Algorithm to Guide Public Health Incident Command System Activation

NATURAL DISASTER
Tornado, storm, flood, earthquake, fire, heat wave, etc.

EVOLVING PUBLIC HEALTH INCIDENT
Communicable disease outbreak, non-communicable disease outbreak, radiological or chemical incident

TERRORISM
Known or suspected to be the result of an intentional release of chemical, radiological or biological agent

Is the political/media/public/partner interest overwhelming the ability to effectively communicate internally and externally?

YES → **Activate Agency ICS**

NO

- Is/will there be significant public health impacts to your community?
- Is/will the incident exceed the agency's routine capability to respond?
- Is the incident occurring in multiple jurisdictions around you?

YES → **Activate Agency ICS**

NO → Monitor Public Health Response

Is incident something that is normal (e.g. – start of flu season) and cases numbers are within expected levels?

YES

NO

- Is the incident causing or likely to cause serious morbidity or mortality in your community?
- Is there an association with a large event in your community?
- Are many people likely to be impacted or is there a large vulnerable population in your community?
- Is the incident occurring in multiple jurisdictions around you?

YES → **Activate Agency ICS**

NO → Monitor Public Health Response

YES

- Is the incident likely to cause serious morbidity or mortality?
- Is there an association with a large mass gathering event?
- Are many people likely to be impacted?
- Is there a large vulnerable population?
- Are there multiple cases of a rare or novel illness, or illnesses with an unknown cause?
- Is the incident occurring in multiple jurisdictions around you?

NO

YES

Is staff overwhelmed or are there inadequate supplies to respond?
For example:
- Is staff falling behind in response activities?
- Is staff part of ICS for another incident?
- Is staff impacted by incident too?
- Are you running short of medical supplies, drugs and/or PPE?

NO

December 2012

Incident Command System for Public Health Incidents Algorithm

The creation of this algorithm is the product of a small group project conducted as part of the Harvard University, National Preparedness Leadership Initiative (NPLI), Cohort #9. This is an executive education program taught by the Harvard School of Public Health, within the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. The Harvard NPLI program teaches the 5 dimensions of Meta-Leadership: 1) the leader; 2) the situation; 3) leading your organization or silo (leading down); 4) leading up to bosses (leading up); and 5) leading cross-system connectivity (leading across).

Purpose This algorithm acts as a guide for governmental public health entities determining when a routine public health incident develops into a more complicated situation requires the activation of a Public Health Incident Command System (ICS)/Incident Management System (IMS) to manage the incident response.

Guidance for Leaders

This algorithm is designed to assist leaders who may be uncertain about the appropriate time for action or what actions to take when a routine public health incident starts to encounter complications necessitating a change in operational approach. It is precisely in these moments that the leader needs to remain situationally aware of the changing environment and recognize when the time is right to activate an ICS to manage the response.

When making the decision on whether the situation warrants activating ICS, the leader's advisors should include varied perspectives including public health, political, communications, etc. The algorithm enables the leader to "recognize" that the situation has evolved to the point where the processes and resources of an ICS are now required. The converse is also true. By following the algorithm the leader should also recognize when it is not necessary to activate ICS to manage the situation.

Consideration must be given for decisional space. Leaders must be aware the sooner a decision is made, the sooner subordinates can respond to those instructions.

We encourage you to adapt this algorithm and add or delete associated criteria to match your jurisdiction's unique requirements and resources. Definitions for descriptors such as "many" or "large" are different for each jurisdiction and must be defined locally. Ten cases at the local level may overwhelm while at the federal level a thousand cases may not.

Assumptions

- The jurisdiction or organization is capable of activating and operating an ICS/IMS structure.
- Activating ICS requires significant personnel resources to operate. Caution is advised when deciding whether to activate ICS because of the potential to overwhelm staff and draw resources away from other important activities.
- Activation, especially in larger organizations, necessitates robust planning and coordination to synchronize the efforts across the command and staff sections. This diverts increasing amounts of time away from the primary day to day tasks and activities of the organization.

Note: Where the algorithm indicates that ICS should be activated it implies that at a minimum an Incident Commander or Incident Manager will be assigned with support as needed. However, it does not mean activation of the entire ICS/IMS structure. It may be appropriate to partially activate some of the supporting staff positions but not all of them for all situations (e.g. for communications). For disasters that have a lead or warning period such as hurricanes or floods caused by snowmelt, consider a phased activation that corresponds to when increased support and oversight can add value to the response.

Once sustained conditions exist that do not necessitate an ICS per the algorithm, consider deactivation
The deactivation decision process can include using the algorithm backwards, or re-answering the questions.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Before using the algorithm, situational awareness is needed – what is going on, what are the impacts so far, how the event is being managed now, and the leader must be ready to make decisions and act upon them.**
2. **Start at the top of the algorithm and identify the type of event.**
3. **Answer Yes/No questions until arriving at a terminal diamond. Act upon that result.**
4. **Repeat as new observations and information are available.**

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