

# Understanding the ICS: It Starts with Training



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**U**nderstanding the National Incident Management System/Incident Command System (NIMS ICS), is an important part of being a volunteer in disaster response and emergency communications. Many served agencies, such as your local emergency management department, may require some basic training before you are even allowed to volunteer with them. While this requirement may discourage some volunteers, it truly is critical to understand the ICS organization and where we and other Emergency Support Functions (ESF), connect and work together as well as the established chain of command. Here's where to start your training.

Before we look at some of the recommended courses, I wanted to take a moment to emphasize the importance of training as it relates to emergency communications. When we volunteer to support our local emergency management organization, we'll be alongside people who do this for a living. They're professionals and have spent countless hours taking extensive training. Just as I wouldn't attempt to hop on a fire truck and start putting out fires without understanding how a structure fire has to be managed, we can't expect to jump into an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and be able to communicate and understand the structure of how everything works together without having some basic training.



Santa Rosa County Emergency Operations Center during the annual hurricane exercise. You can see the various ESF positions on signs hanging above the desks.

## Getting the ICS Basics

There are four primary ICS courses that most agencies require before you're able to volunteer with them. These courses are easily found by searching for them online or by visiting training.fema.gov. They can be taken online at your convenience, and then you will take a short quiz to obtain your certificate. While these courses generally aren't offered in an in-person format, some agencies do walk students through the web courses in a group setting. Check with your local ARES team to see if this option is offered in your area. I've listed the four primary courses in the order I recommend taking them:

### **IS – 100 Introduction to the Incident Command System**

This course lays the groundwork for advanced ICS training. It covers the historical development, key features, principles, and organizational framework of ICS. Additionally, the course elaborates on the connection between ICS and the National Incident Management System (NIMS)

### **IS – 700 An Introduction to the National Incident Management System**

This comprehensive overview of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) explains how NIMS establishes a unified framework for the entire community — including all government levels, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the private sector — to collaborate effectively in preventing, protecting against, mitigating, responding to, and recovering from various incidents. This course will give you a fundamental understanding of NIMS concepts, principles, and components.

### **IS – 200 Basic Incident Command System for Initial Response**

This in-depth review of the ICS emphasizes its role in initial response efforts and equips you with the necessary training and resources to prepare for supervisory roles within the ICS framework.

### **IS – 800 National Response Framework, An Introduction**

This course emphasizes the importance of the framework to those involved in delivering and applying response core capabilities, including private sector partners, NGOs, government officials, community leaders, emergency management practitioners, and first responders.

It is important to note that these courses are revised periodically, so if you've taken them before but are just now looking to get involved in emergency communications, you should consider taking the latest revision of the course. Some position task books, such as that of the AUXCOMM volunteer, require that you've taken the most recent revision of the course.

## Taking on Tasks

Speaking of task books, a Position Task Book (PTB) in the context of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is a vital tool used to document the training, experience, and demonstrated competencies of amateur radio operators in emergency communication roles. These task books outline specific tasks and responsibilities required for various positions within emergency response operations. By completing a PTB, ham radio operators can ensure they have met the standardized criteria set by FEMA, thus enhancing their ability to effectively support disaster response and recovery efforts. ARES and AUXCOMM volunteers both have a task book.

## Matters of Structure

During your training, you will learn about the various sections of ICS, how they are organized from a command structure, and how they relate to the various duties and ESFs. At the top of your ICS is an incident commander, and from there, as the size of the incident dictates, you may have various sections such as logistics, operations, planning, and finance, with Emergency Support Functions reporting to a section chief within each of those sections.

NIMS ICS employs a Modular Organization structure, allowing it to expand and contract in response to the evolving size and complexity of an incident. Smaller incidents may only have an incident commander, while larger ones, such as a hurricane or major tornado, may utilize the full ICS structure. As the incident comes to a close, various ESFs and other portions of the command structure may be reduced to accommodate the closure.

## Where Amateur Radio Fits

There are 18 ESFs within ICS. Communications, where ARES® (Amateur Radio Emergency Service®) volunteers usually report, is known as ESF-2, which is responsible for ensuring that critical communications services to provide emergency services are kept up and functioning. While amateur radio is one of the backup ways this is done, don't be surprised to see other communications methods such as cellular, satellite phones, or satellite-based internet connections such as Starlink. While some ham radio operators may be discouraged by these new communications technologies, remember that those rely on the internet and/or satellite connections. If those services become impacted, hams still provide an incredibly valuable backup communications service.

I know that taking training can be daunting for some, but the benefits of gaining a foundational understanding of the Incident Command System can open a multitude of opportunities to serve in your community. You may find that you enjoy it so much and become so skilled at it that your served agency may ask you to fill in other roles within their team. Don't let a fear of training keep you from an opportunity to truly make a difference in your community.



Santa Rosa County (Florida) ARES Emergency Coordinator Arc Thames, W4CPD, entering his ICS-214 activity log form into the online EOC management system during hurricane Sally.

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