

Situation Size-up

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The first thing a communicator needs to do at any emergency incident is to safely size up the situation. What is the problem? What needs to be immediately? You may receive a briefing by people already on scene, or you may need to find out yourself.

- A What is the problem?
- B What needs to be done?
- C Who needs to do it?
- D What resources are needed?

Once you have determined this initial information, communicate it to the Incident Commander (IC). And once you have successfully delivered this information, continue to monitor the situation.

- E What has changed since the last report? Does the IC know?
- F And finally, what was the resolution? Communicate to all involved.

Until we understand the basics of a situation, we are not in a position to communicate anything with accuracy. And until your CERT Incident Commander knows what's really happening, there's nothing they can do about it. If you are communicating from an incident you are the eyes and ears for the IC and it's your responsibility to size up the situation and communicate the information concisely and accurately. If you are CERT Comms Operator at an Incident Command Post receiving size up information, make sure you accurately receive the messages and report them to the IC. Don't repeat what you *think* you heard, ask for confirmation. And don't guess -- be sure. Note the time and source of your messages and write everything down. You will need your notes for your reports later, so make them.

Upon arriving at an incident, take a quick look around and accurately communicate only what you see.

What's wrong?

"Colfax IC this is Colfax Search One. Intersection of Colfax and Collins, single family residence, light structural damage, smoke showing."

This lets everyone listening to your transmission know something is happening and allows them to start thinking and preparing ahead.

After your initial transmission, find out more about the situation and do it safely. Don't just look at it -- investigate it, do a quick walk around the incident if possible. Is there a guest house? Multiple exposures (nearby buildings) threatened? Downed power lines? Gas leaks? A light plane crashed in the back yard? Report what you find and be specific.

What needs to be done?

"Colfax IC, this is Colfax Search One. Single family residence, 12345 Colfax at Collins, fire showing from the first floor rear, persons trapped on the second floor."

Now we know more about the situation. The IC and others know that fire suppression and rescue are involved.

Who needs to do it?

Request additional resources. What do you think you need? The IC may suggest other resources.

“We need fire suppression and rescue”.

What has changed since the last transmission?

Continue investigating the incident. Talk to the neighbors. Do infants or elderly or disabled live in the structure? Are people normally there during the day? Update the IC with important information as it becomes available.

“Colfax IC, this is Colfax Search One. Colfax Rescue One on scene 12345 Colfax. Neighbor reports a disabled resident at this location”.

“Colfax IC, this Colfax Search One, Colfax Rescue One reports three persons removed, building clear. Request Medical and Transport Teams.”

And the resolution?

“Colfax IC, this is Colfax Search One. The Colfax/Collins fire is out. Rescue is complete -- No further exposure at this time. Request permission to continue searching East on Collins.”

How NOT to make an emergency size up communication

“IC this is Search. I’m heading North on Colfax and I smell smoke, Yes, I see smoke and it seems to be coming from the East. Yes, definitely from the East. I’m going to try to see if I can find it, OK? No, it’s not from the East, the wind is coming from the North now – I think it’s the North (to someone else – Is that North?), yes North so I’m going to continue North on Collins. It smells like plastic is burning, it doesn’t smell like wood smoke.”

(pause – creaking and rustling sounds are heard)

“OK, I’m here and, Oh HELP, there’s people trapped and screaming. Send help right away. Oh my. Oh this is terrible – please help”

(Screaming can be heard on the radio)

“Ok, someone jumped out of the window and she’s hurt. Oh my, she’s bleeding. There’s a big fire and there’s more people screaming. Oh Send HELP. This is TERRIBLE”.

(the creaking and screaming and thumping sounds continue for 17 seconds and then the transmission ends)

No further contact.

What's wrong with this communication?

This is an example of an emergency communicator who became involved in the drama and immediacy of a situation and forgot how to communicate effectively. It's very easy to become personally involved and affected. This volunteer didn't size up the situation and forgot to use basic emergency communication skills, thereby becoming part of the problem, not part of the solution. Emergency events can be very intense emotional situations, so try to stay calm and think clearly. The information you gather and transmit is an important part of an emergency response.

"Colfax IC this is Colfax Search. I'm heading North on Colfax and I see smoke, Yes, I see smoke and it seems to be coming from the East..."

This volunteer is using radio for personal chatter, not as an emergency communications device. Make your observations, think about what you need to say, then make your brief, concise transmission.

"I see smoke and it seems to be coming from the East. Yes, definitely from the East. I'm going to try to see if I can find it, OK?..."

Transmitting information that may be of interest is useless if not given in the proper context. Reports of smoke? Where on Colfax?

No, it's not from the East, the wind is coming from the North now – I think it's the North (to someone else – Is that North?), yes North so I'm going to continue North on Collins. It smells like plastic is burning, it doesn't smell like wood smoke."

Transmitting unnecessary information. Of course they're going to try to find the source of the smoke – that's their task.

"Continuing North on Collins"

This could be useful information if Collins Street ran North and South – it doesn't, Collins runs East and West. It's easy to get directions mixed up in an emergency and this is a common. Stop, think, breathe, then transmit brief, concise, accurate information.

creaking and rustling sounds are heard

The creaking sounds indicate that the person is still pressing their Transmit, or Push To Talk (PTT) button after they finish talking. Everyone does this from time to time – especially new communicators. Their radio is still transmitting and they're using up their battery while preventing anyone else from using the frequency. Think, push, talk, release.

"OK, I'm here" Where?

"Send help right away" What kind of help?

'screaming sounds are heard' The Transmit (PTT) button is still pushed down. No one else can talk and the IC can't ask important questions.

'No further contact'

This communicator has forgotten their primary role is to communicate concise information back to the IC. They may have set their radio down as they try to help, or perhaps the constant transmitting has killed the battery. Now there is no way for the IC to find out what is really going on or respond to the incident in an appropriate, efficient way. Another communicator will need to be sent to the scene to find out important information, using up additional personnel resources and causing unnecessary delays.

Communicator vs. First Responder

Communicators need to size up incidents and report back – the initial information may be vitally important. But this is NOT to say that an emergency communicator cannot or should not become involved in an incident. Life safety and circumstances may require your immediate participation. We're volunteering for the greater good of everyone involved and that may mean delaying your active participation until later, or, if you're a communicator, until you have informed the IC. If you believe the most important action you can take at a given moment is, for example, putting pressure on a massive bleed, that's OK – you decide. But do keep your IC informed.

"Colfax IC, this is Colfax Search. I've got a bleeder here and need a medical team at 12345 Colfax and Collins. I am putting the radio down for a few moments."

As soon as the medical team arrives, or a passerby is able to help

"Colfax IC, this is Colfax Search. Colfax Medical has arrived and I am back on frequency."