

# Joint Information Centers

*Communications During  
Emergency Response*

February 2005

## **WHAT IS A JIC?**

The **Joint Information Center** (a.k.a. JIC) provides a means for conducting incident communications during emergency responses and other situations in which multiple organizations need to collaborate to provide timely, useful and accurate information to the public and other stakeholders.

A JIC is a co-located group of representatives from agencies and organizations involved in an incident who are designated to manage public information needs.

A JIC should accommodate the likely communication components of all organizations participating in the emergency response including media relations, public affairs, legislative affairs and community relations. A JIC also acts as a central point of contact, “one stop shopping,” for media, community and key contacts, and agency representatives. A JIC facilitates the flow of information between the different agencies involved and allows them to work in a cohesive manner, enabling them to “speak with one voice.” By maintaining a centralized communication facility, resources are better managed and duplication of effort is minimized.

## **WHY DO I NEED A JIC?**

The Agency Administrator may request a JIC if the complexity or magnitude of the incident or emergency situation exceeds the capacity and span of control for the local unit, e.g., multiple organizations involved, high media interest, multiple IMT’s involved, need for consistent messages and coordinated information.

A JIC structure is most useful when the appropriate agencies and organizations come together to set up and staff a center to provide coordinated, timely, accurate information to the public and other stakeholders. A JIC structure may also be useful in coordinating multi-agency event planning for major events such as the Olympics.

### **The objectives of a JIC include:**

- ⇒ Develop, recommend and execute public information plans and strategies on behalf of the Area Command (AC) and the Agency Administrator.
- ⇒ Gather information and ensure the timely and coordinated release of accurate information to the public by providing a single release point of information.
- ⇒ Coordinate incident information and develop key messages relevant to the agencies involved. Create consistent, accurate and timely information delivered to affected and interested audiences.
- ⇒ Focus on broad and general information (big picture); incident management teams will provide detailed information specific to their incident.
- ⇒ Facilitate rumor control.
- ⇒ Support the Agency Administrator(s) and Area Command in legislative affairs, such as responding to the needs of elected officials including requests for information and visits to the incident.
- ⇒ Develop and maintain a web page.

- ⇒ Monitor and measure public perception and media coverage of the incident.
- ⇒ Advise the AC concerning public affairs issues that could impact management of the incidents.
- ⇒ Gather images, video and photos of the incident that can be used by local agencies as well as the media.

## **SETTING UP A JIC—INITIAL SIZE-UP, SIZE AND STAFFING NEEDS.**

Typically, the Area Commander will charge their Information Officer (IO) with setting up the Joint Information Center (if an information officer is not with the Area Command Team, one will be ordered). The staffing needs will vary, depending upon the situation; 3-4 (or more) information officers may assume various roles and responsibilities that include: JIC Coordinator, Internal Affairs, External Affairs, Media Relations, VIP visit coordination, information gathering, news releases, briefing papers, web page and walk-in traffic.

The lead Information Officer is responsible for oversight of JIC operations during activation.

The JIC has several primary responsibilities:

- To gather and disseminate incident information (big picture)
- To monitor public perceptions
- Coordinate information amongst the Incident Management Teams and cooperating agencies

Efficient information flow is critical to carrying out these IO responsibilities and meeting the expectations of various publics. A JIC is a centralized “communication hub” that serves to achieve that information flow.

## **JIC POSITIONS**

The number of positions needed to adequately staff a JIC could vary extensively depending upon the nature of the crisis, the media market, and general public interest. It is wise to put some thought into long term needs to ensure an appropriately sized facility is obtained for the JIC. Oftentimes the Agency Administrator can provide helpful insight into the potential size & complexity of the JIC.

The JIC organizational structure is based on functions that generally must be performed whether a person is handling a routine incident or managing communications for a major response to a disaster.

The **Area Command Information Officer** (also known as the lead IO) supports the information needs of the Area Command Team; establishes, maintains and deactivates the JIC; and represents and advises the Area Commander.

The Information Officer works closely with the Agency Public Affairs Officer (PAO), and coordinates with the Incident Management Teams to coordinate all anticipated news

conferences and media events. The Information Officer informs the PAO about congressional tours and concerns, and anticipated VIP visits. Establishing a positive working relationship with the PAO will ensure that special interest group's concerns and needs are addressed in the JIC's communication efforts.

The lead Information Officer provides general oversight for all JIC operations, and interacts with the Area Command Team, the Agency Administrators, coordinates VIP visits, attends daily meetings and conference calls to stay current on the needs and changes in the incident situations, and works to keep rumors to a minimum.

The lead IO works closely with the JIC manager to ensure that adequate staffing is obtained and that media and key internal & external contacts are kept informed. The Lead IO may take on the role of coordinating VIP visits, keep some of key contacts informed of issues or incident changes, and may perform the legislative affairs work.

Depending upon the public information needs of the incidents, the IO may perform all public information-related functions or these functions may be sub-divided among the following major positions, or duties, within the JIC:

**Joint Information Center Manager** - Supervises the daily operations of the JIC, including setting staff work hours, a daily operating schedule and providing a safe working environment; executes plans and policies as directed by the Information Officer; and provides direction to the Internal & External branches to ensure that all functions are well organized and communicating. Ensures unit logs (ICS 214) are filled out and filed.

**Information Officer(s)** - The Information Officers gather information from each incident to answer questions from the public, media and various agency personnel. They ensure that information is disseminated to media and established networks throughout affected and interested communities. Information Officers also ensure timely information is distributed in Area Command. They may also write news releases and produce other informational publications.

**Web master** - The web master either works with the hosting agency webmaster to develop a website, or develops one for the incidents under Area Command. The web master maintains the website to keep it current with accurate information. They collect, modify and convert information from each incident through faxes, e-mails and hard copies and post to the web. Information may include such things as maps, news releases, daily updates, evacuation notices, photos, and other information pertinent to the incident and public safety.

**Media specialist** — Prepares news releases, talking points and media advisories; plans and coordinates press conferences and possible media visits to the incident(s). Works with others on the JIC team to prepare Public Service Announcements. Helps prepare speakers prior to being interviewed. Works with the Information Officer on VIP visits.

**External relations specialist** — Interacts with stakeholders and monitors their information needs; distributes information in a timely and effective manner. Responsible for reception duties, including incoming phone calls at the JIC, maintenance of a phone log, and sending approved written materials to requestors. May help plan/organize a trap line, as appropriate. Organize/coordinate community meetings (ensure the location meets your anticipated turn-out; remember chairs, lights, tables and possibly a lectern; is a microphone or public address system necessary; provide support materials such as a computer, projector, television/VCR, flip chart or map stand, electricity or power outlets; etc.). Supports agency and team coordination; works to identify mis-information or rumors that may affect response. May also provide oversight or supervision of a Volunteer Coordinator (as needed).

**Internal relations specialist** — In charge of information gathering activities and product development activities (e.g. talking points, briefing papers, flyers, fact sheets, news releases, public service announcements, etc.) in support of the JIC communication efforts. May develop displays for use in the JIC and provide support for news conferences or town meetings. Ensure all members of the JIC have current copies of news releases, fact sheets, talking points, and maintain communications with employees of affected agencies.

**Legislative Affairs officer** — This position is more suitable for a large JIC supporting highly complex incidents and deemed appropriate by the Agency Administrator. This position develops relationships with local, state and federal elected officials, and keeps them informed of incident matters. The legislative affairs officer may work with others on the JIC team to develop briefing papers and prepare briefing packets on emerging issues.

## **INITIAL RESPONSE & SET-UP**

Shortly after an incident begins there will likely be a high demand for information. Whether the incident is large or small, a natural disaster or accident, the media and public, as well as responders and affected agencies, require accurate and timely information. The responsibility of disseminating updated information is assigned to the Information Officer immediately after the onset of the incident. The following checklist provides considerations to keep in mind during initial set-up and identifies a few immediate actions to be taken by JIC personnel.

1. Select a location for the JIC. Consider the following criteria:
  - ✓ Enough space to expand into should the need arise
  - ✓ A minimum of 8 AC outlets or power strips approved within fire codes
  - ✓ Access to a copier, fax, computers and printers
  - ✓ Located close to the Area Command
2. Establish a dedicated phone line for inquiries from the media
3. Gather basic facts about the crisis (who, what, where, when, etc.)
4. Use factual information to answer inquires and write an initial news release

5. Get help. If you can find three people right away- put them to work doing:
  - ✓ One person will respond to telephone requests for information. Use the dedicated phone line to answer calls from the media. Record names and phone numbers of callers. Use the approved news release and information gathered by the other two assistants to answer calls. This person must be coached to not speculate, and just stick to what is currently known.
  - ✓ A second person should be tasked with gathering data. They'll need information about the incident(s), lists of key contacts, agency personnel, media contact information, incident management team(s) contact information, legislative contacts, etc.
  - ✓ The third IO may need to prepare written news releases and talking points, using the information provided by the data-gathering assistant. Consider putting current facts and talking points on flip chart paper to facilitate communication.
6. Call for more assistance—preferably trained Information Officers.
7. If communication demands are high, a 24-hour operating schedule may need to be established.
8. Develop a daily operating schedule:

### **Tasks/Outputs/Accomplishments**

Fact gathering

Prepare news releases

Plan press conferences

Plan community meetings

Daily communication with IMT's under AC

Conduct traplines

Maintain web page

Develop daily talking points and other informational materials

Care & feeding of key contacts/congressional staffers

Develop a communication plan/strategy

Manage front office spot for walk-in traffic

Maintain phone logs, unit logs & upward reporting for agencies involved

Special projects (e.g. National Fire Plan stories, side-bar stories)

Coordinate/support VIP visits/tours

Conduct daily briefings for JIC staff

Develop a contact list/phone directory of the IMT's under your jurisdiction, media, key contacts, agency administrators, legislative contacts, county commissioners, affected state/federal agencies, property owners and timber companies, area Chamber of Commerce(s), law enforcement agencies, disaster & emergency services and buying team/expanded dispatch

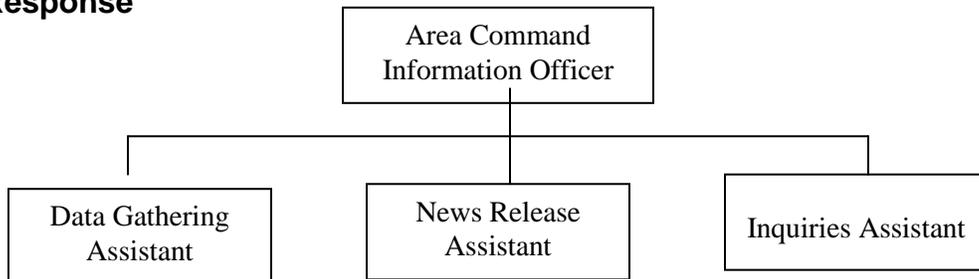
**DEACTIVATION OF THE JIC** - When the time comes use the following steps to help plan the deactivation of the Joint Information Center:

- ⇒ Notify media of closing and provide regional contact information
- ⇒ Prepare comprehensive deactivation news release for lead-agency approval and distribution
- ⇒ Complete after-action report
- ⇒ Return equipment and supplies
- ⇒ Update list of equipment and supplies
- ⇒ Post closure notices on the web page, and provide follow-up contact information.

### JIC Organizational Charts

Note: the Area Command Information Officer works directly for the Area Commander.

#### Initial Response



**Small JIC** – organization can be expanded to add positions e.g., legislative affairs

