



Seminole County Fire Department

Training Standard

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TS-203

Response to Hostile Situations

The potential exists for EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel to be confronted by a violent person during the routine response to calls for assistance. A report of an "injured person" may result in fire fighters walking into a domestic dispute involving weapons. Mentally disturbed persons may become violent or threatening, prompting family or friends to request emergency medical assistance. Periodically, EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel are dispatched to reported violent crimes in progress. Even automobile accidents or structural fire alarms may produce hostile situations that threaten EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel.

Ignorance of the psychology of violence, self-protective measures and police procedures may result in unnecessary injury or death for fire fighters, police officers, bystanders and even the violent person himself. By reacting improperly, EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel may escalate the amount of violence or even cause a violent incident. EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel are expected to take reasonable risks in order to aid injured persons during these "hostile situations." These reasonable risks are only taken with adequate knowledge of the nature of violent people and methods of self-protection.

Psychology of Violent Persons - Violence means an attack or hostile action directed against a person or thing. Suicide is violence directed at one's self. Most violent incidents involve normal people who lose their self-control due to one or more basic factors. Sometimes violence is caused by **frustration**. A person attempts to reach some goal, but if he is unable to do so due to any number of factors, he may become angry and then violent in an effort to remove what he perceives to be the reason for his failure. The violence is directed at the source of the frustration, either real or imagined. Another cause of violence is **fear**. If a person perceives a threat, either physical or psychological in nature, he may react in a violent fashion in an effort at self-defense. Alcohol, drugs and certain physical disturbances to the brain may cause a person to be more prone to violence, but **frustration and fear are the motivator**. Remember the cause of the frustration or fear as perceived by the violent person will be the target of the violence, whether this cause is real or imagined.

In general, violent episodes have three basic characteristics:

1. Violence is a defensive reaction. Fear and frustration cause some people to react violently in an effort to protect themselves.
2. Violence produces more violence. Attempts to control or subdue the violent person using force, threat or intimidation will cause the violent person to have more fear and frustration, and consequently more violent reaction.
3. Violence is time limited. When the violent person perceives that there no longer is a threat, or that he has controlled the source of frustration, the violent episode will stop.

In all cases, the protection of self, others and the violent person is the priority.

Assessment of Violent Situations

When responding to an incident, information from the EOC will be a good indicator to personnel of the threat of violence in progress. Also, information from bystanders or the sounds of violence coming from inside a structure or vehicle will tell EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel of danger.

At times, violence may begin after the EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel have arrived at a fire or accident. In the crisis of a personal emergency, certain people may react by directing their fear and frustration at others or even toward EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel.

Some signs that may warn EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel of potential violence in a person are:

1. A history of previous violence.
2. Threatening statements or actions.
3. Pounding on objects.
4. Clenched fists and/or teeth.
5. Obvious muscle tension, especially in the face.
6. Loud, sharp speech.
7. Agitation and hyperactivity.
8. Paranoid statements ("Everybody is against me!").

Evidence of the use of alcohol and/or drugs significantly increases the risk of a violent outburst.

Do not be misled by physical size. A large person is not more prone to violence, and a small person can exert large amounts of force and can very effectively use a weapon. Persons under extreme stress may have a much greater strength than normally available due to metabolic changes.

Some signs that may warn EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel of danger during a vital assessment are:

1. People hiding under or behind cars, fences, trees, roofs, etc.
2. Vehicles parked haphazardly and/or with engines running.
3. Lack of people, activity or lights in a situation where this is not usual.
4. Obvious weapons lying about the scene or bulges under clothing that may conceal a weapon.
5. Broken windows or smashed doors.

The decision to enter a structure or to approach a violent person can only be made by the ranking EMS/Fire/Rescue person on the scene. If a violent episode is over, especially if the violent person has left the scene, it is important to promptly reach and care for injured people. Proper size-up of the risks, based on this assessment, is important.

Self-Protection

Certain actions can be taken in order to minimize risks to EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel who are confronted with a violent situation.

1. **Communication** - When EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel suspect danger, it is very important to keep EOC and other supervisors advised. Report your suspicions and your actions by radio. This information can be relayed to the Sheriff's Office and supervisors may provide some guidance for your actions. Do not allow yourself to become separated from your partner. Be sure you fully understand/explain any instructions between partners.
2. **Light Control** - Use your headlights, floodlights and hand-lights to your advantage. Do not allow yourself to be "backlighted" or silhouetted by any lights. Do not approach a suspicious situation in a manner that allows you to be blinded by lights. When looking into a darkened area, hold your hand-lights extended away from your body.
3. **Door or Window Approach** - In a suspicious situation, do not walk directly up to any door or pass by any windows. Always approach doors from the side and, if possible, approach the side away from the door hinge. Stay under or to the side of windows. Remember, it is easier to see out of a darkened house than to see in. When knocking on a door, remain standing off to the side. Minimize your body exposure to doorways and windows.

4. Identification - Be sure to loudly identify yourself as "EMS/Fire/Rescue." The violent person reacts to threats, and he may not consider a fire fighter coming to render emergency medical care as a threat. Loudly identifying yourself may also prevent a surprise reaction by the violent person, or may even allow him to run away. EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel should wear helmets for further identification. The uniform may be misconstrued as that of a police officer but the helmet is a distinctive mark of a fire fighter. The combination of verbal identification and the helmet may prevent the violent person from seeing EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel as a threat. The helmet will also assist the responding police officers by allowing them to recognize EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel quickly, especially in the dark or confusion of a hostile situation. Wearing the helmet may prevent accidental injury or even death.
5. Self Protection Under Gunfire - When EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel encounter gunfire, certain steps may be taken for protection:
 - A. If you hear shots while approaching the scene, do not stop the apparatus. Keep moving past the incident to safety.
 - B. If outside, take cover behind solid objects that will deflect bullets, i.e., the engine-block of the apparatus or other vehicles, corner mailboxes, steps, curbs, walls, etc.
 - C. Do not leave good cover until the police personnel indicate it is safe to do so.
 - D. If caught in the open, stay down low. Do not stand up.
 - E. Do not stand in doorways or windows.
 - F. Do not take a position in order to see the action. Stray bullets can kill too.
 - G. If you are a target, do not draw fire toward civilians.
6. Patient Contact/Intervention Skills - EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel should stay out of reach of a potentially violent person until an acceptable level of confidence is obtained. Personnel who get too close, too fast are at risk for being grabbed by panicked or aggressive patients. EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel should stay out of reach of hands and feet, with full view of any aggressive movements.

Vehicle Approach

Certain actions can be taken to minimize risks to EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel when approaching a parked vehicle with a possible patient.

1. The first team member to exit the vehicle should be the attendant (passenger). Never leave the vehicle without a portable radio. When exiting, open the door slowly so it may act as a shield. The driver should stay in the vehicle until signaled to approach.
2. During approach, be constantly observing for unusual behavior or activity in the vehicle. If the back seat is occupied do not move beyond the "C" post of the vehicle. While passing the trunk press down on it to assure it is closed. Verbally determine if occupants are injured; if not, back away and call for law enforcement agency.
3. If the back seat is empty, move to the "B" post of the vehicle, keeping your body as close to the vehicle as possible. Verbally determine if occupants are injured. If there is no threat, signal the driver to approach and bring EMS supplies.

**** If at any time during approach to the vehicle you see signs of aggression, retreat and call for law enforcement agency.**

Cooperation With Law Enforcement - Whenever possible, all dealings with violent people should be handled by law enforcement. EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel should place themselves under the direction of law enforcement officers when they are present.

EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel should not approach known hostage situations or other crimes in progress. When EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel have information of a violent person with weapons in a structure, they should take a protected

position away from the incident, attempt to control bystanders or other innocent people, gather information and relay this information to law enforcement agencies through the EOC.

If law enforcement establishes a command post, EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel should report to the command post for instructions. During hostage situations or other similar incidents, EMS/Fire/Rescue should be prepared to care for major trauma. Trauma kits, oxygen/suction equipment, backboards, etc. should be placed in a protected but convenient location to the incident. Apparatus should be positioned out of the way.

Whenever possible, a senior supervisor from the Department of Public Safety will be dispatched to coordinate the actions of EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel with law enforcement activities.

Actions when Challenged by a Law Enforcement Officer

In the confusion of a violent situation, it is very possible that your identity may be mistaken. If a law enforcement officer challenges you, **DO EXACTLY AS THEY SAY**. Do not move rapidly or reach for anything. Your hand and body movements must be very slow and controlled until positive identification can be made.

Intervention Skills

EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel can take certain actions to restore order and calm in a violent or potentially violent situation.

- A. Attempt to separate the violent person from his target. **DO NOT USE FORCE**.
- B. Ask the violent person what is happening. Do not try to get the "straight story" from others. The violent person may feel you are taking sides against him.
- C. Do not take sides.
- D. Do not give advice.
- E. Do not rush in and attempt to settle the situation. Move slowly and even use delaying tactics. Time is of major importance in preventing violence or provoking more violence.
- F. Do not try to take weapons away from violent people.
- G. Listen to what the violent person has to say.
- H. Do not corner the violent person. Always leave him room to escape.
- I. Get the violent person to focus on the problem and determine some solutions.
- J. Do not touch the violent person.
- K. Try to get the violent person to cooperate with you.
- L. Do not threaten the violent person with any weapons.
- M. Help them find an alternative to the violence.

Only one person should talk to the violent person. Too many people talking may cause him to become confused or feel threatened. If possible, one or two other fire fighters should be silently present as a show of force.

If the violence appears to be escalating, protect yourself and others. **BACK OUT !!!**

If you have to assist in the restraint of a violent person, attempt to use padded restraints, blankets, backboard straps, etc. to control the person.

Summary

EMS/Fire/Rescue personnel have an obligation to render emergency medical care to the victims of violence. In meeting this obligation, personnel may encounter violence directly. Proper action may prevent further violence and will minimize the risk to the fire fighter and other principals involved.