



Multi-unit Response in the Fire Service

In the last article, we introduced the concepts and principles of the incident command system. During major fire incidents, the equipment and personnel needs of the incident may either commit all of the department's resources to this one incident, or may "strip" the department's resources completely. In these cases, aid from other agencies is necessary.

When a major incident occurs (or a series of small incidents occurs all at one time), other fire units must be moved in to help at the emergency or cover the area. In many areas, formal agreements are made to handle these situations. These agreements are called "Mutual Aid" and/or "Automatic Aid".

As a telecommunicator, you may or may not be familiar with the ISO and their ratings for fire safety. The Insurance Service Organization (ISO) determines the level of service provide by all fire suppressions agencies. ISO uses a series of calculations and testing mechanisms to determine how efficient a fire agency is at fire suppression. All fire agencies are rated by ISO on a regular basis. Some of the items that are tested are: levels of response, average time of response, level of staffing on fire units, ability to maintain a set fire flow from a given water supply and other specific functions. ISO even evaluates communications centers on their ability to meet set standards such as generator and back up power supplies, and the number of dispatchers on duty on a regular basis.

When ISO finishes it's evaluation, it issues the fire department a "class" number. In the ISO rating system, Class One is the best possible score. You may have seen fire departments that have the words, "A Class One Department" on their fire apparatus. They are touting their ISO rating by writing it on their equipment. A Class Ten is the worst possible score. Your local homeowner's insurance rates are based in part on your local fire departments ISO rating. The lower the rating, the higher the insurance premium.

So what do ISO ratings have to do with Mutual Aid? ISO sets a standard defining how many units are needed to perform basic suppression duties. Fire Departments nationwide attempt to meet the level of staffing and the number of units needed to respond to emergencies. When a fire agency commits units to an emergency, they may or may not have enough units to cover a second or greater emergency. This causes the

need to have assistance from a neighboring agency on occasion. Formal agreements are necessary in many jurisdictions because cities and counties must agree to pay the cost of sending fire equipment outside of their normal response area.

No fire agency can have all of the resources it will need for every combination of incidents that may occur. For this reason, many fire agencies have formal agreements that establish when and how neighboring agencies will respond inside another jurisdiction. These agreements are known as Mutual Aid Agreements.

Mutual Aid Agreements are negotiated in advance of a major incident (or series of smaller incidents that strip resources). These agreements provide a framework for providing assistance when needed. As mentioned above, the level of staffing and response are usually defined by the department's ISO rating.

In the case of a single large incident, mutual aid agreements may include the use of specialized units. These may include HAZMAT units, crash trucks, aerial towers, or specialized rescue units. These specialized units are typically high cost units and mutual aid agreements spell out who will pay for the cost of operating the units while out of their normal jurisdiction.

If an agency commits most or all of its resources on a particularly active day, mutual aid agreements may provide for units from another adjacent jurisdiction to cover calls or to cover stations left vacant. While high call volume incidents may occur, they usually cause coverage problems only for a short term. This is in comparison to the long-term tendency of a major incident.

An example of Mutual Aid: Air Florida and the Metro in Washington D.C.

Many years ago, an Air Florida jet crashed into the icy Potomac River on takeoff from Washington National Airport, in Washington D.C. The water was freezing, and after the first few minutes, victims that survived the impact of the crash were literally freezing to death in the river. The D.C. Fire Department sent units to the scene and engaged in search and rescue operations. Due to the large number of units sent to the crash, there were very few D.C. fire units left for response in other areas of the city.

Within an hour of the aircraft incident, there was a crash in the Washington D.C. subway system. The subway accident involved a number of people who were injured in the subway tunnel. The additional incident was also located in the response area of the D.C. Fire Department. All remaining D.C. units were sent to the incident in the subway. Because a mutual aid agreement was in place, units from Virginia and Maryland covered D.C. fire stations and responded to emergencies in D.C. while all of the D.C. units were committed. Because the agreement was already in place, there was no question from the fire dispatch center as to whom to send to cover the vacancies and pending emergencies.

Automatic Aid or Mutual Response agreements differ from Mutual Aid agreements in the following ways: Mutual Aid agreements are designed to cover major

incidents or fluctuations in coverage due to a high call volume, or the agreements cover the response of specialized equipment such as HAZMAT units. Automatic Aid or Mutual Response covers the regular response of a unit or units to a given address that is totally unrelated to call volume or a major incident.

This concept is best explained by an example. City A has a large oil refinery within its jurisdiction. Because of the nature of a major fire incident there, City A Fire Department knows that it must have help if it is to fight a fire at that refinery. Through written agreement, City B, which is adjacent to City A agrees to send some of its fire units “automatically” whenever a call is received and dispatched to the refinery.

This concept not only applies to large-scale incidents. Automatic Aid or Mutual Response also can cover areas that are physically closer to another jurisdiction. Example: Smith Street is located within the coverage area provided by City A Fire Department. Smith Street is physically located on the far south border of City A’s response area. City B has a fire station that is 2 blocks from Smith Street while City A has a station that is 1 mile from Smith Street. City A Fire Department may have an Automatic Aid or Mutual Response agreement with City B to “automatically” respond to any calls located on Smith Street, in place of one of their units.

Since Mutual Aid and Automatic Aid/Mutual Response agreements differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, telecommunicators must be familiar with their local agreements.

One of the goals of fire dispatch is to dispatch every call as quickly as possible. Response to the fire scene takes longer if the response has to come from farther away. Therefore, plans must be made that provide for covering geographical areas. These plans involve the concepts of “move up” and “fill in”.

Agencies may have different names for these concepts, but the concepts are basically the same - provide coverage in geographical areas that have been left “open” by other units who area assigned to calls. These plans provide for the systematic movements of responsibility and in some cases, the physical movement of units to provide coverage.

In order to understand move ups, it is necessary to cover the concept of First Due/First In. In the fire service, a jurisdictional area is broken down into segments. These segments are usually based on the location of stations and equipment. These segments are referred to as a station’s First Due or First In area. This terminology simply means that this station’s equipment will be the “first due” to arrive on the scene of an emergency in that area (or as the case may be, “first in” to the area) under normal circumstances. The same concept holds true for the “Second Due/Second In” area. This means that this piece of equipment will be the second to arrive under normal circumstances to a given area. Larger jurisdictions may calculate response areas that may be 10-20 units deep and each unit is calculated as a first in, second in, third in, etc.

The concept of first due/first in is a major part of the fire service since it defines which units are closer to a given area. In many cases, fire service units are required to call into dispatch to tell them when they leave and re-enter their first due area. This is important information to the fire dispatcher since that information will tell which areas are relying on the second due piece of equipment.

If a major incident occurs, dispatch will have the most current information on the status of fire units within the area.

It cannot be stressed enough that the dispatcher is the one who has the information. The responding chief officer may not have the most current information and may assume that he/she has more units available than there really are.

When the number of available units begins to run low because of a large incident (or a series of small incidents in the same area), a “move up” should be considered. This means physically moving another piece of fire equipment into a station that has been left vacant. The unit that is moved up now assumes the first due area of a unit that is currently committed on the scene of another emergency.

Remember the object of fire dispatch is to keep response times at a minimum. Vacant stations mean that there will be a delay in the arrival of a fire unit that will have to travel farther from another station.

Many fire communications centers have move up policies in place that tells the dispatch supervisor what to do if a large incident occurs. Depending on the size of the jurisdiction involved, dispatch may have a standing order to begin moving fire units around when a call reaches a second or third alarm level. Other fire dispatch agencies may not be allowed to handle the move ups without direction from a chief officer who will either give the move up orders remotely or they will physically respond to the communication center to give the order.

Move up units may come from the same fire department or they may come from neighboring agencies. Mutual Aid Agreements exist to allow other jurisdictions to cross boundaries without having to ask for clearance at the time of an emergency.

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Quiz

CDE Article – Multi-unit Response in the Fire Service

Name: _____ Date: _____

Agency: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

Email: _____

1. Contacting Animal Control for control of livestock during a major incident is an example of:
 - a) An allied agency
 - b) A command decision
 - c) A responding agency
 - d) An assisting agency

2. A formal written agreement that allows another jurisdiction to regularly cover an area because they are physically closer is called a(n):
 - a) Move-up agreement
 - b) Fill in agreement
 - c) Automatic Aid agreement
 - d) Mutual Aid agreement

3. A specialized piece of equipment that will respond to a neighboring agency is covered under a(n):
 - a) Move-up agreement
 - b) Fill in agreement
 - c) Automatic Aid agreement
 - d) Mutual Aid agreement

4. A fire jurisdiction is usually broken down into segments, these segments are known as a(n):
 - a) Move-up engines
 - b) First Due/First In area
 - c) Automatic Aid area
 - d) Mutual Aid area

5. This person has the most up to date information about a fire jurisdiction's units:
 - a) The Battalion Chief
 - b) The Company Officer
 - c) The Dispatcher
 - d) The Call Taker