ASRC Operations – Facilitating Multi-Agency Coordination

White Paper with Recommendations

Steve Weiss, 16 September 2017

Purpose: This paper describes some history and recommends concepts for improving ASRC multi-agency coordination for inter-group callouts. It also includes questions to answer that will lead to a specific implementation to improve inter-group callouts.

History

From its earliest days, ASRC was organized as a single-entity response group, with common training standards allowing geographically distant portions of the ASRC to share an operational basis and shared capabilities. Over time, the local groups that make up the ASRC developed stronger local reputations and some authorities having jurisdiction resisted calling out an organization that may turn out geographically far-flung responders. From an organizational risk perspective, focusing group resources for local callouts makes sense, since it reduces the most dangerous thing we do in SAR—drive to and from searches.

This organizational structure was mirrored operationally in a common alerting system with Alert Officers who fielded requests for ASRC response. Dispatch was strongly managed centrally, with conference dispatch assumed to be stood up for any search. The Alert Officers were expected to make a distinction as to which groups might respond on the initial call to the ASRC and potential subsequent shifts for a search. As ASRC governance moved more toward a group-centric model, this operational approach proved awkward politically and drifted into disuse.

Current Status

During the most recent consideration of ASRC governance, closing with updates to major documents of the ASRC, the conference gave serious consideration to reconstituting the fundamental governance of the organization as vested in a confederation of groups, rather than a set of individuals who conveniently collect into groups. Due to the historical drift described in the preceding section, this was a reasonable governance approach to consider. However, there as an administrative impediment: Purchasing insurance for the confederation of groups required special, negotiated insurance. We were not able to find existing insurance policies, so the fundamental governance remained that the ASRC is an organization, whose members are all the members of each group.

Operationally, the ASRC now operates effectively like seven largely autonomous groups. Each group has local or state procedures to get called out. There is no common ASRC alerting system that has been maintained. And the ASRC does not oversee callouts to the groups.[1] However, we still have the option for groups to call other groups of the ASRC, when appropriately endorsed by an AHJ. And in at least one case, there is a multi-agency coordination entity (VDEM) that reserves the right to callout ASRC directly, consistent with a Memorandum of Understanding that has expired (though the last section of the MOU indicates that the MOU may essentially be maintained, if the parties continue to use it as written). So it would seem reasonable to develop a system that can facilitate such inter-group callouts, with some understanding of how the ASRC may be called out as a "single entity." In short, however an AHJ or other multi-agency coordination entity wishes to call out ASRC resources, we should be prepared to respond to alerts and initiate response of ASRC team(s).

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[1] To minimize organizational risk to the ASRC, each group is expected to notify the when called out. Through our fundamental governance structure, ASRC bears some potential liability when a group responds to a callout. Notification—essentially an administrative requirement rather than operational oversight—is the course we have chosen to mitigate any potential liability. It may be worthwhile to explore this aspect of ASRC organizational risk in a bit more detail.

Assuming that groups still wish to be able to call each other out (and there have been several *ad hoc* efforts to do so over the last few years, which suggests there is such interest), I propose the concepts underpinning an operational system to support inter-group callouts.

System to be Developed

Based on the current group-centric approach to administering the ASRC, the system to be developed should be designed to support inter-group callouts. Any effort to callout the "entire ASRC" may be managed through a liaison in one of the groups who subsequently calls out the rest of the conference.[2] The system must provide groups a means to alert other groups and to establish a routine basis for continued information exchange (e.g., through a dispatch system of some sort).

Considerations for this System

The system necessary to ease inter-group callouts can be anything from a simple page on the ASRC web-site that provides alerting information for each group to an alerting and dispatch system that is more tightly integrated with how groups currently manage alert and dispatch. This choice for an ASRC system, then, will depend a great deal on the manner in which each group is currently called out.

It is also important to build a system whose urgency matches the urgency of the requests. In general, according to my observations, current practice for inter-group callouts will have significant lead time. A VDEM search in Shenandoah National Park will be happy to use resources from non-Virginia ASRC groups starting with the operational period starting the day after the decision is made. It has been rare for an "all ASRC" call to require the level of urgency that most groups are able to support for more local callouts.

Input to inform development of and ASRC inter-group callout system:

- How does each group currently manage alerts?
- Do groups wish to be able to be urgently alerted (e.g., through a text-message alerting system), or is email a sufficient means for inter-group callouts? In other words, do we assume that inter-group callouts will occur when there is sufficiently lead-time in advance of response of the newly requested groups?
- How will data exchange and subsequent notifications between the requesting group and the requested groups be managed?

Conclusion

The ASRC should develop an operational system to facilitate inter-group callouts following our multi-agency coordination basis. I have provided a few starting questions to help shape exactly what such a system could look like.

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[2] This approach is what I have developed in an *ad hoc* manner to support VDEM callout to the ASRC. Essentially I respond as an alert officer whenever a VDEM callout (such as the recent effort to collect potential availabilities for hurricane response) might include the ASRC. This informal liaison role was a continuation of the more formal relationship between VDEM and ASRC that I managed when I was ASRC Chair (though I stepped down as Chair back in 2010). It was important to SMRG's training program and ASRC certifications that VDEM continue to recognize the ASRC as a partner within the SAR community. Far more often than this "direct callout" have been the opportunities to extend callouts to BRMRG and SMRG (and the rest of the VDEM MOU groups) to include non-Virginia ASRC groups when these resources would be helpful.