EMERGENT ACTIVATION

Activating an emergency operations center in response to critical incidents requires care and planning before it's required.

By Patrice Coleman

WHAT IS THE EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CENTER?

What is the impact of an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and what transpires in one? According to FEMA, "an EOC is the physical or virtual location from which leaders from a jurisdiction or organization coordinate information and resources to support incident management activities."[1] While EOCs have a common definition, their processes are not all the same so EOCs may achieve their mission through different steps. The centralized location is conducive to information sharing and collaborating to ensure resources are available to responders at the incident scene. The EOC operates in a support role; it does not manage a critical incident.

EOC responsibilities include:

- Analyzing provided information.
- Playing a supporting role in providing necessary resources.
- Generating relevant documentation for the incident.
- Creating a plan for present and future needs relating to the incident.[2]

A planned EOC activation may occur when large scale events are planned. However, in unplanned EOC activations, which are critical incidents, time is a factor for gathering the right personnel from the appropriate departments. Agency representatives notified to be on standby or report for an activation must begin to prepare for both professional and personal variables during an EOC's operational period. EOC activations for planned events come with a relatively high level of information about what to prepare for; critical incidents are accompanied by an array of unknowns.

MAKING THE CALL

The determination to activate an EOC lies within the responsibilities of the EOC director.[3] An elected or appointed official and senior administrators may also have the authority to activate an EOC, depending on local government/municipality guidelines. The ideal situation is to staff EOCs with departmental personnel with the authority to make decisions on behalf of their agency and articulate statistical data or available resources from their respective agency. Appropriate coordination for critical incidents may be achieved through a "partial" activation, with a response request for specific functions that are identified when the EOC is activated. 'Full' activations require a response from all local department functions.

EOC READINESS

Several FEMA classes prepare personnel to effectively engage in an active role
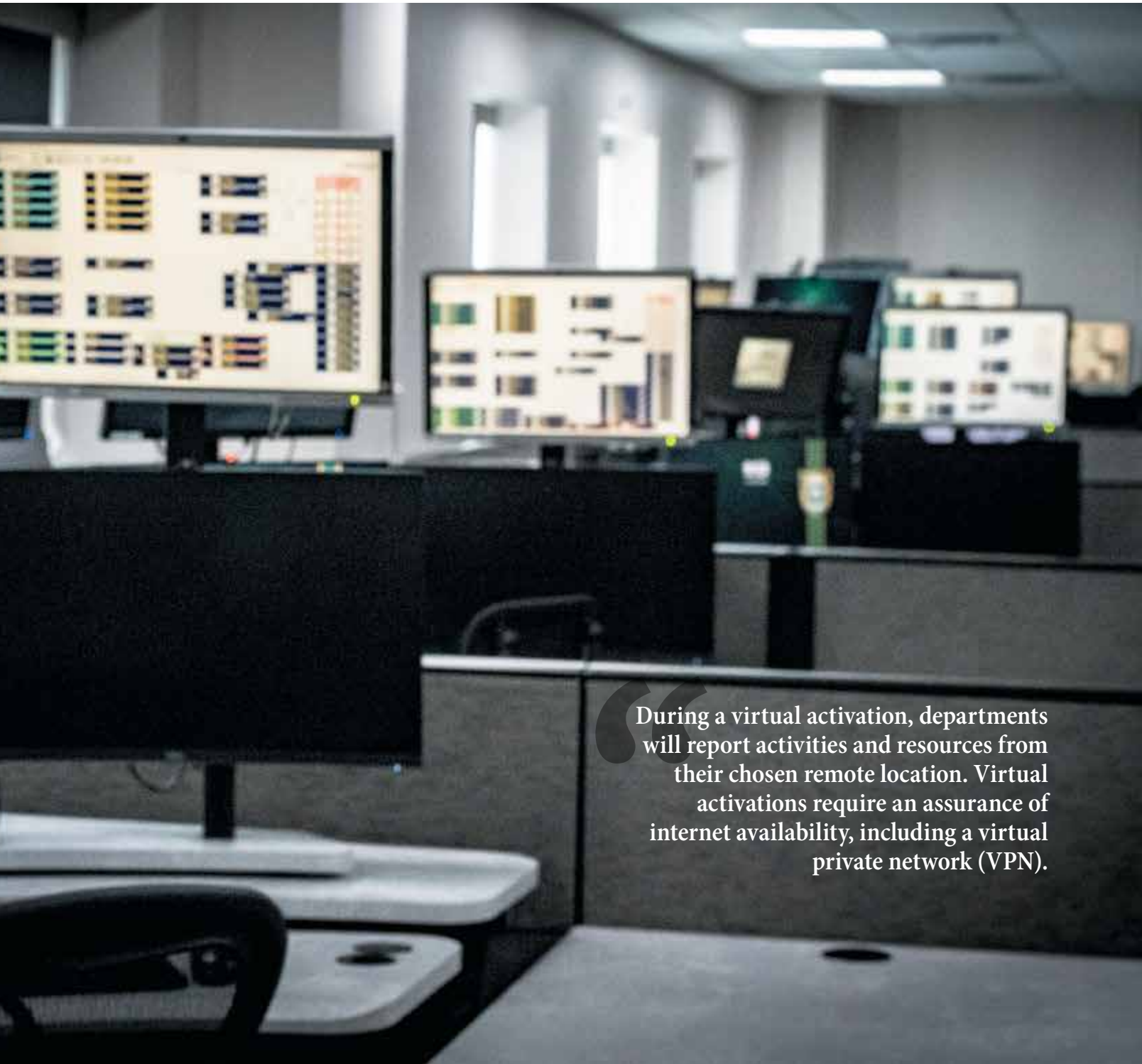
> **During a virtual activation, departments will report activities and resources from their chosen remote location. Virtual activations require an assurance of internet availability, including a virtual private network (VPN).**

during critical incidents in the EOC. Agency EOC representatives may be referred to as emergency service coordinators (ESC) while operating in an EOC capacity. Classes that are important for preparation prior to taking an active role in the EOC include:

- E/L/G19: ICS/EOC Interface
- IS-2200: Basic EOC Functions
- E/L/G: 2300 Intermediate EOC Functions[4]

Additional background clearances and credentialing may be required to access databases with sensitive information within the EOC. Continued training opportunities are crucial for readiness and may be achieved by multiple methods.

- Full tabletop exercises
- Monthly check-in to the informational database used by the EOC

- Regular meetings covering different resources, topics and awareness of upcoming events

THREE TYPES OF EOC RESPONSES

Physical — The setup of furniture, environmental services, catering, internet connection and uninterrupted power supply (UPS) are necessary considerations in

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having a functional and safe location. An EOC may be physically attached to another department, and it is important to maintain a functional and clean EOC that is ready for activation.[5] A benefit of physical response is in-person coordination, while a negative may be a delay in gathering staff at the EOC's physical location.

Hybrid — Depending on the critical incident and projected duration, the EOC director may deem that a hybrid activation is most effective and efficient for the critical incident. Specific departments may be required to respond to the physical location during specific times of the day and work virtually during specified hours. A benefit of a hybrid response is the activation will be worked virtually, while a con may be the necessity of preparing for two different environments (virtual and in-person) during the activation.

Virtual — During a virtual activation, departments will report activities and resources from their chosen remote location. Virtual activations require an assurance of internet availability, including a virtual private network (VPN). A major benefit of a virtual response is quicker access to coordinators as they need not travel to the physical EOC.

REFLECTING ON THE AFTERMATH OF CRITICAL INCIDENTS IN NATIONAL MEDIA

2020 NASHVILLE/MIDDLE TENNESSEE TORNADO

Approximately two weeks before Tennessee's 2020 COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, Nashville activated its EOC in response to a devastating tornado outbreak. On March 3 a catastrophic weather cell spawned EF-2, EF-3 and EF-4 tornadoes in the Middle Tennessee area resulting in fatalities and destruction.[6] Shortly after midnight on Tuesday, March 3, tornado sirens warned of imminent danger and confirmed tornadoes on the ground. Tennessee's presidential primary election was slated to occur when polls opened later the same day as one of the "Super Tuesday" states. The tornado

outbreak had multiple rounds and the entire event happened during darkness. Nashville's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) initiated full activation of the EOC.

How do you prepare and transition your mindset to occupy and coordinate in the EOC immediately following destructive tornadoes? Arrangements must be put in place for family members, including pets; emotions must be temporarily compartmentalized; the "go bag" must be ready; and training on how to function in the EOC is key. Representatives responding to the EOC likely sheltered in a safe space during the tornadic weather and possibly did not know the status of family and friends also in the path of the devastation. Additionally, EOC representatives may have suffered damage to their residence, while also suffering a sense of shock contemplating the destruction facing the Nashville metropolitan area. The activation lasted 24 hours with departmental reports provided every hour via a roundtable, including participation by Nashville's mayor who also supported those functioning in the EOC. Operational managers for the Nashville Department of Emergency Communications functioned as the emergency services coordinators (ESCs) for ECC representation, reviewing statistical data and reporting call volume for each hour while continuing to provide leadership for their respective shifts. The Nashville-Middle Tennessee storms are recorded as among the top 10 costliest tornado outbreaks in U.S. history.[7]

2023 COVENANT SCHOOL SHOOTING

The morning of March 27, 2023, tragedy unfolded as calls reporting an active aggressor at a private school poured into Nashville's ECC. The initial activation was a partial and virtual activation, which included the Office of Emergency Management, ECC, police, fire, EMS, schools, sheriff's department and the city's transportation department. The EOC notification was accompanied with a message advising the requested departments to be aware the virtual status could change. The ECC's reporting ESC was listening to the incident's radio traffic upon receipt of

the notification and immediately logged in to the virtual command center (VCC) to begin documenting activities regarding the critical incident and the requested resources. Transportation was required to transfer the school's children to a reunification center. Public school bus drivers across the city responded quickly to provide transportation. The virtual activation lasted five days and collaborative measures with departments prior to the incident promoted preparedness for the EOC activation. Transportation may not be thought of as a common resource during critical incidents, but it was a key to the Covenant School shooting response.

RESOURCES FOR AN EOC

A robust EOC is crucial in supporting critical incident responses. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has grants to improve areas where an EOC may be deficient. The goal is to promote an EOC capable of interoperability. According to FEMA's website, DHS funding for EOCs in fiscal year 2022 was approximately $49 million, $89 million in FY 2023 and $103 million in FY 2024. If your local EOC can benefit from major improvements, it is important to research options to promote a solid EOC.[8]

MEASURING PREPAREDNESS IN THE EOC

Whether your EOC has a virtual command center (VCC) for information sharing or a different critical information management system, adding pertinent information regarding the incident is imperative. Planning should include completing incident action plans (IAP). Adding a calendar reminder to change passwords associated with EOC logins ensures preparedness for the activation of a critical incident. Those addressing hazards, such as police, fire, ECC, health department and airport personnel, should participate in tabletop exercises and training.

SUMMARY

After-action reports should follow all EOC activations. Discuss what was successful for

the activation, what resources were needed and what improvements should be made. Preparedness is a major component resulting in prepared coordinators and more effective EOC response. ●

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REFERENCES

1   Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Emergency Operations Center How-to Quick Reference Guide." October 2022. www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_eoc-quick-reference-guide.pdf

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3   Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Emergency Operations Center References and Resources Tool." www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_eoc-references-resources-tool_factsheet.pdf

4   Ibid.

5   Ibid.

6   Fox Weather. "Nashville's scars still healing two years after deadly tornado outbreak." March 5, 2022. https://www.foxweather.com/weather-news/nashvilles-scars-still-healing-two-years-after-deadly-march-2020-tornado-outbreak

7   National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration. "10 Costliest U.S. Tornadoes." www.spc.noaa.gov/faq/tornado/damage$.htm

8   Federal Emergency Management Agency. Emergency Operations Center Grant Program. April 25, 2024. www.fema.gov/grants/preparedness/emergency-operations-center

CDE EXAM #67615

1. EOC responses include all the following, except:
   a. Physical
   b. On-scene
   c. Virtual
   d. Hybrid

2. The Nashville tornado outbreak of 2020 was recorded as the _____, according to records.
   a. Most destructive
   b. One of the 10 most destructive
   c. Among least destructive
   d. Worst

3. A FEMA class for EOC preparation is:
   a. IS-2200
   b. E/L/G19: ICS/EOC Interface
   c. E/L/G: 2300 Intermediate EOC Functions
   d. All the above

4. The role of an EOC is to:
   a. Provide a support role of a critical incident
   b. Manage the critical incident
   c. Dispatch police and fire units
   d. A and B

5. Incident action plans should be completed by:
   a. Finance
   b. Operations
   c. Planning
   d. None of the above

6. Grants are available for EOCs through:
   a. FEMA
   b. DHS
   c. Department of Interior
   d. FBI

7. Virtual command centers are also known for being:
   a. The housing of excel spreadsheets for an incident
   b. Virtual chat system during an EOC activation
   c. An incident management system
   d. Not secure for critical incident information

8. EOC responsibilities include all of the following, except to:
   a. Analyze given information
   b. Generate relevant documentation for the incident
   c. Plan for present and future needs for the incident
   d. Ensure efficient operations in the ECC

9. _____ may not be known as a commonly requested resource during an EOC activation.
   a. Transportation
   b. Electric services
   c. Water services
   d. Food services

10. Readiness for the EOC is achieved through all of the following, except:
    a. Tabletop exercises
    b. Monthly check-in
    c. Regular meetings
    d. Limiting strenuous activities

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