

Fire and Emergency Medical Services Response to Civil Unrest

Civil unrest may occur as a period of social upheaval, following sporting events or during periods of heightened community tension. Fire and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel will be called to respond to these incidents, placing themselves at higher than anticipated levels of risk. The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) and the National Highway Transportation Administration (NHTSA) Office of Emergency Medical Services (OEMS) worked together to compile these best practices to assist you as you respond to civil unrest incidents in your community.

Goal: Prepare personnel, the station, apparatus, and the community for emergency response in a challenging environment.

Personnel

- Review civil unrest-specific organizational and jurisdictional protocols and guidelines.
- Wear civilian clothes when reporting to and returning from duty.
- If issued by department, wear ballistic protection in accordance with National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) 3000, *Standard for an Active Shooter/Hostile Event Response (ASHER) Program*.
- Establish a family communication plan to share information with responder families.
- Provide emotional support for personnel and their families.
- Per NFPA 1500, *Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety, Health, and Wellness Program*, fire and EMS personnel should not be used for crowd control operations.
- Work in pairs or teams.
- Carry a radio and lights.
- Secure items such as scissors and stethoscopes on your person.
- Remove badges from uniforms and consider wearing casual uniforms.
- Keep personnel IDs, keys, wallet, etc., on your person or otherwise secured.
- Minimize carried equipment, such as harnesses, extra tools, pocket contents, etc.
- Always carry a radio (be sure to regularly charge/swap batteries).
- Chief and company officers shall maintain accountability of apparatus and staff.
- Develop communications code words for secure communications of emergency actions (building or area evacuation, apparatus/station abandonment, etc.).
- Develop rally points should apparatus or stations need to be abandoned and pass on to members. These may change due to situational changes.

Station

- Secure and lock parking areas.
- Lock personal and emergency response vehicles parked outside of station.
- Keep valuables out of sight. Park facing an escape route (e.g., backed in).
- Lock interior and exterior facility doors and windows.
- Keep all interior and exterior lights on in buildings and stations.
- Consider 24-hour watch-desk staffing.
- Keep station radio on and volume turned up to allow all members to monitor radio traffic.

- If the station needs to be abandoned, remove all communications equipment, medications, and as much department and personal equipment as possible.
 - Consider placing all equipment for removal on apparatus or in a single location, staged for rapid removal.
- Consider an alternate parking location for personal vehicles and other fire department light duty vehicles in areas of potential difficulties, and shuttle personnel to and from stations.

Apparatus

- Remove nonessential equipment from exterior vehicle compartments.
 - Only store items in passenger compartment if doing so can be done safely.
- Lock exterior compartments.
- Roll up windows.
- Tape windows to limit flying glass.
- Have personnel wear full protective equipment while riding in apparatus.
 - This may include eye protection, turnout or rescue gear, gloves, etc.
- Cover hose beds with tarps.
- Place all spare self-contained breathing apparatus cylinders that are stored in stations on apparatus.
- Keep fuel and water tanks full.
- Perform routine preventative maintenance early in the day (daylight).
 - Check vehicle, clean glass and wipers, ensure lights work, etc.

Community

- Routinely communicate with local leaders and members of the community.
- Inform the community of changes to response priorities and manage community expectations.
- Monitor social media for information.
- Identify possible/probable locations for large gatherings.
- Work with law enforcement, emergency management and all other emergency response agencies to communicate needs and expectations.

Operations

Coordinate response activities

- First and foremost, develop an Incident Action Plan. Communicate, exercise, follow and adapt the plan as needed.
 - Create a communications plan to communicate between organizational and jurisdictional partners.
- Activate the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to support the incident area.
- Assign fire and EMS representatives to the EOC to assist with coordination.
 - Establish a method for screening calls for service and determining response priorities. This includes determining if no response is warranted or is unfeasible given the current circumstances.

- Establish Unified Command with appropriate law enforcement and other agencies.
- Consider using Modified Area Command in areas of civil unrest. In this configuration, response assets are assigned to the Unified Command team and staged in a safe location. Response assignments must be coordinated by the Unified Command team using assigned resources. Responses within the unaffected areas are controlled by the normal dispatch process or jurisdiction EOC using resources not assigned to Area Command.
- Ensure Command Post security and remain flexible as location might be subject to change rapidly.
- Identify Hot, Warm and Cold zones. These must be dynamic and may be based on geographic area or specific to a single incident:
 - **Hot Zone:** an area considered unsafe. Law enforcement support is required for force protection in the Hot Zone.
 - **Warm Zone:** an area of lower threat, but which may become unsafe. Law enforcement support is recommended for entry into the Warm Zone.
 - **Cold Zone:** an area of little to no threat of civil unrest or violence. Law enforcement support is optional for entry into the Cold Zone.
- Maintain and communicate situational awareness across all levels of the response and with the Unified Command team.
- Establish fueling, maintenance and logistics support for apparatus and personnel assigned to the area of operations/incident staging area.
- Activate an Incident Management Team early to help organize and coordinate activities.
- Be prepared to engage hazardous materials and EMS assets in the event of chemical dispersant use.
- Prepare to activate department Continuity of Operations (COOP) plans and alternate facilities.

Modify operations based on perceived threat or risk

- Provider safety remains the highest priority and, when possible, should be addressed.
- Scan environment and communicate with command for situational awareness before exiting apparatus.
- Consider modified response protocols, including:
 - Adding or removing response assets based upon the situation, area, need, perceived escalation, threat, etc.
 - Minimize use of equipment as feasible.
 - Ensure control over equipment used; if used, take it back out with you (medical bags, hydrant wrench, etc.).
- Rapidly size up and communicate the potential for any situation to get worse and the unmitigated or escalated impacts to life, property, infrastructure, etc.
- Consider alternative mitigation strategies such as:
 - Immediate patient movement out of impacted area (into Cold Zone).
 - Treatment in place without transport for minor injuries (conducted in secure area).
 - Treatment in route versus on scene.
 - Suspension of requirements for medical direction to perform routine procedures and medication administration.
 - Rapid fire attack to slow spread as much and as fast as possible.

- Establish response task force for entry into Hot and Warm zones. For example:
 - **EMS task force:** two law enforcement vehicles with four personnel per vehicle, two EMS transport vehicles/ambulances, one EMS or fire supervisor, and one fire apparatus.
 - Consideration should be given for level of care: basic life support or advanced life support.
 - **Fire task force:** two law enforcement vehicles with four personnel per vehicle, two fire apparatus with pumps, and a supervising officer.
- Work in teams of two or more and remain in contact with each other.
- Position apparatus to allow for rapid evacuation.
 - Back/angle apparatus into position.
 - Keep an evacuation lane open.
 - Avoid dead ends, roadblocks, etc.
 - Avoid the use of supply lines that may block streets.
- Illuminate the incident scenes.
- Recognize that there may be a need to abandon apparatus and/or equipment.
- Consider the use of plow and possibly tow trucks for debris and vehicle removal to clear path for apparatus.

Maintenance of situational awareness

- Ensure current information is communicated to those that need to know.
- Leverage all possible sources of response area and regional intelligence, including potential locations of gatherings.
- Maintain channels of communication with law enforcement, fusion centers and other emergency response partners regarding threat information and intelligence.
- Ensure that intelligence is free flowing laterally and vertically.
- Monitor local media reports for situation awareness.

Issues related to operations during COVID-19

- Maintain social distancing across the entire incident scene.
- Consider locating the Command Post (if needed) and all other incident management structures (Staging, Treatment, Triage, etc.) in larger areas away from the incident scene, as feasible.
- Minimize access to these areas, and adhere to strict personal protective equipment use, including masks.

Resources

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