# TECH b•e•a•t

# Commanding the Incident

*The day begins as just any other quiet weekday morning in any one of a thousand small towns in America's heartland, but at 9:15 a call to 911 changes everything. The caller reports seeing a man with a gun near the local high school. Before officers can reach the scene, the man enters the school and takes a number of hostages. For the next several hours, area emergency response agencies will be pushed to their limits. Not only must they resolve the hostage situation without loss of innocent lives, they also must deal with a demanding media and concerned and frightened parents.*

In an event such as a school takeover, the ability of law enforcement to establish an incident command post quickly, combine and allocate resources effectively, and cooperate with other emergency responders fully is paramount. Unfortunately, public safety agencies, especially smaller agencies in rural and remote parts of the country, do not often have the staff or budget resources for critical incident command training. A recently released, no-cost training program called Incident Commander, however, can help.

Available through the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC) system, a program of the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice, Incident Commander is a PC-based software simulation that models real-world situations within a community, allowing for training at the management level during a critical incident.

According to Mike O'Shea, NIJ program manager, Incident Commander is based on the command structure mandated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in its rules for National Incident Management System compliance. Agencies, O'Shea says, are now required to complete some type of National Incident Management System training to apply for U.S. Department of Homeland Security grants. Incident Commander can be used to help meet that training requirement.

Incident Commander offers a realistic representation of crisis management with realistic scenarios, realistic time delays, and realistic resource limitations. Focusing on smaller jurisdictions (less than 50,000 residents), participants face the problems of dealing with a school hostage situation, a chemical spill, the aftermath of a severe storm, and a possible terrorism incident as they fill the roles of the incident commander and the command team. At the same time, participants also control the various agencies responding to the incident, including police, fire, emergency medical services, public works, and school personnel.

Anywhere from 1 to 16 people can participate in a scenario by taking on a variety of roles within the operations team. In addition, multiple simultaneous roles for player interaction are available, allowing independent action in any role or as a part of a group of players over the Internet or on a local network. Solo play is also possible. Two years in development, Incident Commander was created by BreakAway Limited, a company specializing in modeling and simulation software for both computer games and training purposes.

"We wanted a tool that would make them think outside the box," O'Shea says. "In one recent training session, officials from one jurisdiction yelled at each other throughout the whole first scenario. They did a horrible job. The second time they played, they started to communicate with each other. The third exercise went so well they didn't want to stop even though it was 4:45 p.m. and the training officially ended at 4 p.m. That's exactly what we want to have happen."

At the conclusion of a scenario, players receive a score based on how well they did in public safety (number of people killed or injured), media response, and total response cost. The scoring system was changed after the beta testing phase because nobody was winning. "We didn't want people to win easily, but we didn't want them to lose that badly either," O'Shea says. He adds that the software developer ironed out several other glitches during the beta testing phase and built in the ability to adapt maps and other aspects of the scenarios to make them specific for local areas and provide the capacity for jurisdictions to develop their own scenarios.

"It is important that agencies are able to play the scenarios in their city, county, or State," O'Shea says. "The impact of the scenario is so much greater if, for example, the school is located in the right place, the street names are the same, and the available responding units are what can respond in real life."

Also during the beta testing phase, NLECTC–Northwest, in Anchorage, Alaska, developed an extensive outreach program for Incident Commander. Training sessions for the program have been (and will continue to be) offered at regional and national conferences. NLECTC–Northwest is also offering train-the-trainer instruction and developing a communications leader module so that dispatchers and communications unit leaders can also gain training benefits.

"These Incident Commander scenarios are events you never want to have happen in your community, yet if they do, you want to be able to mount a thorough response," says Bruce Richter, deputy director of NLECTC–Northwest. A key lesson learned from the training, he says, is that one of the secrets to making incident command work is effective communication with the other participants.

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To "play" Incident Commander, you must have the following minimum system requirements:

- Windows® ME, XP, or 2000.

- 400 MHz Intel® Pentium® II (or equivalent).

- 128 MB RAM.

- 4x CD–ROM/DVD–ROM drive.

- Sound card.

- 36.6 Kbps Internet connection (for Internet play).

*For more information about Incident Commander, visit www.incidentcommander.net, contact Mike O'Shea at michael.oshea@usdoj.gov, or call NLECTC–Northwest at 866–569–2969.*