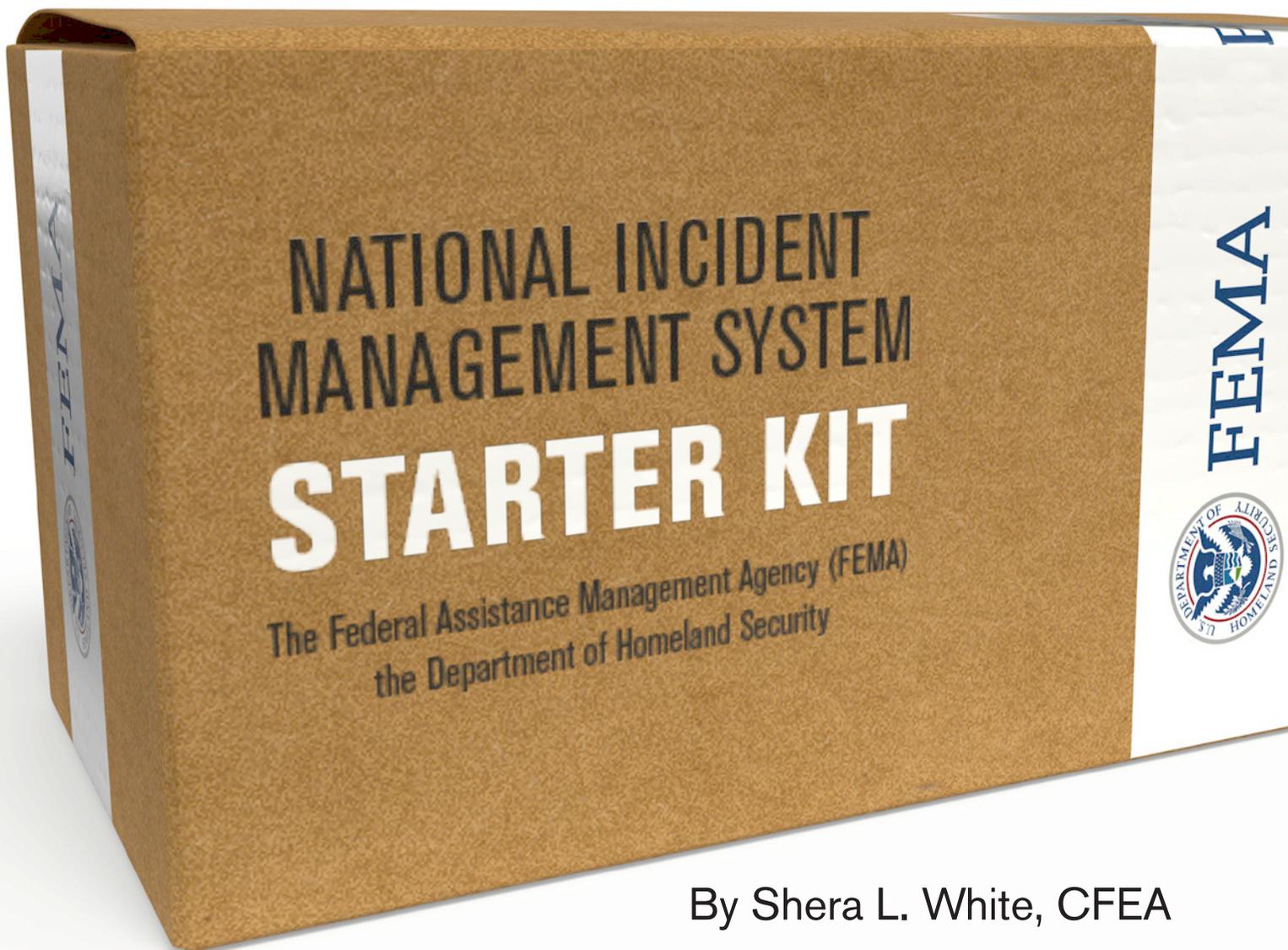


# WHEN TRAGEDIES OCCUR:

## A Starter Kit for Using FEMA's Systems in Times of Crisis



By Shera L. White, CFEA

There's an unfortunate, yet familiar question posed around water coolers stretching from San Diego to Boston; "Do you remember where you were when, fill in the blank tragedy happened?" We recite our responses; pulling from the dark corners of our minds, where we log the unspeakable. Incomprehensible visions and inconsolable sorrow reside there, too. But, in today's climate of repeated terrorist threats and intent, we've been forced to push away the denial, shine light on those dark places and recalibrate.

That process began at 8:46 a.m. on the morning of September 11, 2001.<sup>1</sup> America made an important pivot that day. The way the nation approached public safety took a contemplative turn. Our vulnerabilities were exposed and exploited, on our soil and that notion caused us to re-examine the ways in which we function, daily. One

of the products of our self-assessment was the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Although most of us relate DHS to the current border control discussion, its sub-agency, the Federal Assistance Management Agency (FEMA), has established a strong foundation for how first responders and even special events professionals respond to public safety issues and emergencies.

The Federal Assistance Management Agency (FEMA), of the Department of Homeland Security, has created the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to ... "provide a consistent nationwide approach for federal, state, tribal and local governments

to work together to prepare for, prevent, respond to and recover from domestic incidents, regardless of cause, size or complexity."<sup>2</sup>

### **What is the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and How Do I Use It for Event Planning?**

Take the Manchester Arena bombing, Las Vegas Route 91 Harvest Festival shootings or a tornado sweeping through

your event site. As event planners, we have plans for everything- staffing plans, setup and breakdown schedules, etc., but do we have a planned response for these unexpected occurrences?

When an unforeseen tragedy happens, our event landscape and related personnel broadens to include firefighters, police, rescuers, medical professionals and other agencies that specialize in saving lives and reacting to danger. Luckily for event professionals, the National Incident Management System incorporates the Incident Command System (ICS) which "is already in use by firefighters, hazardous materials teams, rescuers and emergency medical teams... for the management of all incidents."<sup>2</sup>

### **How it All Began**

The Incident Command System, established in the early 1970's, was a fix to the difficult collaboration of response by municipal, state and Federal resources- to a string of Southern California wildfires. The system is just as meaningful today in event planning by "optimizing communication and coordination, and facilitating the protection of life and property."<sup>3</sup>

### **It's Your Event Assistant**

When planning your special event, ICS is the tool box that houses all event details, objectives, contact information, site plans, medical plans and the like. There are specific electronic forms (ICS Forms) that guide coordinators through the planning process; allowing for additional input from Police, Fire, Medical Staff and Emergency Management personnel. This compilation of forms, put into one centralized document is called an Event Action Plan or EAP. In the case of an actual emergency, the Event Action Plan becomes an Incident Action Plan or IAP. The Incident Command System, which houses these documents, is easily accessible to all responders for a seamlessly executed approach. There is no on-the-fly decision-making and planning needed, it's already in the system.

### **I'm Sorry...What's Your Name, Again?**

Planning in advance for difficult situations allows key players to meet each other, develop trusting relationships and initiate conversations BEFORE the unspoken happens. Teamwork is made easier when you know all the members. The ICS system and its forms, leads cross-organizational departments to work together and strategize in a way in which they wouldn't normally. For example, the

Traffic Engineering Specialist and the Emergency Management Technician each have valid concerns, yet different perspectives regarding road closures and thoroughfare access. When securing plans and providing information for ICS Forms, contributors can work through issues and easily identify conflicting systems and glitches.

### **Is the Incident Command System Relevant for Smaller Companies and Non-Profit Organizations?**

Private event companies and non-profit organizations are just as vulnerable to the threat of disasters and incidents, both big and small. The level of coordination and response may vary based on the capabilities of the organization, but the need for planning is the same. Weather, natural disasters and human-imposed occurrences are never reserved for public vs private organizations.

After one hour of watching the evening news, it's clear that the world of terrorism, both domestic and abroad, has evolved. The strategy has expanded from attempting colossal attacks on mass gatherings, to reaching vulnerable soft target events- where planners adopt the "it won't happen to me" mantra. It's important to understand that smaller organizations and lower-scaled events should be parties in this conversation, too.

### **What are the Key Tools for Learning and Using the System?**

#### **#1. Visit <https://training.fema.gov>**

After setting up your free account in the Emergency Management Institute, you can complete free online courses through the Independent Study, sign-up for more in-depth courses offered throughout the country, and apply to participate in specialized training programs. In the self-guided courses, you will find introductions to the National Incident Management System (NIMS), the Incident Command System (ICS) and other systems that will be used to execute the response in an emergency situation. You will also learn about the organizational structure of a response and what role the event coordinator plays in that process.

**#2. Familiarize yourself with the terminology.** As an event planner, many of the terms and acronyms used in ICS aren't a familiar part of our day to day vocabulary. In fact, the terms used are most familiar to the police, fire and emergency responders who deal with these threats as a normal part of their 9-to-5. It's alright

# In the event of an unfortunate incident at your event, the ICS Forms in your Event Action plan take life.

to lean on their expertise and use them as a resource in understanding what things mean. They understand the complexities of the system and know that as a novice, there are many questions to ask. You'll find that your curiosity and willingness to dig-in are encouraged.

**#3. Try it out.** After you've done some training, try the system out on your next event. Dismiss the pressure of requiring perfection; there's always more to learn! As you navigate through the creation of your first action plan, you'll find that certain forms will be more relevant than others—depending on the scale and landscape of your event. Perhaps an extensive medical response plan isn't necessary for a 2-hour event. As you work through the system, the details of each form will guide you through the thought and planning process.

## The Worst Happened... Now What?

In the event of an unfortunate incident at your event, the ICS Forms in your Event Action plan take life. Your committee of contributors now takes on official roles and responsibilities in the overall response process. Each stakeholder, by referencing the information in the ICS system, now has a clear outline of what conditions currently exist and how best to move forward.

Here are a list of key stakeholders that may exist in your organization, and what their relevant role or responsibility may be in the course of an emergency response<sup>4</sup>:

**Incident Commander** - (Special Event Coordinator) An Incident Commander (IC) is responsible for the overall management of the special event. Certain incidents occurring during a special event may dictate the need for a specific Incident Commander to manage that incident.

**Safety Officer** - (Police Lieutenant or Chief) The Safety Officer's function is to develop and recommend measure for assuring personnel safety and assess or anticipate hazardous and unsafe conditions.

**Information Officer** - (Public Relations Director or Promotions Director) The Information Officer, otherwise known as the Public Information Liaison, is responsible for developing and releasing public information regarding safety matters

of the event to the news media, to incident personnel and to other appropriate agencies and organizations.

**Liaison Officer** - (Public Relations Specialist) This representative serves as the contact person for agency staffers from assisting or cooperating agencies who are assigned to the event.

**Operations Section Chief** - (Superintendent) Manages tactical operations; Supervises the execution of the IAP for Operations; Approves the release of resources.

**Planning Section Chief** - (Administrative Manager) Collects, evaluates, processes and disseminates information for use throughout the event; Reports any significant changes in the status of the event.

**Logistics Section Chief** - (Logistics Coordinator) Identifies anticipated and known event service and support requirements; Supervises requests for additional resources.

**Finance/Administration Section Chief** - (Financial Analyst) Manages all financial aspects of an event's command infrastructure; Provides financial and cost analysis information, as requested.

## So What is the Major Take-Away?

Although starting any new planning system can be an intimidating feat, your safety and the well-being of your festival patrons is worth the effort to explore the system. We as event planners have been charged to provide meaningful and joyous events for our constituents, but with that honor comes the responsibilities of being diligent in establishing ways of protecting our patrons and responding efficiently and effectively in a time of crisis. The NIMS and ICS systems are a critical way of doing that.

After gaining a 101 perspective of what ICS offers, you may find that your organization is not yet ready to commit to the process, and that's alright, too. The Emergency Management Institute has training guides and educational tools available that are just as helpful in sparking critical thought to event planning, public safety and proper emergency response.

If you spend enough time on social media, watching television or browsing through

the home décor aisles in Target, there's the likelihood that you've acquired an arsenal of inspiring sayings and quotes, picked up from sources you can't recall. This topic of event and crisis planning led me to Google search the quote that comes to mind as most relevant: "When you know better, you do better." To my surprise, the attribution belongs to Maya Angelou in a lesson to her mentee, Oprah Winfrey. Oprah found that advice so inspiring, that she readily shared it over 43 times during the life of her talk show.<sup>5</sup> In the case of accepting and acknowledging the dangers we face, while putting our best foot forward to prepare for the unspeakable, Maya and Oprah have it right.

## Additional Resources:

1. Encyclopedia Britannica (2019, March 18) Retrieved from: [www.britannica.com/event/September-11-attacks#ref301275](http://www.britannica.com/event/September-11-attacks#ref301275)
2. NIMS and the Incident Command System, (2004, November 23), Retrieved from: [www.fema.gov/txt/nims/nims\\_ics\\_position\\_paper.txt](http://www.fema.gov/txt/nims/nims_ics_position_paper.txt)
3. (2005, March, Page 3-2). IS-15: Special Events Contingency Planning. Job Aids Manual
4. (2005, March, Page 3-4 - 3-8). IS-15: Special Events Contingency Planning. Job Aids Manual Department of Homeland Security, Special Events Section [www.dhs.gov/special-events](http://www.dhs.gov/special-events)
5. OWN (2011, October 20) The Powerful Lesson Maya Angelou Taught Oprah. Oprah's Lifeclass, Oprah Winfrey Network. Retrieved from: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fx447ShQLeE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fx447ShQLeE)

Emergency Training Institute Homepage, (2019, March 18), Retrieved from: <https://training.fema.gov/emi.aspx>

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**Shera White** currently serves as a Special Events Coordinator for the City of Newport News (VA) Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism. Her multi-faceted career includes municipal event planning, collegiate championship coordination and venue management.