Years ago, four people (including two police officers) were shot in a small town in New Hampshire. The shooter fled to Vermont and was pursued by police officers from both states. The police radios were not compatible and the different jurisdictions could not communicate with each other, which made it difficult to coordinate efforts and put many officers at risk. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) is designed to limit these kinds of problems.

NIMS is a consistent, nationwide system that enables all levels of government, private sector, and nongovernmental organizations to work together during emergencies. It includes coordinating communication systems, training and planning standards, and standardized organizational structures and procedures.

On Feb. 9, 2005, Gov. Pawlenty issued an executive order that established NIMS as the state standard for incident management. The Minnesota Homeland Security and Emergency Management Division (www.hsem.state.mn.us) of the Department of Public Safety is helping to coordinate the state's compliance with NIMS requirements. Minnesota's well-established incident command system will make it easier for the state to comply with the new federal NIMS program.

To implement the NIMS system, Minnesota cities must take the following steps. (If a city decides not to participate, it will not be eligible for federal funding.)

Resolution. By Sept. 30, 2005, the city must pass a resolution to formally adopt NIMS as its emergency management system. Sample resolutions are located online at: http://minnesotafireservice.com/whatsnewnimsmenu.

Assessment. Review the city's current emergency system to determine which NIMS policies you already follow (for assistance, see the NIMS Capability Assessment Support Tool (NIMCAST) at: www.fema.gov/nimcast). To coordinate with the state's compliance with NIMS, cities should obtain a NIMCAST account from the Minnesota's Homeland Security NIMCAST Coordination Team (download the registration form at: www.dps.state.mn.us/dhsem/documents/NIMCAST_Guidance_Registration.pdf).


Awareness course. City staff and officials that deal with emergencies should take the online NIMS awareness course at: http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is700.asp. The course, which takes approximately three hours to complete, introduces NIMS and addresses the system's purpose, principles, key components, and benefits.

Another key component of the NIMS system is promotion of intrastate mutual aid. Minnesota Statute 12.331 authorizes statewide mutual aid, and provides a system for handling damages or liability related to the mutual aid services either through written agreements or by statute.

To address how the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will deal with mutual aid reimbursement as part of an emergency situation, FEMA developed the Mutual Aid Agreements for Public Assistance policy in September 2004. Policy 9523.6 develops standard criteria for FEMA reimbursement for mutual aid services that include:

- Assistance must have been requested by the requesting entity; be related to a presidentially-declared emergency, disaster or fire; used in performance of eligible work; and involve reasonable costs.

- FEMA will recognize written mutual aid agreements between requesting and providing entities, and encourages cities to establish written mutual aid agreements prior to emergencies. FEMA will also recognize post-event mutual aid agreements. For both types of agreements, FEMA wants cities to determine reimbursement and it will honor those provisions.

- Most mutual aid agreements anticipate a period of assistance where reimbursement is not expected. FEMA has now established a minimum for its policies at eight hours for this unpaid period; it will not provide any reimbursement for services for that time period. This is true whether the mutual aid agreement discusses reimbursement or not, or if it was written before or after the emergency.

The rules also define eligible costs and eligible emergency work. Providing entities must submit their claims for assistance to the requesting entity. The mutual aid agreement (specifically, the reimbursement provisions) must apply to all events, not just when there is a federally-declared emergency. All entities must keep detailed records of the services.

Cities should review their mutual aid agreements to clarify how they will reimburse each other for services provided. By thinking about it ahead of time, the cities providing services will know they will be reimbursed by the other entity or by FEMA if the need goes beyond the initial unpaid period. Based on this policy, FEMA will defer to your provisions when it decides reimbursement as long as they are reasonable and meet the other FEMA criteria.

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