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BEST PRACTICE

Mutual Aid Agreements: Requesting Mutual Aid

PURPOSE

This Best Practice reviews procedures for making mutual aid requests.

SUMMARY

Procedures for the activation of mutual aid agreements must be clear to all partners. Requests should be as specific as possible whether made through dispatch or directly.

DESCRIPTION

Triggers

Agreements must specify clearly what will trigger mutual aid as well as proper request procedures. Direct written requests are preferable when reimbursement is an issue, while oral requests will suffice when reimbursement is not required.

Triggers vary depending on the type and purpose of the agreement but must be standard for each individual agreement. In interlocal or automatic aid agreements units are automatically dispatched based on geography and/or incident size. These processes occur on a daily basis in thousands of incidents each year.

Mutual aid agreements, on the other hand, should be activated in one of three ways:

- Notification through dispatch, which contacts assisting parties directly;
- Notification through the state emergency management agency (EMA), which then contacts assisting parties; or
- Direct notification, orally and/or in writing.

In many cases, there will not be time to make a formal written request until after the critical first few hours of an incident. Mitigation is the first priority and forms should be filled out only after the situation is under control. A written request should be required within 24-28 hours for mutual aid situations requiring reimbursement.

Requests

The Incident Commander should notify dispatch/mutual aid partners of what is required in plain English and in a clear, concise manner. The following information should be included:

1. A general description of the emergency;
2. Identification of the disciplines for which assistance is needed (fire, Emergency Medical Services, law enforcement, etc.);

3. The exact amount and type of personnel, equipment, materials, supplies, and/or facilities needed and a reasonable estimate of the length of time that each will be needed; and
4. The location or locations to which the resources should be dispatched.¹

Single Point Ordering

Requests for mutual aid at the incident scene should emanate from one person only. In most cases, this should be the Incident Commander communicating directly or through liaison to the EMA, dispatch, or others responsible for contacting assisting parties.

Request Form

Forms can facilitate requests for mutual aid and assist in proper record keeping. Mutual aid systems that are used for day-to-day response, however, might find forms cumbersome. In general, if reimbursement will be required than request forms should be used. The form will include space for all of the information listed above as well as relevant contact information.

Dispatch Communication

Mutual aid requests should be communicated to dispatch as clearly and concisely as possible.

Train Dispatchers

Dispatchers must be familiar with mutual aid procedures. Dispatchers unfamiliar with mutual aid protocols, procedures, and terminology can be prone to errors and delays, according to [After Action Reports](#) from wildfires in California.

[Northern Illinois's Mutual Aid Box Alarm System \(MABAS\)](#) designates one agency to serve as headquarters dispatch for between 10 and 30 fire departments. Large-scale mutual aid requests--involving several pieces of equipment from different jurisdictions--are handled by the headquarters dispatch.

Self-Dispatch

Self-dispatch can be common practice in many areas but it is unacceptable. When mutual aid agreements are effective, needed units will respond properly and unsolicited aid will only get in the way. Dispatchers should prohibit units listening in from self-dispatching to the incident scene. Only units properly responding to a mutual aid or automatic aid agreement should be allowed to participate in incident response.

Self-Dispatch was a problem during the response to the September 11, 2001 attack on the Pentagon. According to an [After-Action Report](#) by the [National Volunteer Fire Council](#), freelancing by off-duty personnel or self-dispatch by mutual aid companies lent to chaos at the incident scene and caused accountability and communications problems for the Incident Commander.

For more information on request procedures, forms, and examples, see:

- Texas Model Interjurisdictional Agreement: ([LLIS.gov ID# 13505](#))
- Texas Regional Councils' Mutual Aid Agreement: http://www.nimsonline.com/docs/Mutual_Aid_ao.pdf
- Virginia Statewide Mutual Aid Event Form: ([LLIS.gov ID# 13514](#))

¹ Adapted from the Texas Inter-Jurisdictional Mutual Aid Agreement.

- Santa Barbara County Mutual Aid Request Form:
([LLIS.gov ID# 13515](#))
- Kentucky Emergency Management Mutual Aid Request Form:
<http://kyem.dma.ky.gov/mutualaid/4.doc>
- Colorado Metrowide Intergovernmental Mutual Aid Agreement Request Form:
([LLIS.gov ID# 8158](#))

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