

Just What Is a Standard?

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One of the positive trends in emergency management over the past few years has been the increasing interest in standards. Standards represent a general consensus on the right way to do business and offer a baseline metric against which we can measure our programs. Adherence to standards can sometimes result in cost savings and reduced liability and can be leveraged to provide increased funding for programs.

If we accept that basing our emergency management programs on standards is a “good thing,” the logical question follows: “What is a standard?” With the advent of Title IX and its potential for a massive unfunded mandate for the private sector, the question of what constitutes a standard has never been more relevant.

Technically, a standard is nothing more than a consensus document that has been developed by a standards development organization (SDO). An SDO must in turn be accredited by an overseeing organization. The International Standards Organization (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) are the principal international standards organizations. In the United States, the overseeing organization is the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). ANSI does not itself set standards but instead accredits other organizations such as the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) and the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). Accreditation means that the standards-setting organization follows a structured process that ensures openness, balance, consensus and due process in the development of standards.

There are several things worth noting here. The first is that standards are *voluntary*. They do not, in themselves, have the force of law. However, once a standard is

adopted by state and local jurisdictions, adherence becomes mandatory and organizations are bound to comply. An example is NFPA 70, the *National Electrical Code*. While the NEC itself is not itself a law, its use is mandated by state and local laws.

Standards May Overlap in Focus and Content

While ANSI oversees the process of developing standards, it does not *manage* that process. That is, ANSI does not decide what should or should not become a standard. This is left to the SDO. This has led to a number of standards from different organizations related to emergency management, such as NFPA 1600 *Standard on Disaster/Emergency Management and Business Continuity Programs* or the ASTM EOC guidelines currently under development.

Although standards may overlap in focus and content, they may take different approaches towards implementation. NFPA 1600, as an example, adopts a program management philosophy allowing each organization to determine how it will implement the standard. The new ASIS International *Organizational Resilience: Security, Preparedness, and Continuity Management Systems – Requirements with Guidance for Use*, on the other hand, adopts the management systems philosophy advocated by ISO and contains auditable criteria for measuring compliance.

Measuring compliance is causing considerable debate over Title IX, the Private Sector Preparedness section of Public Law 110-53. The U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security (DHS) is mandated to identify a standard or set of standards with auditable criteria to implement Title IX. With the exception of the recently-released and controversial ASIS standard and British Standard

25999 *Business Continuity Management*, there are no auditable standards for emergency management.

Status of EMAP

Hold on! What about the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) Standard? EMAP demonstrates another important issue: accepted practices can become de facto standards. EMAP was accredited as an SDO in 2008, but technically the EMAP Standard is not yet an American National Standard as it was developed before EMAP became an SDO. However, the widespread use and acceptance of the EMAP Standard, coupled with support from FEMA and DHS, have created a voluntary consensus among public sector emergency managers similar to that of a formal standard.

Value Lies in Consensus

So what is a standard? It is a voluntary consensus document developed by an accredited SDO. Its value lies in this consensus – in theory, we as professionals have agreed that this is how we should operate. This is why it is so important to be aware of developing standards and to participate in the comment periods that are part of the development process. It is easier to input changes during development than to try and change a published standard. Secondly, we should always be mindful that standards are not the only drivers to our programs. There are de facto standards and generally accepted practices, along with laws and regulations, that serve to make up the overall standard of care for our profession. Ultimately, we will be held accountable not only for standards but for this standard of care.