

METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON  COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

One Region Moving Forward

MOITS Technical Subcommittee
November 8, 2011
Item 2b

November 2, 2011

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To: COG Board of Directors

From: The Honorable Phil Andrews, Councilmember, Montgomery County
Chair, National Capital Region Emergency Preparedness Council
Chair, Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response

Re: Report of the Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response

Emergency planning since September 11, 2001 has greatly strengthened the region's incident management and response as evidenced during a variety of events, from the Beltway Snipers to Hurricane Irene. However, the January 26, 2011 snow and ice storm, which resulted in dangerous and many hours-long commutes on gridlocked roads during hazardous conditions for thousands of residents, and unacceptable results during other incidents have shown that serious challenges persist. Following the January storm, the COG Board of Directors approved a Major Regional Incident Response Action Plan and created a Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response (IMR) in March 2011 to identify improvements to regional incident management and response. The Committee was comprised of 19 area officials, including emergency managers, chief administrative officers, state transportation and WMATA officials, public information officers, and representatives of area electric utilities, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the Greater Washington Board of Trade, and the Red Cross. The COG Board asked the Committee to complete its work by November 2011.

Through its research, the Committee identified key needs and gaps in current programs and protocols and offered comprehensive and readily implementable recommendations to address them. It studied incident management models in New York, London, and other regions and considered the question of creating a single, decision-making authority. The Committee found that most other localities do not have such an entity and concluded that our region would achieve better, faster results by enhancing our multi-jurisdictional approach.

To address a lack of regional situational awareness and the need for better regional coordination and communication among area officials—the Committee proposes the creation of a Regional Incident Coordination Program. While our localities have skilled personnel and a wide array of tools and technologies, no single local agency has staff dedicated to monitoring the region. Highly-trained RIC Program staff will monitor the region, analyze and share information, create a picture of the regional situation, and initiate calls among area decision-makers. The program is a proactive step that will benefit the region immediately, and the Committee applauds the District of Columbia's Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management for offering to host and staff the program beginning in December 2011.

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Many of the Committee's other recommendations to address other serious gaps require action by individual groups. Transportation officials are urged to continue making more real-time information on regional transportation conditions available to the public. The Committee recommends that public information officers communicate information to area residents through a new, regional web site, a Virtual Joint Information Center established by Fairfax County on behalf of the region. Emergency managers are urged to conduct regional exercises to test evacuation communication and coordination plans. Area employers should update their employee release policies, as OPM has done, and take into account transportation conditions and capacity before releasing employees. In addition, all jurisdictions in the National Capital Region are urged to assess and install back-up power for their major traffic signals to maintain road capacity and help prevent gridlock during widespread power outages.

The Committee unanimously approved this report on October 26, 2011. It is confident that implementation of the RIC Program proposal and other recommendations will lead to better decisions and a safer region when the next major incident occurs. In addition, with the COG Board's support, the Committee has agreed to remain "on call" to monitor implementation of the RIC Program and other recommendations and can update the Board on their progress in mid-2012.

EXCERPT

Report of the Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response



**A proposal for a Regional Incident Coordination Program
and over a dozen other improvements to enhance
incident management and response in the National Capital Region**

Presented to the COG Board of Directors
November 9, 2011

Report of the Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response

Approved Unanimously by the Committee on October 26, 2011

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Executive Summary

On the afternoon of Wednesday, January 26, 2011, a snowstorm hit the National Capital Region (NCR), triggering widespread and many hours-long traffic gridlock and causing power outages that impacted thousands of residents. Initial and subsequent observations of the snowstorm indicated that officials underestimated its severity. Many federal employees did not know about the early release or did not leave work until after the snowstorm began. Decision-makers focused on their individual state and local concerns, but regional coordination was inadequate. Once the snowstorm was underway, the public did not have access to real-time information on regional conditions to inform their decisions.

Following the snowstorm, area leaders and residents questioned the region's preparedness and response, as well as its ability to deal with future storms, emergencies, and other major events. In March 2011, the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG) Board of Directors approved a Major Regional Incident Response Action Plan and Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response (IMR) to identify improvements to regional incident management. The Action Plan charged the Committee with reviewing focus areas and making recommendations that would improve the response to future incidents in the NCR. The Action Plan (*which is included in [Appendix A](#)*) had four focus areas:

- Real-time information or situational awareness among local, state, and federal government agencies with operational authority or responsibilities
- Real-time information to the media and the public
- Regional coordination
- Decision-making

The Committee was comprised of a wide range of public, private and nonprofit representatives. *For the membership list, see [Appendix B](#)*. It met 6 times over 8 months, receiving input from several COG policy boards and committees, including the Chief Administrative Officers Committee (CAOs), the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (TPB), and the National Capital Region Emergency Preparedness Council (EPC), among others. In this report, the Committee addresses the focus areas and makes recommendations that should substantially improve regional communication and coordination for events such as the January 26 snowstorm.

Focus Area Issues

For the first focus area, the Committee was tasked with examining how emergency managers and transportation officials communicate among themselves and with each other during incidents. The Committee notes that while WebEOC (Emergency Operation Center) is a valuable tool that provides information sharing, it is only used when trained staff is available to operate the system. Jurisdictions in the NCR have 24/7 emergency 911 centers and DC HSEMA (Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency) has a 24/7 Emergency Operations Center, but no agency has staff providing situational awareness of the region as a whole. The Committee also finds that existing tools had been underutilized—such as messaging and consultation between transportation and emergency managers—before and during the January snowstorm. The Committee notes that the traffic gridlock on January 26 resulted from a compressed departure of

employees during a highly-problematic afternoon rush-hour rather than from an evacuation—reinforcing shelter-in-place as the default protective action for residents. Communication between transportation officials and emergency managers needs continued testing in order to help manage similar, future incidents, and in rare occasions, evacuations.

With regard to real-time information to the media and public, the Committee stresses the need for coordinated messages delivered through a steady stream of accurate, real-time information, through a variety of communication forms, to empower individuals with information so they can make good decisions during incidents. The Committee notes, for example, that the region has lacked a central web site where Public Information Officers (PIOs) can coordinate during emergencies and post a regional PIO message, compile up-to-date information from all individual government web sites, and link to information on regional utilities, weather, and traffic conditions. Another major issue, as evidenced by the January 26 snowstorm, is that employers need to have shelter-in-place procedures. The Committee also finds that area commuters and residents need to be well prepared for winter storms as well as unplanned events by having personal emergency plans and supplies for home and work and by signing up for alerts from local governments and transportation agencies.

The Committee finds several areas in need of improvement in regard to regional coordination. It notes that the Metropolitan Area Transportation Operations Coordination (MATOC) Program is still relatively new and has the potential to provide more detailed transportation incident information to a wider audience. The Committee finds that the Regional Incident Communication and Coordination System (RICCS)/snow calls, which provide a venue for area decision-makers to consult and coordinate efforts before an event, could be enhanced to better share information. The Committee notes that employee release decisions have a major impact on regional transportation conditions and that delivery of early release from work messages by employers needs improvement. While adequate plans and agreements are in place for removal of disabled vehicles, the region needs to do more to discourage commercial trucks and commuters from being on the road in the first place during forecasted major snowstorms or other events. On the subject of electric power reliability and restoration, the Committee finds that utilities' preparations for storms occur outside of the regional coordination framework and that regional officials would benefit from more communication with the major utilities serving the NCR on their work before, during and after storms. The Committee also notes that many critical facilities, including most traffic signals, lack back-up power.

For the final focus area, the Committee reviewed other U.S. and international incident management models to determine if there was a better framework for decision-making. The Committee notes that coordinating local decisions in a regional context is challenging in the multi-jurisdictional NCR. Incident management models, such as those in some foreign countries or U.S. regions located solely in one state or with a dominant jurisdiction, are not appropriate for the NCR due to this region's multi-jurisdictional nature. The Committee also notes that the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut metropolitan region's traffic monitoring program is similar to MATOC because it supports regional decision-makers instead of acting as a central, decision-making authority. Based on the Committee's research, there would also be legal barriers to creating a central authority, such as one decision-maker. Moreover, it is not clear that a central authority would achieve better results than a robust, well-coordinated multi-jurisdictional approach.

Committee Recommendations/Strategic Actions

In the previous four Focus Areas, the Committee recommends specific actions that will improve the region's future incident management and response through better regional coordination and communication. (*For a table of all Committee recommendations, see [Appendix C.](#)*) The Committee calls attention to several improvements underway since the January 26 snowstorm that must be continued, such as the ongoing work by transportation officials to provide their information to emergency managers.

Many of the recommendations require action by the Chief Administrative Officer's Committee and other individual groups—the central participants in incident management and response—to strengthen and enhance their own procedures and programs. Transportation officials are urged to continue efforts to make MATOC's transportation incident information available to the public. The Committee recommends public information officers utilize the new, regional Virtual-Joint Information Center and vigorously describe, promote, and inform personal emergency preparedness before the winter snow season begins. Emergency managers are urged to conduct regional exercises to test evacuation communication and coordination plans. The Committee recommends officials that make employee release decisions, like OPM, review and update their policies with a goal of having new policies in place by December 1, 2011. And all jurisdictions in the NCR are urged to conduct assessments of and expeditiously install back-up power for their major traffic signals.

Some recommendations—providing regional situational awareness and improving coordination and communication through the RICCS call—require participation by multiple agencies and jurisdictions, and the Committee believes they should be addressed through coordinated action—the creation of a Regional Incident Coordination (RIC) Program. The Committee notes in the report that no local agency has staff providing situational awareness of the region as a whole. The RIC Program would be staffed with highly trained and experienced individuals—its staff would have access to and knowledge of the region's many programs, such as RICCS, WebEOC, MATOC, Virtual JIC, as well as other information sources. RIC Program staff would be responsible for monitoring the region using these established programs, distributing and redistributing relevant information to appropriate officials, creating a picture of the regional situation, and sharing this picture with decision-makers on RICCS calls and through other means. Its staff would also serve a proactive role to initiate RICCS calls, contact agencies to help expedite the release of information to the public, and be a key participant in scenario-based regional exercises. The RIC Program would not usurp the authority or duplicate the current functions of any local, state, or federal agency, and it would not impact mutual aid agreements among jurisdictions. It would, however, provide better information for officials to make operational decisions. On an interim basis, DCHSEMA has offered to staff and host the RIC Program, so it can begin providing the Program's functions starting in December 2011.

The Committee also notes that area officials do not work jointly across their subgroups on a consistent basis to improve incident management and response. It sees value in continued engagement by its own multi-sector group of members and urges them to formalize their cooperation by establishing a RIC Oversight Group.

The Committee concludes this report by showing how its key recommendations fit together to improve management of and response to future incidents. It presents these high-level, strategic actions in three categories: advance planning, communication/coordination shortly before an incident, and management and response during an incident. The Committee notes the region has performed well in preparing and responding to planned events and many forecasted storms, but it must do better during unexpected events, such as storms that become stronger than forecast, earthquakes, and

potential terrorist attacks. The Committee believes, if implemented, its recommendations related to advance planning, as well as the functions provided by RIC Program staff, will greatly benefit the people of the NCR during these unexpected events.

Advance planning is the first part of effective incident management. RIC Program staff will use current regional programs like RICCS, WebEOC, MATOC, Virtual JIC, as well as other information sources to monitor the region and begin providing regional situational awareness. RIC Program staff will also participate in regional training and scenario-based exercises. COG will make improvements to the RICCS call so it will be a better forum for sharing information. PIOs will continue community and media outreach on personal preparedness, such as a regional “Get where you need to be before the weather gets bad!” messaging in advance of the 2011-2012 winter storm season. Area officials will update and improve standard operating procedures, such as employee release policies. Current mutual aid and operational agreements should be amended and expanded on, while utilities and other agencies should be asked to become a formal part of the region’s emergency response network. Utilities will work to improve reliability. Jurisdictions and stakeholders will identify and provide back-up power to critical facilities, such as hospitals, shelters, traffic signals.

The time period shortly before an event is the next stage of incident management. RIC Program staff will distribute/redistribute relevant information and assemble and share an up-to-date picture of the regional situation for the appropriate area officials. Local officials or RIC staff will ensure coordination takes place by initiating a RICCS call. New RICCS call technology will better share information on conditions and the possible options for the status of federal employees. PIOs will use a wide array of tools to communicate directly with the public as well as through the media, private, civic and other groups. EOCs will be activated if determined necessary by local officials. Departments of transportation and utilities will mobilize to prepare for the event.

During an event, the RIC Program staff will continue providing regional situational awareness, sharing relevant information with appropriate officials, and coordinating additional RICCS calls with decision-makers as needed. PIOs will make real-time, factual information available to the public through the V-JIC and the many outreach tools they have developed. Emergency managers and transportation officials will communicate with each other. DOTs will be better able to plow and clear roads because fewer vehicles will be disabled due to messaging before the event. Improved messaging by utilities will alert customers of power outages and estimated time for restoration. Utilities will begin power restoration on facilities that are the region’s highest priorities for restoration. New and expanded mutual aid agreements will allow local and state governments, federal agencies, and utilities to provide assistance to one another.

Emergency planning since September 11, 2001 has greatly strengthened the region’s incident management and response as evidenced during a wide range of events, from the Beltway Snipers to Hurricane Irene. However, the January 26 snowstorm and other incidents have shown serious challenges persist. The region must take several proactive, tangible steps to better communicate and coordinate, especially during unplanned events. The Committee believes that its comprehensive and readily-implementable recommendations to strengthen and enhance current programs and procedures and provide new regional functions through a RIC Program will advance previous work in the National Capital Region and reassure the public that its leaders can work together effectively in times of crisis.

Recent Incidents: Examples of Regional Coordination/Communication



January 26, 2011 – Snowstorm

How did regional communication and coordination work?

- A RICCS/snow call was conducted at 10:00 a.m.
- At 11:40 a.m. OPM authorized a two hour early release of federal employees.
- Local officials communicated with public through media, social media, alerts, and other means about the early release and weather conditions.
- Many employees did not leave work early as authorized.
- When snow began and many people departed about the same time, roadways became almost impassable.
- Transportation officials and MATOC were aware of the worsening road conditions but there was no protocol in place requiring the sharing of information with emergency managers and others.
- No additional RICCS call for regional coordination.

How would regional communication and coordination have worked based on the IMR Committee recommendations?

- MATOC is now sharing information directly with emergency managers and others.
- RIC Program staff would have seen the MATOC information, shared it with appropriate officials, and initiated additional RICCS calls.
- Through the RICCS calls, transportation officials would have informed decision-makers that many roads were expected to be impassable. Decision-makers could have then agreed to coordinated messages to the public to stay off the roadways or take Metro if possible.
- Information would have been transmitted through the V-JIC web site and other PIO outreach tools.
- MATOC would have been sharing real-time incident information with the public through a web site.
- More traffic signals would be equipped with back up power and would have been operational.
- Messaging would have discouraged large trucks from being on the roadways.



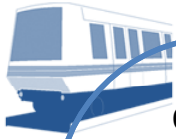
August 23, 2011 - Earthquake

How did regional communication and coordination work?

- The region experienced an earthquake at 1:51 p.m.
- Several local jurisdictions began sending text alerts to the public within 15 minutes of the earthquake.
- A RICCS call occurred at 3:15 p.m. with CAOs, emergency managers, and others sharing initial assessments that indicated minimal damage.
- Many commuters departed work early resulting in traffic delays of several hours. In addition, Metrorail was operating at 15 mph while their system was being evaluated by engineers.
- During a RICCS call at 9:15 p.m., CAOs confirmed minimal damage and OPM/General Services Administration (GSA) indicated that they had damage to some federal buildings.
- At approximately 2:30 a.m., OPM/GSA determined the status of federal employees for the following day and this information was posted on the OPM web site, provided to the media, and distributed via RICCS.

How would regional communication and coordination have worked based on the IMR Committee recommendations?

- Advance planning activities and scenario-based exercises would have provided information for the public on appropriate responses to earthquakes or other significant, unexpected events.
- RIC Program staff would have gathered and provided to decision-makers timely information on the earthquake, the condition of the transportation systems, and employee release statuses.
- Timely information would have been posted for public use on the V-JIC and MATOC web sites as well as internally on WebEOC, and updated frequently as new information became available.



October 11, 2011 – Person Struck by Metro train

How did regional communication and coordination work?

- Incident occurred at 4:50 p.m.
- WMATA sent the first of 44 twitter messages at 4:57 p.m. The first alert from WMATA was sent at 5:14 p.m.
- RICCS message was sent out at 6:11 p.m.

How would regional communication and coordination have worked based on the IMR Committee recommendations?

- WMATA's early alerts and messages to its customers would have been recognized by RIC Program staff.
- RIC Program staff would have shared all relevant information from WMATA as well as the implications for the regional transportation system with appropriate officials.
- Timely information would have been posted for public use on the V-JIC and MATOC web sites as well as internally on WebEOC.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

COG	Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments
DCHSEMA	District of Columbia Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DOTs	Departments of Transportation
EMAs	Emergency Management Agencies
EOC	Emergency Operations Center
EPC	National Capital Region Emergency Preparedness Council
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
JFRQ-NCR	Joint Forces Headquarters – National Capital Region
IMR	Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response
MATOC	Metropolitan Area Transportation Operations Coordination Program
NCR	National Capital Region
NIMS	National Incident Management System
NPS	National Park Service
NWS	National Weather Service
OPM	U.S. Office of Personnel Management
PIOs	Public Information Officers
RECP	Regional Emergency Coordination Plan
RESF	Regional Emergency Support Function
RIC	Regional Incident Coordination Program (proposed)
RICCS	Regional Incident Communication and Coordination System
RITIS	Regional Integrated Transportation Information System
SPG	Senior Policy Group
TRANSCOM	Transportation Operations Coordinating Committee (NY-NJ-CT Region)
TPB	National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board
V-JIC	Virtual Joint Information Center

Appendix B: Steering Committee on Incident Management and Response Members

Hon. Phil Andrews¹
Montgomery County Council
Chair, NCR Emergency Preparedness Council

Tony Alexiou
Deputy Director & Divisions Chief for
Operations
Montgomery County
Regional Emergency Managers

Steward Beckham, Director
Office of National Region Capital Coordination
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Jim Dinegar, President & CEO
Greater Washington Board of Trade
Business Community

Tim Firestine, Chief Administrative Officer
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Montgomery County
Chief Administrative Officers

Merni Fitzgerald, Director of Public Affairs
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Bob Gore, Supervisor
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American Red Cross of the National Capital
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Reggie McCauley
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Jack Requa, Assistant General Manager
Department of Bus Services
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
WMATA

Hari Sripathi, Regional Operations Director
VDOT-Northern Region Operations
State DOTs

Frank Tiburzi, Principal Engineer
Restoration Services & Operations Support
BG&E
Electric Utilities

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District of Columbia HSEMA
Senior Policy Group

Michael Zezeski, Director
Office of CHART & ITS Development
Maryland State Highway Administration
State DOTs

¹ Chair of Committee

* Group represented is italicized.