



Annex O: Emergency Support Function #15 – Emergency Public Information

February 2020

Coordinating Agency

Hamilton County Emergency Management & Homeland Security Agency

Supporting Agencies

Hamilton County Administration
Hamilton County Communications Center
Hamilton County Environmental Services
Hamilton County Job and Family Services
Hamilton County Public Health
Hamilton County Sheriff's Office
City of Cincinnati Communications Department
City of Cincinnati Enterprise Technology Solutions
City of Cincinnati Fire Department
City of Cincinnati Health Department
City of Cincinnati Police Department
Greater Cincinnati Metropolitan Sewer District
Greater Cincinnati Water Works
National Weather Service
The Health Collaborative
United Way of Greater Cincinnati

Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of ESF #15 – Emergency Public Information is to establish how emergency public information activities will be coordinated to meet the needs generated by disasters affecting Hamilton County, OH. This ESF describes the operational components as well as roles and responsibilities necessary to fulfill the duties of ESF #15.

Scope

Emergency Support Function #15 – Emergency Public Information serves to identify the key policies, concepts of operation, and roles and responsibilities associated with public information in Hamilton County. ESF #15 applies to all Hamilton County agencies that may be involved in emergency public information required to support disaster response and recovery operations. ESF #15 encompasses the full range of external affairs functions including:

- Coordination of Public Information – Providing incident-related information through the media and other sources to individuals, families, businesses, and industries directly or indirectly affected by the incident.
- Collecting, Processing, and Disseminating Emergency Public Information – The steps that must be taken to gather information, verify the accuracy and authentication of that information, and proper dissemination of information in relation to the incident priorities: life safety, property protection, incident stabilization, and environmental protection.

Assumptions

Planning requires assumptions based on statistics, history, behavior patterns and likely future trends. The following assumptions were made as consideration for ESF #15 – Emergency Public Information:

- Hazards may affect one or multiple jurisdictions within Hamilton County. Hazards may also extend beyond the borders of Hamilton County and may require a coordinated response and recovery effort between multiple jurisdictions at the local, county, or even state level.
- During a disaster, the means of dispersing public information to survivors of the disaster and surrounding communities may be severely affected by overwhelming demand and/or damage to media infrastructure. County and/or State assistance may be required to supply critical information to survivors, responders, recovery personnel and members of the media. In addition, following a disaster, information from some sources may often be vague, erroneous or contradictory.
- There will be a strong need for the public to get disaster-specific information before, during, and after the emergency. The timely dissemination of accurate, well-coordinated emergency public information will reduce the impact to life and property, help to maintain public trust and confidence, and help the residents find information and resources they need to recover from the disaster.
- Many disasters can occur rapidly, hampering the ability of response organizations and local government to provide comprehensive information to everyone impacted at the onset. For this reason, it is important to ensure the public is aware of potential hazards and knows the appropriate protective and preparedness efforts before a disaster occurs.
- A disaster may have negative impacts on the existing communication infrastructure or systems requiring the use of alternative methods to provide information to the public.
- Disasters may impact individuals' abilities to receive public information due to displacement, or limited access to television, phone, newspaper, the internet, social networks, etc.
- Rumors or misinformation may be spread before, during, and after a disaster. This can cause unnecessary distress among the public, provoke counter-productive public actions, and impede response and recovery efforts.
- The interest generated by a disaster may lead to requests for information or visits from a variety of public officials, dignitaries, or VIPs. Such requests will require coordination and resources.

Concept of Operations

Emergency Support Function (ESF) #15 – Emergency Public Information, consists of two broad activities in relation to the Hamilton County Emergency Operations Plan. These activities are:

ESF #15 Activities	
1.	Coordinating Emergency Public Information
2.	Collecting, Processing, and Disseminating Emergency Public Information

Coordinating Emergency Public Information

A key role of the emergency public information function is to coordinate the flow of essential pieces of information between Incident Command (IC), the Emergency Operations Center and the public before, during, and after an incident. The designated incident Public Information Officer (PIO), Emergency Support Function #15, and/or Joint Information Center (JIC) will coordinate emergency public information during the duration of an emergency.

All levels of government must provide readily available emergency public information that will support emergency response and recovery. During local emergencies requiring county, state, and/or federal assistance, federal, state, county, and local PIOs will work cooperatively and in coordination with one another to ensure that timely, accurate, and consistent information is released. Coordination of information includes but is not limited to coordination between Incident Command and General Staff; coordination between EOC participants; and obtaining approval from appropriate authorities before information is disseminated.

Joint Information System

The Joint Information System (JIS) is the method of operating that allows multiple sources to coordinate information efficiently and consistently. The JIS provides the mechanism to organize, integrate, and coordinate information to ensure timely, accurate, accessible, and consistent messaging across multiple jurisdictions and/or disciplines, in addition to nongovernmental organizations and the private sector. The JIS includes the plans, protocols, procedures, and structures used to provide public information.

FEMA's Core Capabilities – ESF #15

- Public Information and Warning – Deliver coordinated, prompt, reliable, and actionable information to the Whole Community through the use of clear, consistent, accessible, and culturally and linguistically appropriate methods to effectively relay information regarding any threat or hazard and, as appropriate, the actions being taken and the assistance being made available. Utilizing ESF #15 and the JIC during response works to ensure this capability is addressed.

The mission of the JIS is to provide a structure and system for developing and delivering coordinated interagency messages; developing, recommending, and executing public information plans and strategies on behalf of the IC; advising the IC concerning public affairs issues that could affect a response effort; and controlling rumors and inaccurate information that could undermine public confidence in the incident response effort.

A JIS will be supported in Hamilton County by utilizing WebEOC to input and track information and incident updates. Additionally, involved agencies will be able to maintain incident situational awareness through communication made by email correspondence.

Public Information Officer

The designated incident Public Information Officer will serve as the lead PIO in the EOC, and is responsible for the following tasks:

- Addressing inquiries from the media, the public, and elected officials;
- Coordinating emergency public information and warnings;
- Monitoring and responding to misinformation;
- Monitoring the media; and
- Performing any other functions required to gather, verify, coordinate, and disseminate accurate accessible, and timely information related to the incident.

The PIO will advise the Incident Commander on all public information matters relating to the management of an incident.

The lead EOC Public Information Officer for an incident will be designated by the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Coordinator. Until a lead EOC PIO is established, Hamilton County EMHSA will serve in an intermediary role. The lead EOC PIO, in conjunction with the EOC Coordinator, will determine the need to activate ESF #15 and/or the Joint Information Center based on the circumstances of the incident.

ESF #15 Coordinator

The ESF #15 Coordinator will serve as the liaison between ESF #15 activities and the activities of the other fourteen Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) within the EOC. The ESF #15 Coordinator will assist the lead EOC PIO by managing the activities of the Joint Information Center (JIC) and ensuring that other emergency partners are informed and briefed about emergency public information developments. Supporting Agencies of ESF #15 will report their activities to the ESF #15 Coordinator, who will report to the lead EOC PIO.

Unless otherwise designated, Hamilton County EMHSA will fulfill the role of ESF #15 Coordinator.

Activating the Joint Information Center (JIC)

The Joint Information Center (JIC) is a central, physical location that facilitates the coordination of emergency public information. It is a location where personnel with public information responsibilities perform critical emergency information functions and crisis communications. During an incident, a JIC is the single point of coordination for all public information operations. A JIC is established when deemed appropriate by the EOC Coordinator, in conjunction with the lead EOC PIO. The Hamilton County JIC is located at the Hamilton County EOC. JIC procedures and checklists can be found in Tab A: Joint Information System Guideline.

Once other levels of government are involved in the incident effort, local, county, state, and federal public information personnel will work in cooperation and coordination with one another by coordinating between JICs.

All organizations involved in emergency support and recovery, having requirements to release information to the media and public, will work through the JIC. All representatives in the activated EOC will verify reports received from the field and will clear press releases relating to their response efforts with the lead EOC PIO. The lead EOC PIO will serve as the single official point of contact during an emergency. Dissemination of public information will be made from the JIC via news conferences, interviews, and issuing of news releases.

Depending upon the severity of the emergency, PIO personnel from other agencies may be requested to provide support during county emergency operations. Hamilton County EMHSA will maintain a cadre of specially-trained PIOs to support the County's information dissemination effort during an emergency or disaster. When the JIC is activated, members of the ESF #15 Public Information Officer Workgroup will be notified via Rave internal notification, and asked of their ability to respond to the JIC to assist with public information coordination. Members who respond that they are available to staff the JIC will be recorded in order to start planning for staffing needs of future operational periods.

The following tasks will be accomplished through ESF #15 Emergency Public Information in coordination with the Joint Information Center (when applicable):

- Rapidly release accurate emergency instructions and information to the public;
- Coordinate periodic media briefings throughout an emergency or disaster as appropriate. A media briefing center may be established at the Regional Operations Center or other location(s) as determined by the incident. These locations must be available on short notice and be logistically suitable for conducting media briefings;
- Receive inquiries from the media and the public concerning an emergency and respond with official information or relay inquiries to the appropriate function;
- Obtain reports or situation summaries from EOC representatives of all response organization elements to maintain situational awareness;
- Prepare media releases, key messages, informational flyers, and talking points;
- Develop and maintain an online presence for the County to provide emergency information to the media and public;
- Deploy Public Information Officers into the field as appropriate;

- Conduct situation briefings for VIP visitors, media, other government agencies, representatives, or interested or affected parties;
- Conduct tours for VIP's and elected officials, as appropriate;
- Arrange interviews with key personnel, when requested by the media, or the PIO.

Before the deactivation of the JIC, the lead EOC PIO will consult with the EOC Coordinator.

Emergency Public Information Coordination Process

The following method describes how emergency public information will be coordinated prior to release to the public:

- Notification and public information will be handled by an Incident Commander (IC) and/or a single agency's Public Information Officer (PIO) until the incident evolves and/or the JIC is activated.
- When the incident evolves or affects multiple jurisdictions within Hamilton County, organizations involved in the disaster response effort will coordinate notification and/or public information efforts until the JIC is activated.
- If necessary, the EOC Coordinator will designate an EOC PIO when the EOC is activated. The lead EOC PIO will be responsible for overall coordination of public information activities for Hamilton County. The lead EOC PIO will manage all ESF #15 activities, will support the EOC Coordinator, and will communicate with the IC to coordinate emergency public information between the field and the EOC.
- Coordination of emergency public information will be maintained through ongoing Leadership Group briefings in the Hamilton County EOC and submission of all emergency public information and related news releases to the Leadership Group for approval prior to release. The ESF #15 Coordinator is responsible for keeping all members of the EOC, including the lead EOC PIO, informed by entering updates and information in WebEOC.
- After emergency public information and media releases have been approved, copies will be given to the Planning Section for distribution to local personnel in the EOC and at the site as needed. The ESF #15 Coordinator is responsible for entering information, press releases, and updates to WebEOC.

Collecting, Processing, and Disseminating Emergency Public Information

Collecting Emergency Public Information

Public information officers engaged in the incident effort will collect and document relevant information in order for accurate information to be efficiently communicated to the public. Such relevant information may include, but is not limited to:

- Information from Incident Command
- Weather updates
- Damage reports
- Persons injured or affected
- Threats to public safety
- Road closures
- Closure of government offices for employees and/or public (e.g. Courthouse, Clerk of Courts, etc.)
- Potential rumors and misinformation

Information will be collected from a wide range of sources including response agencies, traditional and social media, calls from public and elected officials, technical specialists, and other emergency management partners such as utility companies or the National Weather Service.

Relevant information that is collected will be recorded in WebEOC, for proper tracking and verification.

Processing Emergency Public Information

Once incident information is gathered, PIOs will work to verify the accuracy of the information with Incident Command, the EOC Coordinator, and relevant EOC personnel, before it is disseminated to the public. The designated incident PIO, ESF #15, and/or the JIC (if activated) will verify the accuracy of information and dispelling of rumors by consulting with EOC sources and technical specialists, as well as other PIOs who may be liaising with various assistance programs or response/recovery partners.

Disseminating Emergency Public Information

The processes and methods of emergency public information dissemination are focused on the following priorities: life safety, property protection, incident stabilization, and environmental protection, as well as any other incident objectives as established by Incident Command or within the EOC. Pre-scripted messages and press releases will be utilized by PIOs as a method to disseminate important information in a timely manner. Pre-scripted messages can be found in attachment Tab A to this annex.

It is essential that all agencies involved in the disaster effort are disseminating a unified, coordinated message, in order to avoid public confusion. Messages will be coordinated through establishment of a JIC. Hamilton County EMHSA will notify emergency partners of incident updates and information via email. Information will also be tracked and documented in WebEOC by the ESF #15 Coordinator.

If deemed necessary by the EOC Coordinator and lead EOC PIO, a physical JIC will be activated and utilized for coordination. Through coordinated effort, the following information will be disseminated to the public:

- The risk of hazards and appropriate preparedness actions;
- Emergency status information;
- Lifesaving or health preservation instructions;
- Disaster assistance and recovery information;
- Information in response to public or media inquiry;
- Information to resolve any conflicting information or to dispel rumors;
- Donations management assistance from external groups.

Methods that will be utilized to disseminate information to the public include regularly scheduled media briefings/press conferences, social media, What'sApp Media group chat, press releases, agency websites, outdoor warning siren system, the Integrated Public Alerts & Warning System (IPAWS), and Alert Hamilton County. The EMHSA Social Media Policy and Guide to identify necessary processes and tasks can be found in Tab B. The process of activating and utilizing Alert Hamilton County can be found in Tab C.

Incident updates and briefings will be delivered to the media in a regular, timely fashion. Press briefings will be coordinated with PIOs from partner agencies and media representatives, who will be properly notified ahead of the briefing. PIOs will monitor news coverage to ensure that accurate information is disseminated. Rumors and misinformation will be addressed promptly in order to get accurate information to the public. A list of media contacts and guidelines can be found in Tab A.

Public information methods may require additional consideration for individuals with functional and access needs. Information posted on the Hamilton County EMHSA website will be available in the most commonly spoken languages within Hamilton County. When needed, a sign language and foreign language interpreter will be requested to be present during media briefings. A list of interpreters can be found in Tab A.

Hotlines dedicated to answer public inquiries will be established to help keep emergency communication lines clear for life safety matters. Local Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) members, County employees, or other volunteers, may be utilized to staff phone lines to assist with call taking and information distribution. Those staffing public inquiry hotlines will maintain records of numbers of calls received, calling areas, types of questions asked and other pertinent information, as directed by the lead EOC PIO. ESF #15 will analyze such information and utilize it in the formation of public information

releases. If necessary, a call center will be established by Cincinnati Enterprise Technology Solutions (ETS) at the Regional Operations Center.

United Way 2-1-1 Helpline will support the needs and mission of the EOC during and after an incident. All information developed in the EOC will be communicated with the 2-1-1 Helpline, in order for call takers to pass along information to callers and monitor and manage rumor control. United Way 2-1-1 will also assist callers with unmet needs, providing them with incident information and resources.

Spokesperson

The messenger is just as important as the message being delivered. It is important to note that the Public Information Officer may not be the person speaking to the media to deliver a message. The EOC PIO will prepare the message, help coordinate information between agencies, and ensure the spokesperson is trained and ready to speak. A spokesperson is someone who has authority and is a reliable and respected person in the community, who will prepare for and conduct regular news briefings and conferences. The designated spokesperson should have sufficient authority or expertise to be accepted by the public as speaking on behalf of the organization or the affected jurisdiction.

Spokespersons may include public elected officials who have a history and experience of speaking on behalf of County leadership. Spokespersons will be briefed by ESF #15 Coordinator/Lead EOC PIO during an incident with prepared statements and will be equipped to provide just in time training to all spokespersons. Prior to an event/incident, all potential spokespersons are encouraged to attend trainings related to public information, including:

- G289 – Public Information Officer Awareness
- G290 – Basic Public Information Officer
- G291/E-L0387 – Joint Information System/Joint Information Center Planning for Tribal, State and Local PIOs
- G-402: ICS Overview for Executive and Senior Officials
- IS-29 – Public Information Officer Awareness

Organization and Assignment of Responsibilities

Hamilton County Emergency Management & Homeland Security Agency (EMHSA) has the primary responsibility for the emergency management functions in Hamilton County. Hamilton County EMHSA will serve as the Coordinating Agency for this Emergency Support Function (ESF).

Coordinating Agency Responsibilities

Hamilton County Emergency Management & Homeland Security Agency:

1. Will coordinate the activities of Support Agencies within ESF #15 to fulfill operational objectives.
2. Will direct the activities of the ESF #15 in conjunction with assistance from ESFs at the local, State, or Federal levels as applicable.
3. Will collaborate with other Coordinating Agencies to ensure an effective response between ESFs.
4. Will share ESF #15 activity information with appropriate EOC personnel.
5. Will designate sufficient representatives (no less than three) to support/staff 24-hour operations at the Hamilton County EOC. The Hamilton County EMHSA will maintain listings of these personnel, 24-hour contact information, and directions for contacting them in the event of communication outages.
6. Will develop and train all staff responsible for implementing ESF #15 on standard operating procedures.
7. Will maintain the Hamilton County Joint Information Center in a state of readiness.
8. Will assist in coordinating the emergency public information coming into and out of the Emergency Operations Center.
9. Will assist in activating, coordinating activity, and deactivating the Joint Information Center.

10. Will serve as the intermediary EOC PIO until a lead EOC PIO is designated by the EOC Coordinator.
11. Will activate and coordinate alerts sent via Rave Mobile Safety on behalf of Hamilton County.
12. Will activate the Outdoor Warning Siren System.
13. Will activate the Emergency Alert System (EAS).
14. Will provide staff to assist in the Joint Information Center.
15. May provide staff to serve as the lead EOC PIO.

Supporting Agencies Responsibilities

Hamilton County Administration may:

1. Provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
2. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

Hamilton County Environmental Services:

1. Will notify Hamilton County EMHSA when an Air Quality Emergency is declared.
2. May provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
3. May provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

Hamilton County Job and Family Services may:

1. Provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
2. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

Hamilton County Public Health:

1. Will provide appropriate guidance as it relates to public health and medical services.
2. Will coordinate public health and medical advisories with the JIC.
3. Will develop, recommend, and execute approved public information plans and strategies on behalf on the Incident Command or Unified Command structure.
4. Will provide a single release point of information for health and healthcare issues through a pre-identified spokesperson in coordination with the JIC.
5. Will facilitate rumor control of media outlets, including television, internet, radio, and newspapers.
6. Will post incident-related information on the health department website as a means of informing and connecting with the public.
7. Will utilize social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) when and if possible, for public health messaging.
8. May provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
9. May provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

Hamilton County Sheriff's Office may:

1. Provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
2. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

City of Cincinnati Communications Department may:

1. Provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
2. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.
3. Activate and coordinate alerts sent via Rave Mobile Safety on behalf of the City of Cincinnati.

City of Cincinnati Fire Department may:

1. Provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
2. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

City of Cincinnati Health Department may:

1. Provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
2. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

City of Cincinnati Police Department may:

1. Provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
2. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

Greater Cincinnati Metropolitan Sewer District may:

1. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

Greater Cincinnati Water Works may:

1. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

National Weather Service may:

1. Assist in the creation and transmission of public alerts to be broadcast over the NOAA Weather Radio.

The Health Collaborative may:

1. Provide personnel to serve as lead EOC PIO.
2. Provide personnel to help staff the Joint Information Center.

United Way of Greater Cincinnati will:

1. Help disseminate incident information to callers via the 2-1-1 Helpline.
2. Provide callers with information and resources to assist with their unmet needs.

References

Hamilton County Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency. *Hamilton County Duty Officer Manual*.

Hamilton County Emergency Management and Homeland Security Agency. (20xx). *Hamilton County EOC Position Manuals*.

Attachments

[Tab A – Joint Information System Guideline](#)

[Tab B – Hamilton County EMHSA Social Media Policy](#)

[Tab C – Rave Alert Mobile Safety Standard Operating Procedures](#)