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# ICS and Failure

# Jacob Donohue

# State College of Florida

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# Dr. James Carlino

Abstract

The Incident Command System is meant to help during disasters. Its purpose is to form a communication chain that supports and coordinates recovery efforts. There are many moving parts to recovery efforts and many different people able and willing to help. The Incident Command System is supposed to be able to organize those parts and pieces effectively. It has good intentions, but can be ineffective if the leadership is not prepared to respond to the disaster.

ICS and Failure

During Hurricane Katrina, the state of Louisianna was in shock. The levees had broken, and the town of New Orleans flooded, leaving millions without a home to return to. During a time of need like this, the government has duties to respond. Hurricane Katrina qualified as a national emergency and required the resources from the government to be able to effectively respond. This is one situation where the Incident Command System should have played a large part in recovery efforts, and it did not. The ICS is supposed to be prepared to respond and have a hierarchy to delegate tasks too. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, it didn’t seem like anyone was ready or even proactive. They were all slow to react and negatively affected the outcome of Hurricane Katrina.

**What is the Incident Command System?**

The Incident Command System is a structural ideology to organize multi-faceted response efforts during a natural disaster “Using ICS for every incident helps hone and maintain skills needed to coordinate efforts effectively” (ICS Review Document, n.d.). When disaster strikes, there are many people affected, as well as many people who feel obligated to help. There are government response teams who are responsible for showing up and helping as well as local businesses and citizens who want to help. Having too many cooks in the kitchen can cause problems. That’s where the Incident Command System comes in “The ICS is an organizational structure intended to coordinate multiple response organizations” (Moynihan, 2007). At the top of the ICS structure lies the Command center, from there it breaks down into four different groups. Those four groups are operations, logistics, planning, and finance / administration. These four subsections all repost to the command but are used for all different parts of the recovery efforts.

**Hurricane Katrina and the ICS**

Hurricane Katrina was by all measures a failure for the emergency management coordination and FEMA “By almost any measure, the response was a failure” (Moynihan, 2007). There were so many points in the review that, if done differently, could have saved hundreds of lives. This is an example of the ICS not being properly prepared and deployed. Hurricane Katrina was observed and watched for days before it hit New Orleans on a Monday. They had known up to 24 hours in advance about the general area that would be affected, any only evacuated by mandatory 18 hours in advance. The evacuation efforts were the first failure. There was not a quick enough evacuation order from the local government to have a positive effect on the community. Not only was the evacuation declared late, but the response efforts were also days late “On Thursday, buses finally arrived to begin evacuations from the Superdome, although evacuations from both the Superdome and Convention Center were not completed until Saturday, and some remained stranded on highways until Monday” (Moynihan, 2007). The recovery effort to get people out of the damage and remains to up to a whole week after the Hurricane hit.

**The people in charge who failed.**

So, who was in charge, and fumbled the ball, at the time? The mayor of the city was Ray Nagin, who waited until the day before the Hurricane hit to issue a mandatory evacuation. The government was warned about the potential of flooding with a storm this big, and yet they delayed responding, “delays by federal officials in gaining situational awareness about levee breaches and flooding” (Moynihan, 2007). The director of FEMA at the time, Michael Brown, promised to governor of LA, Kathleen Blanco, 500 buses that would be there in ‘hours’ (Moynihan, 2007). Those buses did not arrive for two more days. It was not just a failure of a few people, it was a failure of numerous government levels “to meet their obligations and that the response to Hurricane Katrina constituted a litany of mistakes, misjudgments, lapses, and absurdities all cascading together” (Farazmand, 2019, p. 127). It is not normal for the ICS to have such a failure of a response system and it is not acceptable for this to be the response that New Orleans received.

**Conclusion**

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, the ICS failed. There was a complete lack of communication from the top down “The response to Katrina featured neither an effective network nor an effective hierarchy” (Moynihan, 2007). The ICS clearly failed on many levels of the government. It was the ‘perfect storm’ where everything that happened, just added to the disaster. The warning signs before the disaster were ignored and that caused more casualties than necessary.

**References**

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