



# Lessons Learned Information Sharing

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## TOPOFF 3 EXERCISE LESSON LEARNED

### Emergency Public Information: Coordinating Joint Information Center Operations and Using a Joint Information System

#### LESSON LEARNED

The operations of multiple joint information centers (JIC) were not always coordinated, and there was no evidence of use of a joint information system (JIS).

#### BACKGROUND

Emergency public information differs from the normal, day-to-day public information provided to citizens by the government. In the event of a major disaster or emergency, time-critical lifesaving information must be coordinated, developed, and delivered to all potentially affected people. For this reason, public officials and government spokespersons often find that this aspect of their jobs is different in an emergency environment and more important. In a climate of heightened uncertainty and concern, the timing and content of official statements can save lives, the media and general public are likely to scrutinize statements more, and some statements could incur heightened political liabilities.

After the TOPOFF 2 (T2) full-scale exercise (FSE), the Department of Homeland Security led the continued development of a national public affairs framework. Major accomplishments included:

- The development and release of the National Response Plan (NRP) Incident Communications Emergency Policy and Procedures, comprised of the Emergency Support Function #15 (External Affairs) and Public Affairs Support Annexes;
- The development of the associated Incident Communications Emergency Reference, which provides tactical guidance to federal incident communications professionals; and
- Active participation in the National Exercise Program-sponsored Senior Officials Exercise process to bring visibility to critical incident communications issues.

The TOPOFF exercise series offers federal, state, local, and private sector top officials and public affairs professionals the most challenging and realistic environment of any exercise. The TOPOFF 3 (T3) FSE incorporated three elements for multi-dimensional incident communications play: Virtual News Network (VNN) Live simulated television coverage,

#### About this Lesson Learned

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has not cleared the TOPOFF 3 After-Action Report (AAR) for release. DHS has allowed *LLIS.gov* to extract this and other Lessons Learned from the AAR. *LLIS.gov* has retained as much of the original text as possible and made only minor changes. For more information about the exercise scenario and to view all the *LLIS.gov* TOPOFF 3 Lessons Learned, please see the [TOPOFF 3 Full-Scale Exercise Lessons Learned Report](#).

The National Response Framework (NRF) has replaced the National Response Plan. The National Operations Center has replaced the Homeland Security Operations Center. More information is available at the [NRF Resource Center](#).

VNN.com simulated electronic print media, and a robust media simulation cell. Together, these entities made more than 1,000 phone calls over 5 days to nearly 340 public affairs participants. These elements provided top officials and their public affairs staffs with a challenging and realistic opportunity to gain experience interacting with the media during an unfolding disaster or emergency.

## ANALYSIS

The NRP described the JIC as “a physical location where public affairs professionals from organizations involved in incident management activities work together to provide critical emergency information, crisis communications, and public affairs support.” The National Incident Management System (NIMS) directs responding organizations to integrate multiple JICs into a JIS concept, which integrates public information activities among JICs, across different levels of government, across jurisdictions, and with the private sector and nongovernmental organizations. It stated that “the JIS provides the mechanism for integrating public information activities among JICs, across jurisdictions, and with the private sector and nongovernmental organizations.” Although there was evidence of multiple JICs and individual agency incident communications operations across multiple jurisdictions, there was no evidence of the use of a JIS in the T3 FSE.

The [NRF](#) defines a JIC as “an interagency entity established to coordinate and disseminate information for the public and media concerning an incident. JICs may be established locally, regionally, or nationally depending on the size and magnitude of the incident.”

Various federal, state, and local departments and agencies courtesy-copied JICs on press releases and vice versa. This may reflect the interpretation by many people of the “coordination” role of JICs in the NRP and NIMS. There is also evidence of numerous one-to-one attempts to coordinate or validate information points between departments and agencies. However, there was little evidence in either Connecticut or New Jersey of a structured mechanism for the JICs to receive regular updates from departments and agencies or for the JICs to develop and disseminate message content across all departments and agencies.

Some mock media found that obtaining information from JICs in both venues was slow due to the time-consuming process required to locate and validate answers. Consequently, some mock media went directly to individual departments and agencies in many cases when they needed quick updates or answers. In some cases, representatives at the various JICs focused on supporting their departments’ or agencies’ incident communications needs rather than the JIC’s coordinated message development mission.

The information problems in the JICs may have been caused by a lack of co-location with the decision makers, which increased the coordination burden. This problem may make some departments and agencies reluctant to send their most experienced personnel to a JIC. For a JIC to fulfill its mission as a “focal point for the coordination and dissemination of information to the public and media,” it needs to be closely integrated with the decision makers who are directing incident response, recovery, and mitigation efforts.

The T3 FSE suggests that the current JIC and JIS concepts could benefit from further examination. Further examination of JIC implementation during real-world incidents would also help to determine whether the problems encountered in the T3 FSE are common or the result of an artificial exercise environment.

## **RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION**

None identified

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### **Additional Information and Resources**

Additional information and resources on the JIS and JICs can be accessed through the [NRF Resource Center](#). FEMA has released [National Incident Management System Basic Guidance for Public Information Officers](#). The [Emergency Management Institute](#) provides training on public information processes in its [IS-702 National Incident Management Systems: Public Information Systems course](#). FEMA has also issued the [JFO \(Joint Field Office\) Public Affairs Field Guide](#).

## **SOURCE**

US Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Exercise Division. *Top Officials 3 After-Action Report*. Oct 2005.

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