Disasters and the Dispatcher

Disasters and the Dispatcher is a comprehensive training program designed to prepare telecommunicators for their vital role during emergencies and catastrophic events. As the "first person on the scene," the dispatcher's actions directly influence response outcomes, resource allocation, and life safety. This course introduces foundational emergency management principles, the Incident Command System (ICS), continuity of operations planning (COOP), and both natural and human-caused disasters. It emphasizes crisis communication, situational awareness, and decision-making strategies that dispatchers must use to navigate high-volume, high-stress situations. Learners will gain the skills and confidence necessary to support their agencies and communities before, during, and after disaster events.

Course Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, learners will be able to:

1. Define disasters and describe how hazards, vulnerabilities, and capacity influence their severity.
2. Explain the principles, phases, and organizational structures of emergency management and ICS.
3. Demonstrate situational awareness and communication strategies for managing disaster-related emergency calls.
4. Apply COOP planning concepts to ensure continuity of essential functions in their PSAP during emergencies.
5. Identify natural and human-caused disasters and describe dispatcher roles and caller instructions for each.
6. Recognize signs of caller distress and apply communication techniques such as repetitive persistence and the balcony approach.
7. Understand the dispatcher's responsibilities within multi-agency coordination environments during disaster operations.

Modules

Module 1: Introduction to Disasters and Dispatching

This module provides an overview of what constitutes a disaster, the dispatcher's role as the first point of contact, and why disaster preparedness is essential within emergency communications. Learners will examine definitions of disaster, hazard-vulnerability-capacity relationships, and the increasing need for trained telecommunicators.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Describe the dispatcher's position as the first responder "on the scene" during disasters.
2. Define disasters using internationally recognized criteria.
3. Explain how hazards, vulnerability, and capacity combine to create disaster conditions.
4. Discuss the importance of dispatcher training in disaster preparedness and emergency management.

Content/Activities

- Brainteaser 1-1
- Brainteaser 1-2
- Brainteaser 1-3
- Brainteaser 1-4

Module 2: Emergency Management

This module introduces the structure and practice of emergency management, including the four phases (preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation) and the role of local, state, and federal governments. Learners will review Emergency Operations Centers and their function during coordinated disaster response.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Identify the goals and guiding principles of emergency management.
2. Explain the all-hazards approach and the four phases of emergency management.
3. Describe the processes and responsibilities at the local, state, and federal response levels.
4. Explain the purpose and functions of an Emergency Operations Center.
5. Relate the importance of personal preparedness to dispatcher performance during disasters.

Content/Activities

- Video: Preparing Makes Sense
- Brainteaser 1-1
- Brainteaser 1-2
- Brainteaser 1-3
- Brainteaser 1-4

Module 3: Incident Command System (ICS)

This module explores the history, purpose, components, and structure of the Incident Command System. Dispatchers will learn how ICS enhances communication, coordination, and responder safety, and how NIMS integrates ICS into national emergency response operations.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Summarize the historical events that led to the development of ICS.
2. Identify the core components and functional areas of ICS.
3. Explain why clear text communication is essential during disaster responses.
4. Describe the dispatcher's responsibilities and interactions within ICS.
5. Explain NIMS requirements and their impact on local agencies and telecommunicators.

Content/Activities

- Video: NIMS Overview
- Activity 3: *Hurricane Use of ICS* (scenario-based exercise)
- Brainteaser 1-1
- Brainteaser 1-2
- Brainteaser 1-3
- Brainteaser 1-4

Module 4: Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP)

This module prepares dispatchers to understand and support Continuity of Operations Planning within their agency. It covers COOP objectives, essential functions, alternate facilities, risk analysis, and the Concept of Operations (CONOPS). Learners explore threat scenarios and COOP activation considerations during emergencies.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Define COOP and explain its purpose within emergency communications.
2. Identify essential components and objectives of an effective COOP plan.
3. Describe the processes for COOP activation under various hazard scenarios.
4. Explain CONOPS and how agencies maintain command, control, and communication during disruptions.
5. Recognize staffing, facility, and communication requirements for sustaining operations.

Content/Activities

- Activity 4: *COOP Tornado Scenario*
- Brainteaser 1-1
- Brainteaser 1-2
- Brainteaser 1-3
  Brainteaser 1-4

Module 5: Disasters of Nature

This module details major natural disasters—such as floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, blizzards, heat waves, and wildfires—and the unique challenges they pose to PSAPs and callers. Learners will practice providing life-saving pre-arrival instructions and recognizing cascading effects that can overwhelm response systems.

Module Objectives

Learners will be able to:

1. Identify major natural disaster types and the hazards each presents.
2. Provide appropriate caller instructions before, during, and after natural disasters.
3. Recognize cascading disaster effects and their impact on call volume and resource availability.
4. Describe specific safety considerations for callers trapped in water, debris, vehicles, or severe weather.
5. Apply life-safety guidance in scenarios involving fires, extreme temperatures, and large-scale weather events.

Content/Activities

- Video: Flash Floods
- Video: Trapped in Flooding Car
- Video: Storm Surge
- Video: Earthquakes and Tsunamis
- Video: Tornadoes
- Video: Blizzards
- Video: Wildfire
- Audio: Earthquake Calls Parts 1 & 2
- Activity 5: Earthquake Reality Practice
- Brainteaser 2-1
- Brainteaser 2-2

- Brainteaser 2-3
- Brainteaser 2-4

Module 6: Man-Made Disasters

This module examines human-caused disasters including terrorism, arson, civil disorder, riots, explosions, and chemical releases. Dispatchers will learn how to identify potential indicators, support early event detection, and provide safe pre-arrival instructions during volatile conditions.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Distinguish between domestic and international terrorism and identify common threat types.
2. Recognize signs of secondary explosive devices and understand responder risk.
3. Explain the dispatcher's role in early detection of bioterrorism or epidemic events.
4. Identify critical information needed when receiving calls related to arson or civil unrest.
5. Provide safe guidance to callers and protect responders during man-made disaster events.

Content/Activities

- Video: Civil Unrest and Arson
- Brainteaser 1-1
- Brainteaser 1-2
- Brainteaser 1-3
- Brainteaser 1-4

Module 7: The Role of the Dispatcher in Disasters

This module emphasizes the dispatcher's responsibilities during major disasters, including managing extreme call volumes, applying investigative questioning strategies, combating tunnel vision, and using communication techniques to calm distressed callers. Learners will consider fatigue, emotional resilience, and the need for multi-layered backup systems.

Module Objectives

Upon completion of this module, learners will be able to:

1. Describe how disasters affect PSAP operations, staffing, and call volume.
2. Apply the Journalistic Investigative Approach (5W + H + W + H + I) during chaotic events.
3. Recognize and counter tunnel vision using the balcony approach.
4. Use communication strategies—such as repetitive persistence—to overcome caller hysteria.
5. Effectively manage calls involving children, suicidal individuals, or emotionally overwhelmed callers.
6. Explain the importance of planning, training, backup systems, and self-preparedness.

Content/Activities

- Video: Disaster Calls
- Brainteaser 1-1
- Brainteaser 1-2
- Brainteaser 1-3
- Brainteaser 1-4

Course Completion Criteria

To successfully complete this course and earn continuing education units (CEUs), learners must achieve a minimum score of 75%. The quiz must be completed within one hour.

- CEUs awarded: 2
- Certificate duration: 12 Months

Technical Requirements

- Desktop, laptop, or mobile device
- Speakers or headphones
- High-speed Internet access
- A current web browser