ALERTING

A training course for REACT Teams and members

This is a new REACT course designed to give REACT Team Officers and members and our Typed response Team Leaders and Bosses an understanding of how to develop an alerting system. This knowledge will help you develop relationships in the community, plan for bad events that may impact your community, and prepare your Team to react in a disaster.

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I. ALERTING – WHAT IS IT?

When bad things happen the response to the event depends on several key steps. Without these, response is chaotic and may result in inappropriate actions, inefficient use of resources, and less than desirable outcomes. If everything happens in the right order at the right time, there is no guarantee that everyone will live happily ever after, but the chances of an acceptable outcome increase significantly.

At the start of a routine emergency, major emergency, or disaster, several things happen even before the emergency services are aware that the disaster is developing or has happened. Someone has to:

(1) Detect that the event is developing or has happened.

(2) Notify the appropriate emergency management or emergency services agency.

Then the management structure in place to deal with emergencies has to determine how to mobilize the right resources to deal with the event. The first step in this is alerting the resources that they are, or may be, needed. An alert is thus a statement that:

(1) a bad event has happened or is happening or is developing,

(2) that an emergency response is, will, or may be required,

(3) that your organization is one that has been selected as being an appropriate resource for the problem at hand, and

(4) that you are needed now, or that you may be needed in the near future, to do your emergency communications mission.

II. SO WHO GETS CALLED?

The bottom line is that emergency management and emergency services organization and supported organizations call the people and organizations that they know and trust. To get to that point:

(1) Establish professional relationships with leadership in these organizations, through local emergency related committees, individual meetings, etc..

(2) Spend time educating the organizational leadership you wish to partner with about your actual capabilities. Do not oversell. Do not project that you want to do their job for them, that you know more about anything than they do, that you will be a political problem for them.

(3) Make absolutely certain that you understand the legal boundaries of what you can and cannot do, both in the law and in REACT International policy. Don't dilute your message and devalue your capabilities by doing things that are not emergency communications. And do not become a free substitute for a commercial service. You want to be wanted because you are good emergency communicators, not because you can save other people money by being a free labor pool.

(4) Listen more than you speak. Understand what the needs are and how you can help meet those needs.

(5) Attend professional training and network with people from the agencies you want to work with.

(6) Always be well groomed, with attention to personal hygiene, in clean business casual or disaster casual (blue jeans or cargo pants with a polo shirt) clothes. Leave the patches and badges and REACT paraphernalia at home – it impresses no one.

(7) Be careful what you call yourself. People understand President, Vice President, etc. If you make pitch to a Police Chief and call yourself Chief, he or she may not say anything, but you have just built a barrier to acceptance by creating a false equivalency between your Team's relatively small number of unsworn, unpaid volunteers and the Chief's department.

(8) Play in local drills and exercises.

(9) Be 100 percent reliable – be there when you say you will be there, do what you say you will do, do what you say you can do, don't claim credit (even if it is due), pick up your trash, and leave the place better than when you arrived.

(10) Above all, do not cause problems, play with other people's stuff, argue about assignments, whine, or lose your temper.

Expect that it will take time to be accepted and to be regarded as a Team that others want to call for – it can easily take a year or more.

III. MEMORANDA OF AGREEMENT/UNDERSTANDING

Your relationship with organizations or agencies that you support should be formally spelled out in a Memorandum of Agreement or a Memorandum of Understanding. These documents establish that:

(1) That you are a functioning organization with emergency communications capabilities, what those capabilities are, and that you are offering them for use.

(2) When, where, and under what conditions you will cooperate and coordinate with and support the organization.

(3) How you will be alerted that your services will be needed.

(4) How you will respond to a request for support.

(5) What the logistical and personnel arrangements are. Are you responsible for background checks of your people, who issues what credentials, who meets reasonable expenses, who provides insurance coverage, etc.?

Having a memorandum of understanding does not guarantee that you will be alerted or that your help will be requested. However, it is a major step in establishing a good working relationship with your supported organizations, and it is an important protection for your members.

Note - REACT's training program includes a course on writing memoranda of understanding.

IV. CAN YOU RESPOND?

Before you commit to responding if you are called do a thorough inventory of your capabilities in:

- Members – when can your members respond? How many do you have that can do emergency communications during a weekday daytime? How many can work the whole weekend? Who can actually leave home to do emergency communications?

- Training – are your members trained to do the emergency communications mission? Is their training current? Can they pass and receive both ICS 213 and radiogram messages by voice at 15 words per minute? Can they use packet or Winlink? Change in modern emergency communications is constant, and requires constant continuing education.

- Typed – REACT has had a standard system for positionally qualifying individuals and typing Teams since 2012. There are new training requirements. Do your members meet those requirements?

- Equipment – do you have a standard set of communications equipment and a service in which all members can operate? Will your radios interface with other communications organization or can you only talk to members of your Team? For example, having all Business radios may be excellent for working community events, but you can't talk to other Amateur radio emergency communications teams or gather information from the general public. Understand your capabilities and limitations.

- Transportation – can you travel to your likely assignment?

- Support – how long can you operate without support? If you are going to promise to be able to deploy to a disaster impact area, you best be self-supporting in food, first aid, sleeping, battery power, personal hygiene, etc. If you are not self-supporting, someone has to divert resources from helping the impact victims to taking care of you.

Part of making alerting and response work smoothly is having these questions answered in your emergency operations plan, tested in Team drills and exercises, and maintained.

V. THE ALERTING STRUCTURE

There are two alerting pathways that can generate a need for your Team to increase its level of readiness to respond to a request for support.

THE LOCAL REQUEST

Most requests for support will be generated by agencies or organizations in your local community. These result from established working relationships with primary (the standard emergency services such as emergency management, fire, police, emergency medical services, and public safety communications) and secondary responders (organizations that are not emergency responders but that play a support role in emergencies including government departments and voluntary agencies).

These requests should come to specified individuals in your Team. You need:

(1) An identified command structure in your Team. In emergencies who is responsible for alerting, mobilizing, and leading the Team? This should be spelled out in your Team emergency operations plan.

(2) A succession to command list. Who takes charge of alerting, mobilizing, etc. if the primary individual is not available? This list needs to be at least three and preferably four or five people long.

(3) A contact list based on your succession to command list. This list establishes the order in which people should be called and provides telephone numbers, pager numbers, and e-mail addresses.

(4) For the contact list to be regularly updated and sent to the organizations with which you have memorandums of understanding. We suggest the list be updated (even if the only change is to change the date on the list) and distributed quarterly. Monthly, unless there are real changes, risks making you seem silly or trying too hard. Once a year raises the question in the user's mind "is this still current?" Regular distribution achieves two objectives – first, it reduces the chance the list will be lost, and, second, it is a reminder that your Team is still there, ready to respond.

REACT INTERNATIONAL ALERTING

REACT Warning Team 6247 is tasked with providing an alerting system for REACT International. Alerts from REACT headquarters result from three cases:

(1) We have been asked by a national or international organization with which we have a memorandum of agreement for our support in a major disaster,

(2) We have been asked by a state or local organization or agency for help because they do not know whether there is a REACT Team in their area of responsibility, or

(3) We are generating an alert because of a developing or ongoing major disaster that may threaten our Teams or generate a request for assistance that we should be ready for in advance.

These alerts will normally come as a suggested activation level (see section VI) and be by either e-mail or other delivery of a radiogram or an ICS 213 General Message. This process is practiced in every one of our quarterly ALERTEX exercises.

INSIDE THE TEAM

So, you receive a request to be ready or to respond. The last step, and the one that absolutely should not fail, is alerting within your Team. Even in a large team you should be able to alert all of your members in no more than 30 minutes. Key to good alerting in the team is two things, a call-out roster and practice.

First, the call-out roster. This is a list of all team members, the order in which they should be notified, how they can be alerted, and the standard message that will be passed. If the Team is small, this is a straight I call you, and you call the next person on the list:

Bob Smith
123-0987 (H)
246-9753 (C)

↓

Susan Small
123-1234 (H)
246-4321 (C)
321-7890 (W)

↓

Johan Bunke
246-5371 (C)

Notice that there is a line telling member Bunke to call President Smith. This is a feedback loop to do two important things:

(1) Verify that the alerting message has made it to the last member, and when the alerting is complete.

(2) If someone in the list cannot be contacted, the individual above them goes on to call the next person down on the list. When that contact is made, the caller passes on that he or she was unable to make contact with the missing member. The last person in the list relays to the first person the names of those persons who could not be contacted so that the Team leadership has an accurate idea of who has been notified and who needs follow-up.

In larger teams it may be a good idea to divide the membership into several columns on the call-out roster. These may be by specialized capabilities, by specific Typed teams, or by geography, and should generally be 4 or 5 people long. More than 6 or 7 starts to slow down the process. Now the person at the top of the list calls the individuals at the top of each column. The individuals at the bottom of each column report back to the person at the top of the roster.

In a very large team, it is probably a good idea for the individual who has to deal with the supported organization not to be managing the actual alerting. You risk having too many phone calls at the same time and something being missed. Similarly, you need a procedure for who assumes the top of the roster job if the person on the printed copy is absent or unable to perform the duty.

A second part of the roster is a standard message. Use a standard message so that in the stress of the event key information is not dropped or incorrectly passed. An example of a standard message for a Team that has its members meet on a standby net for assignments after the alert is:

> This is (your name) with an alert for (team name). Standby net on (frequency or channel). Missing is/are (names of people in this column of the roster who have been skipped because contact could not be established).

The actual roster should be printed on a standard size sheet of paper and include the tree of who to call with contact information, simple reminder instructions on how to use the roster, the standard message, and the effective date.

Print and distribute a new call-out roster every time there is a change. We recommend printing it on different color paper each time so that it will be immediately obvious if someone has an out-of-date roster. Distribute updated rosters and go through the drill of having everyone fold up the sheet and put it in their wallet. It sounds silly, but if you just give them the sheet without the fold-and-put step, or e-mail it out to everyone, a large percentage will be lost within a week.

Second, practice. Using a call-out roster is not automatically understood by everyone. The first time you distribute one have a class in your meeting on how it works. Go through the call-out alert, having each person play their role. Include how the roster works in your new member orientation. Then conduct exercises of the system, at least once every three months if there is no actual alert during the quarter.

A caution. Do not assign key responsibilities for alerting to team members who have conflicting emergency assignments. Bob may be a great member – after all, he is an officer in the Civil Air Patrol, a member of the Police Department's bomb squad, and runs with two different fire departments, while also serving as an officer of the local rescue squad, and an Assistant Emergency Coordinator for the county Amateur Radio Emergency Service. We all know people like this (and some of us have been there and done that). Will Bob be there when you need him? No. Having conflicting obligations to more than one organization means that you cannot count on Bob. Not because he is a bad person, but because he has too many opportunities to choose from, one of which actually pays his bills.

VI. STEPPING THROUGH THE ACTIVATION LEVELS

Alerting is really only useful if you do something when you are alerted.

Alerts originating from REACT International serve two key functions:

- Providing Regions, Councils, and Teams guidance on the possible level of readiness that may be needed to respond to a major emergency or disaster.

- Serving as a framework for Regions, Councils, and Teams to be able to visualize the level of readiness of their resources.

We use four activation levels to suggest increased levels of alert and readiness for impact area and neighboring Regions and Councils. These mirror alert levels established in many states for the activation of the state emergency operations center and the state emergency response team. They also are similar to alert levels used by at least one state auxiliary communications organization. Our levels are, from the lowest level of alert to the highest:

(4) **Activation Level 4 - Standby** - an awareness level during which the Team should:

- contact their members to increase awareness of the situation,
- review the Team emergency operations plan,
- check vehicles, equipment, and supplies,
- REACT Traffic System operates a daily net – message traffic is Routine.

(3) **Activation Level 3 – Readiness** – the first level at which response activity is initiated:

- Teams start to determine member's availability and schedules,
- a Standby Net is initiated to provide updates,
- individual members and Teams should take actions to protect life and property and the ability to communicate in the event of impact,
- the REACT Traffic System is activated for daytime coverage – message traffic is Routine and Priority.

(2) **Activation Level 2 – Limited Activation** – the Team is now performing a basic level of emergency communications:

- Base Station Teams are activated and a schedule established to maintain coverage as needed,
- individual and Team protective measures should be complete.
- deployable Communications Teams should be ready to deploy
- REACT Traffic System is on 18 hour coverage - message traffic is Priority and Emergency.

(1) **Activation Level 1 – Full Activation** – The Team is fully engaged in response communications:

- Emergency communications are fully operational,

- Communications Teams are deployed as needed,
- REACT Traffic System is working 24 hours a day – message traffic is Priority and Emergency.

Regions and Councils may also suggest that their Teams adopt appropriate activation levels when major emergencies or disasters occur and guidance is not provided by REACT International. Teams may assume an activation level on their own when the situation warrants.

VII. REPORTING

If your team increases its Activation Level in response to either a local event, a state level or regional event, or a national level major emergency or disaster, let someone know.

REACT International needs to know that your Team is involved in a major event response any time you move to Activation Level 3 or higher. The natural question is why?

- It helps REACT alert other Teams that may be in the path of impacts of the event so that they can be ready.

- If you need help, REACT International will be aware of the event and be able to more quickly start the search for resources to assist you.

- It lets REACT coordinate response efforts with the other national level organizations with which we work.

- And it gives REACT International information the headquarters needs to answer press inquiries and publicize the good work that you do.

Throughout our history individual REACT Teams responded alone to events in their communities and rarely told anyone they were doing it. In today's environment we cannot survive as a viable national emergency communications organization if we cannot coordinate an effective response to major emergencies involving our Teams, Councils, and REACT International's headquarters.

To report go to http://reactwarning.org/ics213e and complete the ICS 213E Situation and Accountability Report template. Hitting submit sends the data to the REACT Warning Team watch officer who will alert the appropriate members of REACT's leadership team. A watch officer checks for reports approximately every 6 hours. It is also a good idea to call your Council and your Regional Director and inform them.

VIII. WHAT IF NO ONE CALLS?

There will be events for which you are not called, or are not called immediately. In most emergencies, major emergencies, and even disasters there are resources that are not needed. In managing major emergencies, too many resources in the response can become the disaster itself. As a result incident logistics staff and the staff in emergency operations centers are not likely to request resources for which they do not have an identified need.

Being alerted, even up through Activation Level 2, is not a request to respond. Certain parts of our system, your Team's base stations and the Traffic System, may be operational because when they are needed, they will be needed rapidly. However, deployable teams are not dispatched until a request requires full activation.

Do not self-dispatch. First, if you are not called, you self-dispatch, and something bad happens, you may not have the protections spelled out in your memorandum of agreement or even in REACT's insurance policy. Second, you are now resources that are not needed and will either sit in staging for the whole event or be told to turn around and go home. In the next to worst case you become a burden, one more group of volunteers the incident command system has to manage and find something to keep busy. In the worst case, you are in an accident in route and are injured or killed.

If an event does happen, and it is obvious that the appropriate authorities are calling for volunteers, or if the nature of the event is such that it is obvious that communications resources will be needed, a phone call to responsible agency is reasonable. Request to speak to someone involved in managing resources for the event. Identify yourself, tell the person who answers that you can provide (insert the specific capabilities that you do have), that you have (the number of volunteers you actually have) on alert, and that you are available if your help is needed. If they say, "yes, we need you," ask the obvious questions:

- Where do you need us?
- When do you need us?
- For how long should we expect to be used?
- Who do we contact when we get there?

And then be 100% reliable in getting there with what you promised – all the equipment, all the people, on time, where you are needed. Don't promise 25 volunteers with a portable repeater, mobile HF, and data communications but show up with 2 members with handhelds (one of which has dead batteries) and your pet miniature poodle.

If they say "thanks, but we have all the help we need," your answer is that you are glad that things are in hand, leave your number in case the situation changes, and hang up.

After the event ends, and normal operations are resumed by your supported organizations, it is worth asking the question "why did you not request our help?" This should never be a confrontational question. It is information gathering. If what they needed was a capability that is not in REACT's mission, then it is absolutely reasonable that you were not asked to respond. If conditions were such that response was unusually dangerous and they did not want to commit volunteers, that is a reasonable management decision.

But if the answer is "we forgot about you," or "after how your member acted in the last event after eating all the donuts in the fire station …," or "we just needed people who looked and acted professionally," you have a problem. You have to work to be valued as an asset so that people do not forget you or remember your team in a negative way. It is not their problem, it is your problem, and you have to fix it.