we fill our teams. And not only do we exercise that in large-scale incidents, we'll pull those guys even for planned events where it gives us an opportunity to exercise those concepts in a less stressful environment.

Alison Curtis: Yeah, that's a lot of great food for thought in terms of I think—something that can be recreated at other institutions. And we have heard that a little bit, that ICS is not just for managing large-scale emergencies, it can be used—it's scalable for other academic or institutional events on campus.

Ali Shah: Yeah, that's a—that's a really good point. And we encourage our folks to adopt that model as often as they can. So, [00:12:00] anytime we have an event that has more than 100 people, there's already a component where there's—the folks who are running the event have to identify who's in charge of the event. So, we took that a step further and said, okay, instead of calling that person “in charge,” why don't we call them the commander? And we switched out the verbiage a little bit to kind of explain to them who is a decision-maker, who has go-no-go authority, who is the logistics person, who is the operations person. And what we ended up with was a structure where without really realizing that you were using ICS, you ended up using ICS.

So, when we came in and said, oh yeah, by the way, we want you to use the ICS system. Like, well, you're already using it. You've already defined these terms, and this is how it flows. And now I'm going to make you a really pretty org chart that demonstrates to you how that ICS system works.

But it allowed people to become comfortable and familiar with that process. But it also on the back [00:13:00] end allowed us to know how things were functioning. And when we pulled those folks for large-scale incidents, they were already familiar with the concept and were able to fit in fairly easily.

Alison Curtis: That's so cool. Sounds like beneficial to all parties involved and a great practice activity. Do you have—[cross talk] I was just going to ask you, Ali, do you have any other tips that higher ed emergency managers should consider when they're implementing ICS based on lessons that you've learned?

Ali Shah: Yeah, so the biggest one that I would like to share is that there's no perfect one-size-fits-all ICS methodology. The core tenets, the philosophies, the foundations exist, but you can

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modify them to fit your organization, even your incident, [00:14:00] in a way that's beneficial to you. You know, facetiously, I say there's no—there's no ICS jail. No one is going to come and tell you that you can't—you can't do ICS anymore because you didn't use it perfectly how it was illustrated in the—in the ICS training manual. You have the flexibility to modify it as you need.

In the early 2000s, FEMA actually had different ICS versions, So you had an ICS for healthcare, you had ICS for higher education, and then you had ICS for public service. In 2015, I think, don't quote me on the date, but FEMA actually came around and said, "We're going to do away with that. We're going to leave one ICS as a—as a structure, and you can modify it the way you want that best fits your needs." [00:15:00]

So instead of prescribing, "Hey, if you're a healthcare institution, you're going to do ICS this way, and if you're education, you're going to do ICS this way," they took those all away and just left the core ICS fundamentals out, and so you can go in and modify this the way you need. And that's really key. You don't have to force or shoehorn ICS into your structure. You look at your structure, work backwards to see what works for you, and then adapt that ICS structure to the way that you need.

The other thing I would—I would say is: if there's one tenet of ICS that you really want to hold on to is that span of control. A lot of times, especially in higher education, you may be in a one-, two-, or three-person shop, and when a large-scale incident unfolds, you're suddenly the person who's making all of the recommendations, all of the decisions. But you don't have to. That's—you, know the span [00:16:00] of control is, you know, eight people or so. You want to shrink your sphere of influence into those people and let those people, you know, make those further-out decisions. So really hold onto that, that span of control. It'll make your life easier. It'll be less stressful. You'll be able to work longer. Don't assume that you have to manage the entire institution by yourself within your office. Use that expertise that is available to you and leverage their subject-matter expertise to guide that decision making and take some of the load off of you.

Alison Curtis: Those are some amazing tips. And kind of piggybacking off of your last point, you know, what office or role within an institution do you think is one of the greatest partners to consider using in ICS implementation?

Ali Shah: Yeah, so [00:17:00] I'm going to—I'm going to answer that in two parts: the operational part and then the decision-making, the leadership part.

So, from an operational standpoint, you know, your student services group and then your facilities group are key. Your student services group, the group that's not necessarily the teaching part but is over all the other wraparound services that your institution offers, they have their hands on everything, they know how things work, they have the resources, they

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have the connections, and usually they also have the manpower. So, be friends with that group. They can—operationally they can—they can be a force multiplier for you. You can take those groups and really put them to work on your priorities and your goals, and they'll know how to get that accomplished in a very efficient manner.

From the facilities standpoint, those guys know [00:18:00] how your institution runs. So, if you're looking at, you know, looking at processes on how to do damage assessment, for example, this is the group that does that on a day-to-day basis. They have a way to do your damage assessment. They have a way to document that damage assessment. They have a way to fix that damage in a manner that is most cost efficient for you. So, instead of reinventing the wheel and training a group of volunteers to go do the damage assessment, utilize your facilities folks. They already have that. They likely also already have a process to document it all that with a few minor tweaks would serve you in terms of your insurance or your public assistance claims as well. So again, those guys are key in not only adding efficiency and efficacy to your process but also getting those processes deployed and operational in a very, very timely manner.

Now [00:19:00] switching focus to the leadership side, a lot of times emergency management as an office gets, is lower down in your organizational hierarchy with a dotted line that goes to a higher-level leader. That can be problematic because it adds several layers to your decision-making. And then it's always great when you switch from your solid line to the dotted line. When do you involve those leaders? When do you not involve those leaders? So, if there is a place where emergency management should live, especially when it comes to structuring your Incident Command System for those response, and being able to very quickly switch from day-to-day operations to incident operations, you [00:20:00] have to place it in a way that you're directly linked to a decision-maker.

So, in our institution, our office reports to the CFO. There are other offices where emergency management reports to the CEO, the provost, the chancellor, or the chief administrative officer. But regardless of where, you have to be placed in a way where you are directly connected to that decision-maker. What that allows you to do is: even before the incident unfolds, you are able to brief them on what is happening and what to expect. Not only do you accomplish that, but on a day-to-day basis, what we call the blue-sky days, you are constantly exposing your senior leadership, those decision-makers, to how emergency management works, what emergency management does, and what the incident priorities [00:21:00] will be when you do switch to that mode.

And that is key because your leadership who is making those decisions needs to understand how incident response works. Otherwise, there is this friction between what are organizational priorities versus what are incident priorities. But if you have an opportunity to have that direct line of communication, not just on the incident side but on a day-to-day-basis, then they know

where you're coming from, and you know where they're coming from. So, you can modify your incident priorities based on the strategic thinking of your leadership. And then your leadership knows, OK, when Ali comes to my office, he's going to want to do X, Y, and Z. So, we need to be prepared for that.

So, to me, that's really important to have that direct connection to that decision-making group that really lays the foundation for your Incident Command System. And it ensures the [00:22:00] smooth and efficient functioning of that Incident Command System, where in other deployments of ICS, you can have a really pretty ICS structure that's set out, but you're not connected to the decision-maker. So, you're not able to efficiently make those decisions and deploy those decisions and implement them in an efficient manner.

Alison Curtis: Lots of great food for thought, Ali, and tips. We appreciate you sharing all of these considerations, and I hope they're helpful to everyone else too, as they consider how they can improve emergency management at their institution or elevate it in some sort of way.

Ali Shah: Thank you.

Alison Curtis: Ali, my final question for you is: Are there any resources out there on ICS, or is there some place that you recommend people go to get more information on the topic?

Ali Shah: Yeah, [00:23:00] so, from a Federal level, you've got REMS. You've got FEMA, themselves, who have a lot of resources and trainings available for ICS. The biggest resource, in my opinion, is your state, your individual state. Not only will they have resources that familiarize you with how ICS works, but they also will show you how your state works because when you're talking about IHEs [institutes of higher education], you're likely coordinating with the state. So, to know how their system works and how they expect things to happen, that's going to smooth those communications and those resource requests a lot for you. So, I highly recommend becoming familiar with your own state and how your state emergency management, your state emergency operations center, how they work. If you are able to go visit or get a seat in the—either at the liaison side [00:24:00] or just at the seat at the table with that state emergency operations center, that again is really, really helpful. But being involved at that level is key.

And then that kind of trickles down to the rest of the jurisdiction authorities as well. If you're located in the county and your county has an emergency management program, you know, get to know them. I find that the more I'm able to insert myself in those jurisdictional conversations, the more resources I am able to get from the state and the county and the city level. One of the things that I always recommend to do is help them out in the blue-sky days, and they'll be there for you during the gray-sky days. One of the things that a lot of emergency management offices are looking for, outside of your really big cities or really big counties, the

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offices are always looking for places where they can hold [00:25:00] trainings and workshops and classes. But what you know what we're really good at? Holding classes and trainings and seminars. So, what we do is we extend a blanket invitation to our local emergency management office. Like, "Hey, if you want to do a class, if you want some teaching space, we have it." And we accommodate them. That gets us on our campus. So, they become familiar with our campuses, they become familiar with how we operate. And we're not a back-burner topic for them when they're planning.

And there's other things that IHEs do really well that can be pain points for your local emergency management—things like managing large amounts of traffic. If you are an IHE of any size, you have managed traffic and how to move [a] large number of people in and out of buildings, parking lots. And you probably have a really efficient process for doing so. On the municipal and the county side, they don't evacuate [00:26:00] every week. So that planning is really a pain point for them. So, if you are able to offer your insight to them and help them plan those things, then they are more familiar with you. Either that line of communication is created and you can then form a partnership and collaborate with them on all sorts of other things as well.

So, my tip would be to start becoming more engaged with your local- and state-level emergency management offices. You know, share with them the expertise that you have that they may not necessarily have and invite them and let them sit in your office, come look at your EOCs, look at your operations. We also offer the use of our EOC as a secondary EOC for a lot of our jurisdictions. So, if there is a large-scale event where their EOC is not available, we could step in and say, "Hey, we have space where we can set you up." [00:27:00]

And again, that, you know, blue-sky day that opens up those channels of communication, it starts to get those wheels turning, and you will then start to see the fruits of that come through in terms of resources, in terms of exercises and planning help. And that can again have a tangential effect on things that you are able to do. If you are able to get in with your local emergency management and become part of their hazard mitigation planning, well, now you're open to hazard mitigation grants. If you are able to get into—coming from an urban environment—if you're able to get into that urban area security planning, well, then you're now open up, open yourself up to urban area security initiative grant funding.

So, there's the proximal effect of just getting to know those people and having them around and knowing those contacts, but there's also those distal [00:28:00] effects of their funding opportunities that are out there that if you are able to create those connections and open up those lines of communications and build those partnerships, it'll open up those grant opportunities for you, either directly by you applying or even that jurisdiction applying on your behalf and saying, "Hey, we have a large IHE in our jurisdiction, and they're lacking this," and

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then that jurisdiction will apply and pass through those benefits to you. So, it can have distal effects as well that are beneficial to your organization.

Alison Curtis: Ali, so much wonderful information. Thank you so, so much for joining us today and sharing all of your expertise.

Ali Shah: Thank you for having me.

Alison Curtis: I hope there are many blue-sky days ahead.

Ali Shah: I hope so too.

Alison Curtis: Thanks again, and we appreciate you and all your work with the REMS TA Center.
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