EMERGENCY SUPPORT FUNCTION 15
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Responsibility Summary

Primary Agencies: Columbia County Commissioners
                      Columbia County Emergency Management

Support Agencies: Columbia County Sheriff
                      Columbia County Port Authority
                      Mayor, City of Dayton
                      Mayor, Town of Starbuck
                      Other responding agency/organization PIOs

I.   INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of Emergency Support Function – Public Affairs (ESF 15) is to communicate accurate, accessible, and timely information to the public and various stakeholders during an emergency and/or major disaster. ESF 15 provides information about the incident, and local response and recovery activities. It also addresses policies and procedures utilized to prevent or minimize the level of information on local activities that is incorrect or that could potentially undermine confidence in local emergency efforts.

Scope

ESF 15 supports the public affairs priorities of local incident management before, during, and after a natural, technological or human-caused emergency or disaster.

ESF 15 is responsible for developing and disseminating messages to the media, public and business community; and conducting intergovernmental affairs.

ESF 15 describes the roles and responsibilities of the Incident Commander and/or Public Information Officer (PIO) in ensuring the coordination of public information during incidents that involve multiple agencies and/or jurisdictions that can be used to support the gathering, verification, coordination and dissemination of accurate, accessible, and timely information.

ESF 15 supports efforts to maintain the community's trust by promoting openness and transparency in public messaging using all available communications media prior to, during, and immediately following an emergency or disaster.

The actual or perceived magnitude and severity of an emergency or disaster determines the scale, scope and location of ESF activities. A significant public affairs response may involve city, county, tribal, state, and federal agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations and the private sector operating within a construct known as the Joint Information System (JIS).

The Columbia County Commissioners have appointed the Columbia County Emergency Management Director as the primary PIO for Columbia County. The EMD appoints and ensures proper training of a secondary PIO/Coordinating Officer.

The respective Mayor's for the City of Dayton and Town of Starbuck are appointed as the primary PIO for their specific geographical areas for localized incidents. The Mayors are also responsible to appoint and ensure proper training of secondary PIO's for their respective localities.

Non-governmental organizations and private sector agencies operating within the JIS should have appointed and trained primary and secondary PIOs to coordinate information within the ECC or Joint Information Center (JIC), if activated
.
The EMD is the coordinating agency for ESF 15 as provided for in Section III of the Columbia County Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP). As the coordinating agency, the department is responsible for developing and maintaining operating plans and procedures, job descriptions, job aids, and a variety of resource materials to guide ESF 15 operations.

ESF 15 messaging will focus on the extent of the emergency or disaster, local government response and recovery activities, and details of available disaster assistance programs. Messaging activities will include outreach to limited English proficient populations, and to those with disabilities, functional access and functional needs within affected areas.

ESF 15 uses the JIS construct to facilitate the development, coordination and dissemination of accurate and timely emergency public information with other participating organizations through all phases of an emergency response and disaster recovery.

In some situations, such as a pandemic outbreak, oil spill, or wildfire, local agencies other than the EMD may have the lead for both the local emergency response and for disseminating emergency public information. As appropriate, PIOs of deployed Incident Management Teams coordinate within a Joint Information Center (JIC) to ensure a common message is communicated to all. If a lead local response agency operates its emergency public information activities outside of the ECC, ESF 15 assumes a supporting role to that agency.

Depending on the size, scope, and/or complexity of an incident, availability of resources, and following consultation with the Incident Commander and the County Commissioners, the ESF

15 PIO will help establish a JIC either near the local ECC, or near the scene of an emergency or disaster.

Local planning recognized that tribal governments have the primary responsibility for providing emergency public information to their communities. Nothing in this ESF diminishes or usurps these local tribal responsibilities.

In the event that a local tribal government requests assistance to provide emergency public information to its community, ESF 15 may do the following:

- Collaborate with the requesting organization to provide vital health and safety information to affected communities from the local ECC.
- Find and deploy public information staff to help the affected jurisdiction with its on-site emergency public information activities. This will be done with the assistance of the external resource unit of the local ECC logistics section, if activated.

II.   SITUATION

Hazard and Threat Analysis

Columbia County is vulnerable to a variety of emergency or disaster events requiring dissemination of warning and/or other emergency information to jurisdiction officials and the general public.

Emergency or disaster warnings may originate from any level of government or other sources. Most forecasting resources are located with the federal government. This may include but is not limited to watches and warnings for floods, severe weather, volcanic eruptions and hazardous materials incidents.

The sudden and unexpected nature of a catastrophic event will result in numerous requests from local residents, many agencies and all levels of government for information required to save lives, protect property, and preserve the environment.

The capability to produce needed information may be restricted or non-existent. All available communication assets of the various agencies and local government will be needed immediately to assure that accurate and timely information is communicated to address the needs of the public.

Planning Assumptions

ESF 15 begins operations when the local ECC is activated to Level 2 partial activation (see Basic Plan for activation levels) or higher.

ESF 15 supports the local ECC while activated. The size and complexity of the incident or event determines the scope, scale, and location of activities and hours of ESF operations.

The effectiveness of ESF 15 depends upon the availability and/or functionality of resources (e.g., personnel, translators and interpreters, facilities, equipment, primary and backup telecommunications systems, etc.).

ESF 15 operations depend upon communications staff support from local agencies identified in Section III – Responsibilities of the Basic Plan.

The EMD will establish and train a cadre (which may be 1 to 2 personnel only) to lead and/or carry out ESF 15 activities in the local ECC and/or JIC, if needed. Columbia County Commissioners will support the development and maintenance of the cadre and operations of ESF 15 upon request.

Individuals with little or no emergency response-related affairs training may assist with ESF 15 operations in the event of a large-scale emergency or disaster. The extent of the emergency or disaster may delay or disrupt ESF 15 operations and the dissemination of information to identified stakeholders and audiences

Tribal governments have the primary responsibility for communicating with their communities during emergencies and disaster, and are expected to use all means at their disposal prior to requesting assistance from the local ECC.

III.   CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

General

ESF 15 activities support the messaging efforts of local government officials and implement the messaging strategy for the emergency or disaster developed in collaboration with the Incident Commander.

On most incidents, the command activity is carried out by a single Incident Commander.   The need for a Unified Command occurs when an incident affects the statutory responsibility of more than one agency or jurisdiction. When this occurs and depending upon the size and/or complexity of the situation, the Incident Commander may assign/delegate responsibility for the command activities of the PIO.

The PIO is responsible for communicating with the public, media, and/or coordinating with other agencies, as necessary, with incident related information requirements. The PIO is responsible for developing and releasing information about the incident to the news media, incident personnel, and other appropriate agencies and organization.

Organization

The organization of ESF 15 is consistent with the principles of National Response Framework and the Incident Command System.

ESF 15 is committed to communicating with the whole community during emergency response and disaster recovery operations. In the context of this ESF, engaging the whole community includes developing messages for and delivering messages to a wide range of audiences that includes children (through parents or guardians), older adults, individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs, those from religious, racial, and ethnically diverse backgrounds, people with limited English proficiency, and owners of animals, including household pets and service animals. In many cases, this diversity may require the PIO to provide written translations, verbal interpretations or employ other methods of communication to reach all members of the community.

Procedures

The primary goal of emergency response is to protect lives and property, which is accomplished by executing an intensely coordinated effort. Functions and roles are delegated and/or shared between the County, other jurisdictional agencies within the County, and other private sector and non-profit organizations to ensure all required actions are completed in an efficient and timely manner. It is critical, with the potential for several different agencies to be involved in response and recovery activities that all agencies and key personnel understand the Incident Command System (ICS) well enough to communicate with other agencies and "bridge the gap" during an incident.

During ECC activations, WebEOC is used for end-to-end management including situational reporting, all resource requests to ECC logistics, and after action reporting. In the event WebEOC is unavailable, then required reporting should be submitted using manual forms. Hard copies are maintained within the individual ESF folders at the EMD and transported to the ECC when activated.

Providing the residents and first/second responders with timely and accurate lifesaving information during major incidents is of highest priority. To the maximum extent possible and in coordination with ESF 2 – Communications, under emergency conditions, communication and warning functions will be performed in compliance with existing telecommunications regulations and requirements. Radio systems operated by Columbia County will conform to the conditions of the applicable FCC license(s).

The process of getting information to the public during an incident is an ongoing cycle of gathering, verifying, coordinating and disseminating information. Information will be received from the Incident Commander, assigned field PIO personnel, through attending briefings and reports being issued. Media coverage is observed for accuracy of reporting and rumors. Information obtained is verified as accurate. Messages are coordinated with other PIOs whether in the JIC or in the field and approval is obtained from the Incident Commander for dissemination to the public.

Mitigation

Columbia County EMD works with partner jurisdictions and local agencies in preparation for emergencies or disasters to establish and review departmental and agency roles and responsibilities for preparedness and in providing public affairs support during the response and recovery phases of an emergency or disaster by conducting and participating in hazard specific exercises. This includes efforts made to identify resource shortfalls and working to identify strategies that can be implemented to mitigate the impacts of those resource shortfalls.

Columbia County EMD promotes community participation in plan development and exercises to practice the implementation of those plans. Without effective community/private sector integration, operational response capabilities within the County will be marginalized. Columbia County works with support agencies and organizations to aid in the development of plans and conducting needs assessment analysis to identify their resource needs including identifying resources that can be provided to them during response and recovery phases of an emergency or disaster.

Preparedness Activities

Primary Agencies

1. Establish the framework and operational procedures for collaboratively developing, disseminating, monitoring and evaluating state emergency public information through all phases of emergency response and disaster recovery. Such procedures should address communicating with limited English proficient populations.
2. Identify and prepare public information resource materials for use in an emergency response or disaster recovery operations. Resource materials include pre-scripted instructions and information translated into most frequently spoken non-English languages, and list of non-English and ethnic media and other contacts for LEP communities.
3. Work with local agency communications coordinator to identify and train appropriate staff to implement the external affairs responsibilities outlined in this ESF.
4. Lead ESF 15 training and exercise programs to test messaging and operating procedures for the local ECC, the JIS and a JIC.

Support Agencies

1. Prepare and coordinate public information resource materials specific to the organization, its programs and subject matter expertise to use during emergency response and disaster recovery operations. Resource materials should include pre-scripted instructions and information translated into most frequently spoken non-English languages, if needed.
2. Assist with the emergency public information/communications component of their agency's continuity of operations planning.

3. Identify appropriate communications staff to become part of a team responsible for implementing the external affairs responsibilities outlined in this ESF. These staff will attend training and participate in exercise programs established by local/state response agencies to become familiar with plans, operating procedures and systems used during emergency response and disaster recovery activities.

Response Activities

A. Establish and implement strategic messaging in collaboration with the Incident Commander and/or ECC.
B. Fill ESF 15 staff positions as dictated by the actual or projected scale and scope of the emergency or disaster, and to support the communication needs of the Incident Commander and the responding agencies.
C. Establish communication with external affairs officials of responding local agencies, impacted local jurisdictions and tribes, and the state ECC, to the extent practical.
D. Collaborate with the local Elected Officials in the area affected and if needed, responding state agencies on external affairs activities related to the emergency or disaster.
E. Provide timely and accurate local-level information to the public trough established channels such as the news media and social media platforms. This includes communicating with populations of LEP through translations and information channels appropriate for identified group(s) such as ethnic media, community groups, schools, churches, etc.
F. Monitor news coverage and social media platforms for situational awareness, and prepare communications to address or correct rumors and misinformation.
G. Contribute to the Incident Action Plan (IAP), Situation Report, and Common Operating Picture, and to the operational planning process.
H. Dispatch public information/external affairs liaisons to local jurisdictions, as necessary and requested.
I. Recommend and coordinate establishment of a local-level JIC as necessary and/or provide staff to a local JIC established for the incident.
J. Establish two-way communication with established private-sector organization (See ESF 2 – Communications).
K. Route private sector requests for resources and offers of assistance to the ECC Operations center.
L. Assist with coordination of requests for emergency access to restricted areas from businesses.
M. Provide information and respond to legislative offices representing affected areas.
N. Provide information to the Policy group, if activated on issues of concern to the private sector, legislators, and others.
O. Maintain files and documentation of ESF activities.
P. Oversee demobilization of external, affairs resources, as necessary.

Recovery

A. Deploy appropriate external affairs resources as needed to support recovery operations.
B. Support the recovery-related communication needs of the Incident Commander, Elected Officials and recovery program managers.

C. Continue to coordinate joint management efforts through the ECC or JIC, as needed. Also, coordinating external affairs activities with the Incident Commander and with appropriate responding state, local, tribal and any other organizations.

D. Provide accurate and timely recovery-related information to the public and other audiences through established channels such as the news media and social media platforms, as well as other means appropriate such as boards and/or posters posted in locations frequented by the public. This includes translated recovery-related information to ensure continued communications with LEP populations through recovery missions.

E. Continue to monitor news media coverage and social media platforms for situational awareness, and prepare communications to address or correct rumors and misinformation, if necessary.

F. Continue to contribute to the IAP, situational reports and to the operational planning process as needed.

G. Dispatch public information regarding recovery activities to external affairs liaisons or local jurisdictions, as necessary or requested.

H. Oversee demobilization of ESF 15 resources, as necessary.

IV.   RESPONSIBILITIES

Primary Agencies

A. Local Legislative Body.

- Elected Officials are responsible for hiring; appointing and ensuring sufficient training is provided to primary and secondary PIO personnel.
- Elected Officials are expected by the public to deliver accurate emergency information in a timely manner.
- Elected Officials are responsible for direction and control of governmental employees and should remind their perspective departments of the importance of clearing any and all messages through the Incident Commander/ECC or PIO.

B. Columbia County Emergency Management/Coordinating Agency.

- Inform Elected Officials of the emerging incident and activation of the ECC.
- Activate ESF 15 using established procedures and anticipated staffing requirements.
- Discuss messaging priorities and leadership of ESF 15 with the Incident Commander.
- Take initial leadership of ESF 15 activities, as delegated by the Incident Commander.
- Maintain awareness of and support for ESF 15 activities throughout the emergency response and disaster recovery activities.
- Assist in demobilization activities of ESF 15, when necessary.
- Participate in after-action, lessons learned activities and undertake necessary revisions to improve ESF 15 performance in emergency response and disaster recovery.

A. Make staff available to provide public information, editorial and graphics support, and subject matter expertise to ESF 15 Operations upon request of the Incident Commander or ESF 15 Lead.
B. Coordinate the agency's emergency public information response and disaster recovery activities with ESF 15 operations, in the local ECC, prior to dissemination if possible.
C. Assist in recovery and demobilization activities as needed.
D. Participate in after-action, lessons learned activities, and make revisions to improve emergency response and disaster recovery activities.

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V.   RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

Typically, ESF 15 staff responds out of the Columbia County Commissioners Office and the Columbia County Emergency Management department. For small scale incidents authorized personnel will activate either at the scene or at Columbia County Emergency Management department. In these cases, a separate location and/or ECC is established for dissemination of public information to the media and other stakeholders. During larger incidents a JIC center will be established for the emergency and disaster recovery missions.

As an emergency or disaster grows and greater demands are placed on initial ESF 15 personnel, additional staffing will be sought through the implementation of mutual aid agreements and if necessary requests will be escalated up to the State EOC.

VI.   REFERENCES

A. *Columbia County Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan – Basic Plan, December* 2014.
B. *National Response Framework,* Third Edition, FEMA, June 2016
C. Washington State Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan – *ESF 15 – External Affairs*, July 2016
D. FEMA IS-702a – *NIMS Public Information,* October 2013
A. FEMA 517 *Basic Guidance for Public Information Officers (PIOs), National Incident Management System (NIMS),* November 2007