

The devastation following Hurricane Katrina underscores the need for all levels of an organization to be prepared for a multi-agency rescue response.



PHOTO CHRIS MICKAL



COMPLIANCE CULTURE

Read on, NIMS resisters: Understanding the rationale behind NIMS might make it easier to comply

By Richard Andring

Across the country, firefighters and company officers are huddled around the station computer, frantically working to finish one of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) incident command system (ICS) online courses. As we all know, the completion of such courses is required for fire departments to become fully compliant with the NIMS fiscal year 2006 implementation. Although the courses are designed to be completed by individuals, taking the team approach is not nearly as detrimental as the lack of commitment to NIMS principles displayed by many organizations. Becoming NIMS compliant is not merely a box that we check on a form; it is an integral piece of the larger effort in the fire service to improve service and safety for the community and for our personnel.

BUT WHY?

For months, fire departments across the country have directed their firefighters and company officers to complete the NIMS online curriculum: ICS-100 (Introduction to ICS), ICS-200 (Basic ICS) and FEMA IS-700 (NIMS: An Introduction). The lack of adequately trained and experienced instructors has forced the fire service to rely on electronic media to present this critical information. The online dissipation of NIMS information has gone well. But providing the information without accompanying drills and exercises does not afford an adequate and complete experience. It's critical that emergency personnel have extended opportunities to drill on and exercise the acquired information. These multi-company, battalion-wide and department-wide drills should involve our counterparts in law enforcement, public health and public works whenever possible. The key to effectively exercising NIMS/ICS is to train with the same agencies that will respond in a real emergency.

Although the fire service is making good progress in the race to provide NIMS training to emergency services personnel before the Sept. 30 deadline¹, it often seems those who receive the information do not fully understand why such training is important and how it will affect them. Emergency personnel know it's necessary to complete NIMS training; however, without knowing the *rationale* behind such training, their training experience is sometimes meaningless. Many individuals are asking their organizations why such training is necessary—and they're justified in doing so. The nation's emergency services have done a poor job of explaining to our members the importance of being NIMS compliant and the benefits NIMS/ICS can bring to their organizations and communities.

As someone who has nearly two decades of experience working in and teaching incident management, it's clear to me there's a disconnect between those who set forth the standards with a defined purpose and goal and those responsible for implementing the standards, as well as training and supervising emergency responders. Many first responders see NIMS/ICS training as just another certificate to place in their personnel file, or as another requirement to satisfy the federal government. *Example:* I recently observed an engine company working together to complete the online ICS-200 course. When I asked about the importance of completing such training, the company officer summed it up: "The battalion chief requires us to complete these courses so the department can comply with NIMS." The officer added that completing the training is one component of becoming compliant so the department can receive federal grants. This officer's opinion is not uncommon; first responders often don't recognize how NIMS can improve our operations, and instead tend to see compliance as just one more level of bureaucracy.



PHOTO CHRIS WICKAL

Firefighters from departments across the country were called to respond to Hurricane Katrina, demonstrating the need for all first responders to be proficient in NIMS/ICS.

When emergency responders don't appreciate the full importance of NIMS/ICS training, it's often a reflection of the attitudes and perceptions of superior officers. When high-ranking personnel speak negatively about NIMS or fail to create productive training, exercise and implementation programs, they send the message to the lower ranks that NIMS proficiency is not important. First responders may then conclude it's not worth the effort it takes to establish the system at an incident, or to remain proficient in its use.

This lack of commitment often begins at the top of the organization and cascades down to frontline personnel. The benefits that NIMS/ICS training can provide must be embraced by senior leadership and embedded in the organizational culture. NIMS/ICS are proven concepts that provide a safer work environment for responders, create effective coordination between organizations and lead to better understanding among partners in emergency services—with the ultimate result of improving overall efficiency within our organizations.

THE NEED FOR NIMS ILLUSTRATED

The problems we experience at an incident scene can often be attributed to our misuse of the incident management system (or in some cases, failing to use ICS all together). Recently, I observed a full-scale mass casualty incident (MCI) field exercise involving more than 100 victims and hazardous materials in an urban setting. *The outcome:* There was a significant disconnect between response agencies and widespread misuse of ICS.



PHOTO RICK MCCLURE

Field exercises are essential for preventing disconnect between agencies during a real-life incident. Such training can also help first responders understand why it's so important to master NIMS/ICS concepts.

Clearly, fire, EMS and law-enforcement personnel had received some level of NIMS/ICS training. Equally as clear: They had not trained together, and their approach and implementation of NIMS/ICS was parochial at best.

As each agency arrived on scene, its supervisors set up separate command structures on opposite sides of the incident. Formal communications were not in place between fire and law enforcement for nearly 45 minutes, and each agency functioned independently. Although the agencies may have believed they were functioning in the appropriate manner, those of us who stepped back from the incident and examined the entire picture observed a scene of complete chaos. The agencies' isolated decisions created overall dysfunction.

Although this incident was a planned exercise, the cost of such mistakes in a real-world situation could be immense. Due to the lack of cooperation between the responding agencies, many EMS and law-enforcement personnel were unaware that hazardous materials had been spilled. This created multiple problems because first responders were not adequately equipped to be working in contaminated areas. Personnel walked through hazardous materials and transmitted the materials throughout the scene. Victims became contaminated and spread the contaminants throughout ambulances and eventually to receiving hospitals. Lack of communication also precipitated a long delay in the transportation of victims.

Compliance Culture

One of the main lessons learned from this staged incident: NIMS/ICS training should be incorporated into every facet of first-responder emergency culture. It's not enough to merely complete the online courses. High-ranking personnel must embrace the importance of NIMS concepts and display this commitment to personnel at all levels of the organization. They must also create training opportunities that teach NIMS/ICS concepts and provide first responders ample opportunity to drill on and exercise the skills they have learned. Although the training I observed was fraught with errors and miscommunication, those who participated should be applauded for their efforts to test the system and obtain corrective feedback. The actors in training drills always go home at the end of the day. With repeated training, these agencies can address their mistakes and ensure that real victims in a real incident—and the responding personnel—also go home safe. Like all emergency workers, the personnel were striving to do an excellent job; to do so, they must possess the correct tools and experience. NIMS/ICS training gives first responders a tool to implement in all circumstances.

AN EXEMPLARY EXAMPLE

As I conduct ICS training sessions across the country, I am repeatedly surprised by the lack of ICS knowledge at all levels, from the rookie firefighter to the fire chief. Although this lack of knowledge has been acceptable in some ways up to this point, it



PHOTO RICK MCCLURE

During mass casualty incidents, interagency cooperation and communication is critical to ensuring hazardous materials are not transmitted throughout the scene.

cannot continue. Recent manmade and natural disasters are grave and solemn reminders of the need for preparedness. No area of the country is immune to these large-scale incidents, and it is becoming commonplace to deploy responders across state lines and even across the country. *An excellent example:* Hurricane Katrina. Fire service resources and emergency personnel were pulled from far-reaching areas of the country to aid in the response and recovery efforts.

NIMS/ICS provides the framework for the way incidents should be managed, uses common response terminology and creates the opportunity for genuine cooperation among organizations. A few agencies have gone beyond mere compliance and taken the challenge head on; they actively train to become successful at using the guidelines and criteria set forth in NIMS. Agencies that strive to exceed NIMS standards should be applauded; they are working beyond what is expected and their efforts will ultimately save lives.

One such organization is the Seattle Fire Department (SFD). For the past six months, the SFD's leadership has been training side-by-side with their counterparts in law enforcement. The city's fire service and law enforcement leaders recognize the vital importance of educating all levels of their departments and then ensuring each level receives similar training to establish a common set of objectives that aid in the mitigation of both everyday and large-scale incidents. I find admirable their dedication and willingness to not only work side-by-side, but to consistently drill and exercise together. In addition to the required ICS-100, ICS-200 and FEMA IS-700 courses, their training has included the National Fire Academy Command and General Staff course and the U.S. Fire Administration All-Hazard Incident Management Team, Incident Commander and Planning Section Chief courses. Their ultimate goal: Creating several Incident Management Teams (IMT) that will respond to events in the Seattle metro area and stand by for deployment outside of the city and the state.

The SFD has applied NIMS concepts and processes in its day-to-day responses, its planning efforts for such annual events as the



PHOTO COURTESY RICHARD ANDRING

Leaders from the Seattle Fire Department and the Seattle Police Department train together regularly to establish and review a common set of response objectives for both everyday and large-scale incidents.

Compliance Culture

NIMS/ICS is not designed solely for large-scale disasters; it is in the day-to-day encounters between agencies that NIMS can have its greatest impact.



PHOTO MICHAEL COPPOLA

Mardi Gras and Sea Fair celebrations and its disaster preparedness efforts. The city of Seattle has been effective at the most essential aspect of full NIMS compliance: Its personnel not only possess an outward commitment, but they also believe in the importance of NIMS concepts, which directly effects their operations.

BEYOND LARGE INCIDENTS

The essential role of NIMS/ICS information and implementation is most easily understood in the context of large disasters and incidents. But NIMS principles can be effectively implemented and used in everyday situations, too. This is especially evident when you observe independent agencies productively working together toward common goals and objectives. How do we nurture such relationships? Lt. Steve Turcott of the Washington State Patrol believes the key lies in spending time with individuals from other agencies and jurisdictions. Turcott says even simple actions such as having a cup of coffee with someone from another agency can help build the foundation for interagency cooperation during critical incidents. The essence of NIMS/ICS training is the ability to work side-by-side effectively with all emergency personnel.

In many day-to-day encounters where interagency cooperation is essential, such as cooperation between firefighters and law-enforcement personnel, individuals leave the scene wondering why the other organization did not do its job properly. Firefighters and police often function separately, even when working within a few feet of each other. This approach usually leaves both parties frustrated and discouraged, and it represents the area where NIMS can make its greatest impact. The NIMS philosophy stresses the importance of interagency relationships and understanding each other's roles. This approach is justified by the fact that agencies typically become more productive and effective when their members form positive interagency relationships.



IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT MONEY

All agencies are aware of the importance of becoming NIMS compliant in order to receive federal funding. Money was tied to compliance to ensure all emergency service organizations completed the courses and received indispensable information. Although federal dollars present an incentive, they should not be the driving force behind becoming NIMS compliant. As emergency personnel, we are well aware of the large-scale catastrophes and disasters that have occurred in the past few years. We are not immune to more of these tragedies, which will eventually impact every corner of the nation. NIMS/ICS will prepare all first responders to handle such events by working together. Just as important, NIMS/ICS creates a framework in which everyday situations and emergencies can be handled safely and efficiently. I've witnessed both the successes and failures of multi-agency responses, so I know how important it is for all levels of the organization to take NIMS compliance seriously. Ultimately, NIMS will help us provide better service to our communities and ensure our emergency service providers go home at the end of the day. ☺

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NOTES

1. Fiscal year 2006 NIMS requirements must be completed by Sept. 30, 2006. All first responders must complete ICS-100 (Introduction to ICS) and FEMA IS-700 (NIMS: An Introduction); first-line supervisors must also complete ICS-200 (Basic ICS). You can obtain NIMS training guidelines at www.fema.gov/nims.