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Critical Incident Debriefing

G-154.1 PURPOSE & SCOPE

Case studies by medical groups of major incidents where numerous injuries or fatalities occurred have revealed that significant numbers of rescue personnel experience some form of stress related symptoms following an incident. Many of these symptoms were transitory and most personnel had no long-term detrimental effects. These studies, however, have also revealed that a small percentage of personnel do experience continuing, long term detrimental effects resulting from exposure to such incidents. Some of these effects have been delayed, surfacing later after a period of no apparent symptoms. Without professional intervention, these personnel have experienced declining work performance and deterioration of family relationship, as well as increased health problems.

G-154.2 GUIDELINE

It is the guideline of the San Mateo County Fire Chiefs to provide trained intervention (immediately) after major incidents to minimize stress-related injury to Fire Department personnel.

G-154.3 REFERENCES

N/A

G-154.4 PROCEDURES

1. Managing the Incident:

- a. Fire Department response to any incident that causes personnel unusually strong emotional involvement may qualify for "critical incident debriefing." The following are examples of incidents that may be selected for debriefing. Those items indicated with an asterisk (*) require mandatory debriefing.
 - i. Mandatory debriefing:
 - a. Serious injury or death of a Fire Department member or other emergency personnel.
 - b. Suicide of a Fire Department member.
 - c. Death of a child, or violence to a child.

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- ii. Recommended debriefing:
 - a. Mass casualty incidents.
 - b. Serious injury or death of a civilian during Fire Department operations (i.e., auto accident, etc.)
 - c. Loss of life to a patient following extraordinary and prolonged expenditure of physical and emotional energy during rescue efforts by Fire Department personnel.
 - d. Incidents that attract extremely unusual or critical news media coverage.
 - e. Any incident that is charged with profound emotion.
 - f. An incident in which the circumstances were so unusual or the sights and sounds so distressing as to produce a high level of immediate or delayed emotional reaction.

- b. Minimizing personnel exposure to these stressful incidents results in fewer stress-related problems. Command Officers should reduce this exposure by rotating personnel and by removing initial responding personnel from the immediate scene and reassigning to less stressful operations as soon as possible.

- c. Any personnel directly involved in high-stress incidents (particularly examples (A) through (I) in Item 1 above, should be considered a high priority for immediate reassignment / removal from the scene. Relief from duty for these personnel may also be a consideration. Any trained peer support personnel may make a recommendation to the duty Battalion Chief for relief or reassignment during the shift.

- d. On-site evaluation and defusing by a debriefing team member should also be considered for some critical incidents when time and circumstances permit. In such situations, debriefing team members can observe, watch for acute reactions, provide support, encouragement, and consultation, and be available to help resting personnel deal with stress reactions. Team members should be considered a resource available to Command for assignment to Rehab, Medical, or other areas as needed.

2. Activation of the Debriefing Procedure

- a. Company officers, command officers, and firefighter/paramedics bear the responsibility for identifying / recognizing significant incidents that may qualify for

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- debriefing. When an incident is identified as a “critical incident” (as described), a request for debriefing consideration should be made as soon as possible.
- b. Any member of the Fire Department may initiate the debriefing process. For serious events, this can be done by contacting the duty Battalion Chief. The duty Battalion Chief can request a CISM response through County Communications. After evaluating the incident, the CISM team coordinator or acting coordinator can then provide the appropriate number of CISM personnel based on the level of debriefing required. The specific debriefing services utilized will depend greatly upon how early the team is activated, and the nature of the incident.
 - c. The Duty Battalion chief should coordinate with the CISM team coordinator on which other agencies should be involved in the Debriefing process. Particular consideration should be given to County Communication’s dispatchers, ambulance and law enforcement personnel who were involved in the critical event.
 - d. Department staff will be responsible for coordinating the debriefing process, follow-up care, and other support functions.
 - e. Critical incident debriefing is not a critique of Fire Department operations at the incident. Performance issues will not be discussed during the debriefing. The debriefing process provides formats in which personnel can discuss their feelings and reactions and, thus, reduce the stress resulting from exposure to critical incidents. ALL DEBRIEFINGS WILL BE STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL.
 - f. Debriefing attendance and participation is strongly encouraged for personnel who were directly exposed to the traumatic aspects of an incident selected for debriefing. If participants are not in attendance, a follow-up one-on-one with a CISM team member is required. This one-on-one contact can be accomplished via telephone.

3. Types of Debriefings

- a. Several types of debriefing may be conducted depending upon the circumstances of a more typically, in small groups of not more than 25 members; but may vary in size according to the incident. They may be conducted on an individual one-on-one basis

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or, five types of debriefings, singularly or in combination, are most commonly utilized:

- i. **On-scene or Near-scene Debriefing:** On-site evaluation and counseling by a debriefing team member should be considered for some critical incidents when time and circumstances permit. In such situations, debriefing team members can observe, watch for acute reactions, provide support, encouragement and consultation, and be available to help resting personnel deal with stress reactions.
- ii. **Initial Defusing:** Conducted shortly after the incident, primarily informational. An update and status report on the incident and related injuries. Responding peer counselors will provide a brief review of stress-related symptoms. A mental health professional may provide more intense debriefing. More intense debriefing may be provided on an individual basis as requested by a crewmember or as the need is observed by the debriefing team during the defusing meeting.
- iii. **Formal Debriefing Meeting:** Conducted within 72 hours of incident. A Confidential, non-evaluative discussion of involvement, thoughts, and feelings resulting from the incident. Possible stress-related symptoms are also discussed.
- iv. **Follow-up Debriefing:** Conducted weeks or months after incident. Concerned with delayed or prolonged stress symptoms. May be done informally.
- v. **Individual Consults:** Available at any time, as needed. One-to-one counseling for any concerns related to the incident.

Debriefings may be conducted anywhere that provides ample space, privacy, and freedom from distractions. Churches or other meeting facilities, centrally located to the involved companies are worthy of consideration. Selection of the site will be determined by the Debriefing Team and/or Fire Department Staff.

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The debriefing team will consist of Fire Department personnel trained in stress-related counseling, San Mateo County CISM Team Peers and/or mental health professionals. The Fire Department team members' role in the debriefing process will be to assist and support the professional counselors as necessary. Required follow-up care may be administered by the counseling group under contract with the individual cities. All follow-up care will be approved by the Personnel Department, through the Fire Chief or designee, prior to beginning treatment.

Circumstances of a critical incident may result in a recommendation by the debriefing team that individuals or companies are taken out of service. Such decisions may include returning personnel to their station(s) in an out-of-service status and allowing crew(s) to determine for themselves when they are mentally and physically prepared to return to service. In other circumstances, the crew member(s) may decide that they cannot return to duty, or the professional counselor may recommend relief from duty for the balance of the shift. If this is the case, the Duty Battalion Chief will be responsible for making appropriate arrangements.

Under no circumstances is such action to be construed as critical or negative. Personnel taken out of service are to be viewed as deserving of the same consideration as an "injured" firefighter.

A list of members of the San Mateo County CISM Debriefing Team will be provided to each agency. When a company officer feels any member of the crew is in need of defusing or debriefing, the company officer should contact one or more of these peer counselors. The appropriate use of the chain of command shall be used when requesting a peer counselor. When making the request, consideration should be made to personal "comfort zones" in relating to the selected team member.

In addition, both the Bay Area Critical Incident Stress Team and the Center for Living with Dying are available at no cost. Either agency may be contacted directly by any employee desiring assistance at (408) 980-9801.