



# Chain of Events

by Emily LeDuc



Photo by Jocelyn Augustino/FEMA News Photo



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## Maintaining Continuity in the Face of Disaster

*“With today’s changing threat environment, we all have to be aware of the full spectrum of emergencies and disasters that can affect our workplaces and ability to carry out our mission to deliver expert solutions, acquisition services, and superior workplaces. Whether hurricanes, floods, or the threat of terrorist attacks, GSA is where other federal agencies turn for support. Our Continuity of Operations planning, the testing and training we do, and the readiness of our associates ensures that we will be able to deliver essential services when needed.”*

— Karl Reichelt, GSA Chief of Staff

We face a challenging time as we continue to endure not only natural disasters such as wildfires, floods, hurricanes, and tornados, but also the potential threat of terrorist attacks. To this end, we all have a responsibility to be as prepared as we can in the event we are called upon to respond. We, in public service, have a special responsibility to show our resolve and to do our jobs in spite of the uncertainty we face. One of our primary focuses is on maintaining continuity of operations through planning, training of our workforce, testing and exercising our plans, and, when called to do so, executing such plans. It is the policy of the United States to have in place a comprehensive and effective program to ensure that the delivery of essential services remains uninterrupted across a wide range of potential emergencies, and to provide a mechanism for the resumption of all functions as resources become available. For Federal Executive Branch Departments and Agencies, this is referred to as Continuity of Operations (COOP) planning.

### **What is COOP?**

Many people think of COOP plans as a relic of the Cold War, something that’s been around since the 80’s and dusted off after September 11, 2001. They are partially correct. COOP has been

around since the 80’s... the 1780’s. In the early 1780’s the Congress relocated from the then Capitol of United States in Philadelphia to Trenton, NJ due to a possible mutiny of soldiers who hadn’t been paid and were headed to Philadelphia. Later in the 1780’s and 90’s, federal workers had to relocate due to Yellow Fever outbreaks. Being able to continue to operate, no matter what the hazard, has been a planning consideration for our government from the very beginning.

Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 67, titled Enduring Constitutional Government and Continuity of Government Operations, dated October 21, 1998 requires that the Executive Branch Departments and Agencies plan, train for, and be ready to deliver their essential services across a broad spectrum of hazards that may impact them. Continuity of Government (COG) is achieved when the different departments and agencies are all able to deliver their essential services, and Enduring Constitutional Government is all three federal branches continuing to be able to deliver services. PDD 67 is a top secret document that does not have a summary published by the White House. What is known is that it designates the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as the Lead Agent for COOP planning, and assigns the U.S. General Services Administration responsibility for conducting



FEMA's Emergency Support Team employees were TOPOFFII exercise participants.

training and maintaining a database of alternate operating facilities. Each Department and Agency must establish their own COOP programs. FEMA provides guidance through a series of documents known as Federal Preparedness Circulars (FPC). The newest, a rewrite of FPC 65, was just published in June.

Continuity of Operations Plan, or COOP, assures that federal agencies are capable of continuing minimum essential functions across a wide range of potential emergency situations. Most federal departments and agencies have a two-fold responsibility: (1) provide emergency support to other federal entities, and (2) ensure their own continuity of operations in order to provide that support.

### The Planning Process

Y2K and September 11, 2001 did lead to a renaissance in continuity planning efforts. The fact is that COOP planning is simply good business practice. Identifying what it is we do, what resources are needed to deliver those products and services, and who is impacted by our operations is the basis for good planning, whether for emergencies or day-to-day operations. COOP planning pays big dividends to organizations in terms of planning, budgeting, and resource management every day. Competitive sourcing is a harsh reality in today's federal environment, and in some cases, functions have been outsourced to contractors in an effort to save money, only to have the contractor come back with a higher cost. If the office had more accurately outlined what their functions were, and COOP planning had been the foundation of that effort, those federal personnel might still be in place. For SES positions, COOP is one of the few programs that satisfies accomplishment in all the Executive Core Qualifications.

When it comes to the "all-hazards" approach to COOP, one hazard is often overlooked... the hazard of complacency; of failing to plan.

Our primary objective when planning is to ensure the delivery of essential services. The goal of every COOP plan is to maintain continuous performance of essential functions with minimal disruption, to protect personnel and assets, to minimize damage and injury, and facilitate a swift and orderly return to full operational status.

COOP planning has as its basis the identification of essential functions – that is, those functions that are critical to agencies continuing to provide vital services, exercise civil authority, maintain safety, and sustain the economy during an emergency.

Once these functions are identified, a host of issues needs to be addressed to enable the performance of these functions – such as, orders of succession and delegations of authority, identification and acquisition of an alternate facilities to support operations in a threatened environment, protection and ready availability of vital records and databases, availability of critical communications systems, and a program that enables agencies to train personnel, test, and exercise plans to demonstrate capability of execution.

### Testing the Waters

#### Chicago

Executing a COOP plan is no easy task, and proper training, tests, and exercises are necessary for successful implementation. Annual testing is required. Starting with a "National Security Seminar" in November 2002, FEMA Region V, the GSA Great Lakes Region, and the Chicago Federal Executive Board worked together to raise the level of Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP) awareness in the Chicago area. Done in anticipation of a national scale WMD terrorism exercise, titled TOPOFF II, with a Chicago venue, the team worked to enhance COOP readiness in the region by delivering a series of eight COOP seminars on different COOP-related topics to the federal community in the Chicago Metro area. The content from the eight seminars was then repackaged into a 3-hour presentation and delivered to federal participants in six other major cities throughout the region. That series of seminars has been followed by additional, more in-depth seminars at each location. To date, more than 800 people have attended the presentations and workshops.

#### Denver

In August of 2004, a COOP tabletop exercise was held in the Denver metro area with GSA, FEMA, the Denver Federal Executive Board, and over 20 other federal agencies, as well as local city and state emergency representatives participating. Facilitators were on hand to aid participants, to review and discuss



the measures outlined for implementing the plans, without actually performing the actions. Improving communications among agencies and local emergency response representatives was a major focus. The all-day exercise stretched resources to the limit with agency-specific action items and simulated disaster events. Presentations included GSA's role in Continuity of Operations (COOP), the Federal Protective Service's MegaCenter, the National Archives and Records Administration and vital records, and communications systems.

### Steadfast Response 2004

The next step toward enhanced readiness is Steadfast Response 2004. Developed locally in the Chicago area, this COOP exercise is designed to provide a forum for participating departments and agencies to validate their COOP plans, policies, and procedures. The half-day event will consist of an introductory session, followed by a two hour, facilitated exercise period. Participants will be able to interact in small groups with others whose departments and agencies are of similar size and level of readiness. The Steadfast Response exercise scenario is designed to provoke discussion of important topics. There will be a plenary session at the end of the exercise to discuss issues raised during exercise play, share best practices, and to discuss follow-on activities. The exercise will be beneficial for participants regardless of their department or agency's level of readiness.

Steadfast Response 2004 has been conducted in seven major cities within the region, has been mentioned in Congressional testimony as the Generic COOP Tabletop Exercise Template, and is being used as a model in other regions. The exercise was further refined in July and a copy was provided to each GSA and FEMA regional office.

### Activation

Activation of a COOP plan can occur as a result of a number of situations ranging from localized events such as fire or bomb threats to more widespread events such as biological, technological, or terrorist attacks.

Depending on the magnitude of the event that triggers COOP activation, individuals who are designated as first responders are deployed to begin implementing their functions, whether it involves working as an advance team to prepare for additional response resources or actually responding on the front lines to an emergency situation.

As emergency events become clearer and less chaotic, additional designated teams begin their work to continue operations. Operations are returned to a normal state when the emergency is over.

### GSA's Role

GSA has been mandated through Federal Preparedness Circular 65 to:

- Develop and coordinate COOP training programs available for all agencies.
- Maintain a secure database of all operating facilities.
- Issue guidance in cooperation with the Office of Personnel Management and the Department of Homeland Security to promote an understanding of, and compliance with, the requirement and objectives of governing directives.

GSA coordinates with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide support to other federal departments and agencies when there is a Presidential declaration of disaster. GSA provides support across all 50 States, in the U.S. Territories, and U.S. Protectorates.

Executing its mission, GSA provides support by locating and acquiring space; obtaining furniture and furnishings; providing telecommunications equipment and services, vehicles, supplies, transportation services, and excess property to enable agencies to continue operations.

To learn more about the vast services and support that GSA can provide, visit our website at [www.gsa.gov](http://www.gsa.gov).

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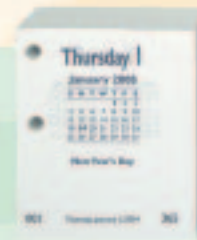
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