

## **King County Office of Emergency Management Podcasts**

### ***Disasters: Are you ready?***

#### **Who's in charge?**

One of the questions people keep asking about disaster response operations is, "Who's in charge?" Here in the United States that is not a simple answer.

It seems a bit strange to me that normally people are all about individual freedoms and the ability to do what they want, when they want to do it. Then along comes a disaster and they want one single person to be "in charge" bossing people around. We don't appear to be very consistent in our thinking.

Our form of government doesn't promote dictatorships. Generally we have various forms of government that include elected representatives and then some form of executive leadership.

Glen Woodbury, a former State Emergency Management Director use to answer the question of who's in charge with another question, "In charge of what?" Since responsibilities are spread across levels of government, multiple jurisdictions and agencies—and don't forget the private sector's responsibilities. Remember that 85% of the nation's critical infrastructure is operated by the private sector.

When we named the Regional Communications Emergency Coordination Center (RCECC) we went with the word "coordination" to reflect what it is that we do at the facility. Again, I will occasionally hear people refer to the building as a "command center" which it is not. Our role in King County during emergencies and disasters is to provide a forum at which information and coordination can be centralized so that we can form a common operational picture that includes situational awareness. Having that in place we can each separately and in a coordinated manner respond to events and be supportive of one another's actions. Yes, Ron Sims is in charge—but he is only in charge of county government and what happens in unincorporated areas of the county.

It is true that at incident sites Incident Command should be in place. This ensures that there is unity of command on scene. But even there, it is possible to have “unified command” when there are more than two agencies or jurisdictions. This then is a cooperative system to ensure that all aspects of incident response is considered and done in a coordinated manner.

Even when the military arrives in a disaster region they are subordinate to civil authorities who are requesting federal assistance. It would be a rare circumstance when a military commander assumes control of a region. I use to say it would never happen, but then in the past few years congressional legislation has been passed that makes this possible if not likely.

If you are still hung up on this issue of “one person” being in charge, get over it! I recommend you move to another country that does not have all the freedoms that we enjoy here in America.