

RESPONDERS AT RISK: SURVIVING VIOLENCE IN THE STREETS

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

As crime rates have been rising in many communities, Clackamas County Fire District #1 firefighters were experiencing a noticeable increase in exposure to hostile and violent situations. Over the past several years, examples of assaults and threats upon personnel were becoming far too commonplace.

The fire district safety committee had discussed issues relating to these incident types; including considering the use of body armor for district personnel. Firefighters were particularly at risk in situations where they did not know or suspect potential violence prior to arrival.

The problem was that firefighter safety was being inordinately compromised when responding to unknown hostile incidents. The purpose of the applied research was to provide for increased firefighter safety when responding to unknown hostile incidents by developing a standard operating guideline (SOG).

Action research was the methodology used to find answers to the following questions:

1. What, if any, pertinent standards, laws, or recommendations exist?
2. What have other adjacent fire departments done to address this issue?
3. What factors suggest that a scene is not secure and/or there is a high potential for violence?
4. What indicators must be present to justify the use of physical force, and what are appropriate methods of self-defense?

A comprehensive literature review examined many sources, including trade journals, text books, fire department incident histories, and legal references. Research findings indicated that firefighter safety

issues due to violent incidents is a widespread concern. Indeed, many communities have experienced injuries and deaths to emergency personnel due to societal violence. Also, many agencies have implemented various strategies for coping with this trend, including special training, equipment, and policies.

Applicable laws, standards, and recommendations were examined as they pertained to the subject. With respect to laws, the state of Oregon utilizes safety rules applied in the general sense, but were not topic-specific. The only nationally recognized standard found was NFPA 1500, which applied as a general safety guide, non-specific to responding to unknown hostile incidents.

Several recommendations were developed; most revolved around training personnel for increased awareness and protection through appropriate use of policies and equipment. Some also pertained to uniform clothing, protective gear, and self-defense enhancements.

Self defense issues were looked at, with the overall result being that of using incremental decision making when faced with violence, such as: 1) use caution and stay away from situations that are potentially violent, 2) retreat if possible, 3) use verbal skills to defuse situation, 4) use self defense maneuvers as necessary for protection.

The research findings were analyzed in a problem-solving mode seeking solutions for increasing personnel safety in unknown hostile situations. Conclusions were then drawn in light of currently observed field conditions and using the professional judgement of the author.

Finally, the resulting recommendations from the research were: (a) implementation of the *Standard Operating Guideline for Responding to Unknown Hostile Incidents* as shown in Appendix A, (b) training personnel in relevant policies, procedures, and equipment, (c) assessment of protective equipment needs, (d) assuring that uniform clothing is boldly designated

"fire department," does not include badges, and is clearly distinct from law enforcement in appearance, (e) issuance of foam pepper spray (oleoresin capsicum) canisters to personnel, (f) seeking legal counsel, advice from law enforcement experts, and professional training prior to issuing impact weapons or firearms, and (g) that further research should be conducted on this and related topics to analyze the effectiveness of the aforementioned SOG and other recommendations.

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INTRODUCTION

American culture has experienced a marked increase in violence over the past decade. The emergence of terms such as “car-jacking,” “road rage,” and “drive-by shooting,” which have become common colloquialisms, illustrate this increase in violence. For the past several years, firefighters in Clackamas County, Oregon, have been increasingly exposed to hostility from their clientele (i.e. victims of medical emergencies, fires, traffic accidents, etc.) and from bystanders at emergency incidents. Firefighters have found that they are particularly ill-prepared and at risk when faced with *unknown* hostile or violent situations. This increased exposure to violence presents a significant problem for Clackamas County Fire District #1 personnel and thereby also provides the impetus for this research project.

The problem is that firefighter safety is unduly compromised when responding to unknown hostile incidents. The purpose of this applied research project is to provide for increased firefighter safety when responding to unknown hostile incidents by developing a specific standard operating guideline (SOG). It is intended that, in addition to the SOG, research findings and recommendations contained in this report will also be helpful to a broad fire and EMS audience through exposure from the National Fire Academy's library, the Learning Resource Center.

Secondarily, this applied research project will fulfil a course requirement of the *Executive Development* class. The action research method was used to answer these four questions:

1. What, if any, pertinent standards, laws, or recommendations exist?
2. What have other adjacent fire departments done to address this issue?

3. What factors suggest that a scene is not secure and/or there is a high potential for violence?
4. What indicators must be present to justify the use of physical force, and what are appropriate methods of self-defense?

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The first people to respond to many emergency incidents are firefighters, thus comes the term "first responders." For purposes of this report, the terms "fire personnel" and "EMS personnel" will be discussed interchangeably, and includes firefighters, paramedics and emergency medical technicians. As first responders to fire incidents, firefighters have always been recognized as having a high potential for danger inherent in the work performed. Attempts to minimize this inherent danger have evolved over time through legislation, education, and technological advances. The fire service has seen a continuum of improvements in protective equipment: including self-contained breathing apparatus, fire-resistive protective clothing, modernized enclosed-cab fire apparatus, development of the incident command system, advancement in fire combat tactics and strategy, and many other safety related strides.

While fireground safety remains an important issue for the fire service, other safety issues assert the need for serious attention as well. Perhaps the most troubling and least resolved of these safety issues is that of violence against responders. Firefighters today are responding to a wide variety of emergencies. Among these are motor vehicle accidents, fall victims, domestic disputes/assault victims, cardiac emergencies, strokes, seizures, substance abuse/overdose, shootings, stabbings, suicide, and myriad other miscellaneous requests for assistance through the 9-1-1 system.

Today's fire service is clearly responding to a more diverse clientele with a greater variety of incident types than ever before. Regardless of incident type, however, the *unknown* hostile incident is one for which firefighters are largely unprepared. And, it is this lack of preparation that leaves firefighters essentially vulnerable and unprotected.

Clackamas County Fire District #1 provides fire, rescue and emergency services to a population of approximately 128,000 people in an area encompassing about 147 square miles of urban, suburban and rural territory. Emergency services are provided from ten district fire stations utilizing ten engine companies, two truck companies, and various other specialized apparatus such as three water tenders, four brush fire engines and a boat/water rescue team. In 1997, the fire district answered 8,967 calls for service, broken down into the following categories (Emergency Services Consulting Group [ESCG], 1997, p.67):

	Number	Approx. Percentage of Total
Fire	3,465	38.5
EMS	5,039	56
Other	463	5

Consistent with national fire service trends, the majority of calls for service fall into the emergency medical services (EMS) category. As the population has increased in Clackamas County, there has been a corresponding increase in violent incidents; these incidents often result in a request for a fire department response.

When fire district personnel respond to a *known* or *suspected* hostile incident, specific procedures are followed to ensure personnel safety. A "staging" protocol dictates that 9-1-1 dispatchers advise responding units to park (stage) a safe distance from the scene (a minimum of two blocks away) if the nature of the call involves weapons, combative persons, domestic disturbances, and other potentially violent situations. Units are to remain staged until the police department has arrived and secured the scene. Company officers also have discretion to use the staging protocol whenever they deem it is appropriate (Tri-County Advanced Life Support Protocol #650, 1997).

The staging protocol has been quite successful in providing for personnel safety in cases where potential violence is known ahead of time. Again, it dictates that responders keep a safe distance away from the incident scene until law enforcement personnel have deemed the scene to be secure.

The more difficult and potentially dangerous situations for firefighters are emergency incidents where there is no known reason to suspect a hostile scene. One of the reasons for the elevated degree of danger is the element of surprise: firefighters mentally prepared for one thing arrive to find something else (Jacobsen, 1997). Also, firefighters are not trained or equipped to deal with violence, which is usually thought to be the role of law enforcement personnel (Hough, 1998). The issue of firefighter safety at violent incidents has been a recent agenda topic for the fire district's safety committee. The committee chair-person who is the fire department Safety & Health Officer, suggested pursuing the subject in this research project as a means of helping to provide guidance toward a greater degree of firefighter safety. Following are a few recent local examples:

On June 1, 1998, a Clackamas County Fire District #1 engine company was dispatched to check a complaint for a possible illegal burning operation. On arrival, firefighters observe a debris fire in a residential yard, unattended except for two young children putting wood scraps onto a six-by-six foot

burn pile. The engine company officer asked the youngsters if their parents were home. The following excerpt is from a descriptive narrative written by the engine company officer (W. Conway, personal communication, September 5, 1998).

...Mr. Havlicek came out of the garage. I advised him he could not burn... he was burning the wrong material, and his fire was too close to structures. At this point he became severely agitated and began yelling. Nearly every other word was profanity... I tried to calm him down...The more I tried to reason with Mr. Havlicek, the more he became enraged. With a flushed red face and spitting, he screamed profanity at us, stated how much he hated the government, threatened our jobs, jumped up and down several times, and ordered us to leave... As I turned to leave, Mr. Havlicek shoved me toward the driveway. It wasn't a gentle shove. He shoved me with both hands while screaming... He then followed us, shoving (firefighter) Jeff (Deetz) twice. The second shove nearly knocked him to the ground. He then started down the driveway toward me. He doubled up his fist as if to prepare to strike me. I thought for sure I was going to be hit. About three feet or so from me, he turned to his right and stopped. He looked around as if looking for something to strike me with. The whole time he was screaming obscenities and threatening us. In fear for our safety, I decided to return to quarters.

On July 3, 1998, three engine companies, one ladder truck, one squad, and a battalion chief from Clackamas County Fire District #1 were dispatched to a reported apartment fire in a large three-story apartment complex. On arrival, the first engine company reported smoke showing from a second-floor unit. As the company officer and hoseman advanced a hand line up the stairs, they noticed the apartment door was ajar, and smoke was issuing from the opening. They entered the apartment to find a small kitchen fire that had started on the stovetop. A deputy sheriff entered the apartment as the

firefighters extinguished the fire. Within minutes, a man entered the apartment from the exterior corridor. As he noticed the firefighters and deputy in his residence, he became immediately hostile. He yelled uncontrollably at them, telling them to leave at once. As the deputy began to explain their purpose for being there, the man attempted to hit the deputy in the face with his fist. Suddenly the firefighters found themselves involved in a scuffle as they tried to assist the deputy and protect their own. The company officer radioed for law enforcement backup as he, the deputy, and the hoseman restrained the combative man (D. Anderson, personal communication, November 9, 1998).

On August 23, 1997, a Clackamas County Fire District #1 engine company responded to an unknown injury motor vehicle accident. On arrival firefighters found an agitated male assaulting a female, pleading with her not to leave. Bystanders stated that he had been choking the infant that was in the vehicle with him and the female prior to firefighters' arrival. The firefighters decided to intervene to protect the female. The ensuing fracas ended with fire personnel taking the man to the ground, and binding his hands with zip ties. The man subsequently went into cardiac arrest and died after resuscitation attempts were not successful (S. Walker, personal communication, October 15, 1998).

On May 10, 1998, Clackamas County Fire District #1 crews responded to a reported shooting victim. Police were on scene, and had "cleared" firefighters to come directly to the scene. This incident occurred in an unimproved residential neighborhood where known drug and crime activity is prevalent. When they arrived, they had a male patient, about 27 years old, down in the front yard. Initial assessment revealed a gunshot wound to the chest, and minimal vital signs, with agonal respirations. As the firefighters worked on the patient, people are observed going in and out of houses, and the "air is charged with tension." Throughout the incident, people are wandering around the patient. One man is

enraged, shouting at the emergency crews as they work. Although police deemed the scene secure, the fire department crews felt extremely vulnerable to attack or misplaced hostility (D. Lais, personal communication, October 30, 1998).

The aforementioned examples serve to underscore an unfortunate trend, that being one of a society where crime is on the increase and authority figures are often targets for people's rage against government or other questionable provocation. It is clear that violence and hostility are not confined to EMS calls or fire calls, but actually can occur on *any* incident, including non-emergency service calls.

An apt description of the hostility confronting emergency responders is presented in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's *EMS Safety: Techniques and Applications* text excerpted as follows (Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], 1994):

Many elements of the modern world conspire to bring out the aggressive tendencies in people. Some people are better able to control this emotion than others. Some people set out *intending* to cause harm, and may have already targeted their victims. Others may become violent because their tempers have exceeded their self-control, sometimes resulting in harm for someone in the wrong place at the wrong time. Because EMS personnel arrive quickly after the event, they become targets. Aggressive people can --and do--harm others, even arriving caregivers. (p. 116)

Determining a measure of exactly how many responses could be classified as unknown hostile incidents is not possible at this time. Due to the varied services provided and the number of agencies

involved, there has not been a reporting method developed for this type of threat. Therefore, hard statistical data is not available (Krebs, 1993). To estimate numbers, it is likely that more than two percent but less than ten percent of emergency calls answered by Clackamas County Fire District #1 last year would fall into this category.

However, estimating a relatively small percentage of calls in the category, out of nearly 9,000 calls answered in 1997, even a five percent figure would indicate that firefighter safety is compromised in these situations more than 400 times per year.

During 1998, Clackamas County Fire District #1 has had on-duty firefighters physically assaulted, confronted with aggression resulting in violent skirmishes, and threatened with the use of weapons. This exposure to hostility and violence poses an unacceptable threat to personnel safety that begs correction. This topic is a pressing safety issue for fire and EMS personnel in today's society (Beck, 1996).

This subject matter has particular relevance to the National Fire Academy's *Executive Development* curriculum and students, as it is incumbent upon present and future fire service leaders to find solutions to these profound safety issues facing firefighters on a daily basis. As societal conditions change the temperament of the workplace for our personnel, we must continuously strive to keep pace, particularly with respect to safety issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review undertaken for this applied research project included several sources. A probe for germane documentation was done at the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center, the Clackamas Fire Academy training library, the Multnomah County (OR) library, as well as taking

advantage of other sources available at the home and workplace of the author. The topic was found to be prevalent in recent fire, rescue, and EMS trade journals and is also discussed in some modern textbooks. In addition, recent case histories were consulted from Clackamas County Fire District #1 personnel to aid in describing the problem.

Overall, the findings gleaned from the literature review process verified the broad existence of the problem, and added credibility to the purpose of this applied research project. Incidents of violence against emergency responders are on the rise, and first responders are finding themselves in hostile situations more often than ever before (Robertson, 1997). In many municipalities, random and unpredictable violence against EMS providers is considered an every day occurrence. According to one study, 5.4 per cent of U.S. firefighter deaths in 1996 were caused by gunshots (Louderback, 1998).

Referring to a 1994 study conducted by Donald W. Walsh, PhD, EMT-P, Spivak (1998) provides the following statistical data gathered from surveys of more than 250 paramedics in 25 major U.S. cities. Eighty percent of the organizations surveyed said they had had paramedics shot at, but not hit, and 24% reported personnel shot while performing their jobs. In addition, 92% of the paramedics said they had been assaulted in some fashion, with 64% reporting injuries resulting from an assault (Spivak, 1998).

The central focus of this report is the *unknown* hostile incident. For it is when emergency responders are caught off guard that safety is ultimately compromised. Beck (1996) cautions that "Even a scene that appears to be safe can suddenly turn violent."

A chilling example of violence against firefighters occurred in 1993 in Denver, Colorado. Police were on scene of a possible suicide, but were getting no response from the house. The fire department

was then summoned to assist by gaining entry to the residence. As a firefighter approached a second floor window using a ladder, he was shot and killed by the suspect inside. Apparently everyone had believed that the suspect either had already taken his own life or was not in the house (FEMA, 1994, p. 117).

Another example happened on June 1, 1998, when a Clackamas County Fire District #1 engine company responded to check a complaint regarding unlawful debris burning. This was a fairly routine non-emergency response and the crew was well versed in burning regulations and related fire department policies and procedures. While investigating the scene of the fire, which was indeed an illegal fire in a residential yard, the occupant became suddenly and disproportionately enraged. Within minutes, this man had assaulted the company officer and a firefighter, physically shoving them while screaming profanity and issuing violent threats. The fire crew rapidly retreated as they called for police.

The man later called the fire station threatening to use his shotgun on the firefighters (W. Conway, personal communication, September 5, 1998).

Yet another recent example from Clackamas County occurred on August 23, 1997. Firefighters responding to an automobile collision found themselves on arrival confronted with a maniacal male who was alternately choking an infant and assaulting an adult female. Even though police were not yet on scene, the fire crew decided to intervene to protect the victims of this out-of-control assailant. The firefighters fought to overcome the man, brought him down to the ground, and then restrained him by binding his hands behind him. A short time later, the man went into cardio-respiratory arrest and subsequently died after resuscitative measures were attempted (S. Walker, personal communication, October 15, 1998).

A large component of the problem is the abundant evidence that these emergency response personnel are not adequately prepared for dealing with violence. Clearly the first option when confronted with physical danger is to summon police protection, and/or retreat to a safe location. (Jacobsen, 1997). In reality, however, many times situations that *seemed* safe at first will rapidly change, abruptly becoming threatening (Benson, 1995). A question posed by Nordberg (1996) sums it up suitably, asking "But what happens when a seemingly safe situation sours unexpectedly?"

Frequently, the people first to arrive at the scene of an emergency are those least prepared to deal with hostility and aggression, firefighters or other EMS providers. This lack of preparation leaves firefighters in a dangerously vulnerable position. And support from law enforcement personnel, those people trained, equipped and armed to handle hostility, may follow five, ten, or more precious minutes behind (Krebs, 1993). While law enforcement specifically trains and equips personnel to defend themselves, the fire service typically does not, leaving them at a gross disadvantage when threatened (Hough, 1998). Consequently, emergency response providers are increasingly approaching law enforcement agencies for advice regarding surviving violence in the streets (Benson, 1995).

An inquiry for applicable laws, standards, and recommendations revealed that the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) has written a consensus standard which applies to this topic in a general sense as it relates to personnel safety. NFPA Standard Number 1500 prescribes that fire departments establish policies containing goals and objectives aimed at reducing on-the-job accidents, injuries, and deaths. Similarly, Oregon Occupational Safety and Health laws (OR-OSHA) speak broadly to the same issue, stating that employers must provide a safe working environment for their employees.

Other pertinent policies were scarce, except for a regional guideline used by most fire departments in the Portland metropolitan area, entitled *Staging for High Risk Response* (Tri-County Advanced Life Support Protocol #650, 1997). This particular policy is issued as a part of regional EMS treatment protocols, and it speaks to known or suspected hostile incidents, requiring responding units to keep a safe distance from the incident scene until police have secured the area.

Many recommendations were found in professional journals and other documents. Among those were: increasing awareness/scene assessment, survival training such as cover and concealment techniques, defusing hostile situations, self-defense measures, protective holds and principles of physical restraint, use of protective equipment, carrying weapons, and police-fire inter-agency training (Oregon Task Force on EMT Safety, 1998). Other ideas promoted included: martial arts training and using body armor (Jacobsen, 1997).

Besides using the staging policy noted above, none of the fire departments adjacent to Clackamas County Fire District #1 have implemented specific policies and/or procedures for dealing with increased unanticipated violence as related to emergency response. Three fire departments were contacted in this regard, they are: Portland Fire Bureau, Gresham Fire and Emergency Services, and Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue. One notable exception, however, is that many local fire agencies are now receiving training courses such as *Emergency Response to Terrorism* which share similar concepts as contained in this report for increasing personnel safety.

In relation to methods for predicting violence, Wilder (1995) suggests that emergency responders should be familiar with how to "read" people and predict impending violent behavior. By learning what he calls the "aggression continuum," behavioral changes can be recognized, allowing personnel to take appropriate steps to ensure their safety (Wilder, 1995).

In today's climate, self-defense skills are just as important as medical skills for emergency personnel (Wilder, 1995). Wilder (1995) also asserts that first responders should be taught various protective techniques, holds, and defensive self-defense techniques, including the use of soft restraints and/or leather restraints.

Jacobsen (1997), Beck (1996) and Robertson (1997) all stressed the need for accurate scene assessment skills, as critical decisions need to be made when responding to calls and approaching scenes. By familiarizing with various danger signs, personnel will be better equipped to make these decisions (Robertson, 1997). Jacobsen (1997) mentions carrying "a piece of equipment" which could be used for self defense, as well as describing some basic maneuvers for escaping physical attacks. And, as most sources indicated, Jacobsen (1997) stated that the first choice when faced with hostility is to leave the scene and call for police if possible.

Benson (1995) emphasized awareness and recognition skills, including how to handle extraneous weapons on an incident scene, and how to deal with gang members without inciting further violence. Dealing with patients on drugs and psychiatric patients can also lead to violence against responders, thus training should be focused on these unique situations as well (Benson, 1995).

Emphasizing planning and preparing for violence, the idea of police-fire cross-training and learning more about each others' policies was suggested in order to develop a more unified approach (Brenneman, 1996). And, Smith (1997) promotes using the incident command system for dealing with multiple agencies on most types of incidents; while Krebs (1993) stresses interagency cooperation as necessary for increasing safety margins.

The primary determining factor in deciding whether to/when to use physical force to defend oneself is the presence of a perceived threat of physical harm (Sloan, 1987). All sources generally agreed that when physical force is deemed necessary, it should only be applied to the extent minimally required under the circumstances to obtain personnel safety (Nordberg, 1996).

And, while experts also seem to be in agreement that taking up arms against street violence may have a heavy liability component, Nordberg (1996) says that many agencies have employees carrying pepper spray to defend themselves on the job. And, though there are pros and cons - as with any weapon - the overall conclusion given is that, in properly trained hands pepper spray is perhaps the safest "last ditch" protection method to use. This product is intended to stop an assailant without causing long-term injury, allowing the user to retreat to safety and call for help (Nordberg, 1996).

Regarding liability issues, Nordberg (1996) states they are multi-faceted. For instance, if a patient comes under attack while being treated by EMS and the caregivers are unable to deal with it, they may be open to charges. Also, pepper spray carries less liability when used than weapons capable of serious injury or death (Nordberg, 1996).

In characterizing how pepper spray works, Nordberg (1996) states:

People who are sprayed with oleoresin capsicum (OC) experience severe pain as the cayenne-pepper extract irritates the areas of the body it hits--usually the skin, eyes, nose, or throat.

Theoretically, this pain becomes the focus of their attention, causing them to stop their attack.

Depending upon the type of spray used, the pain usually abates within 30-60 minutes or less.

Some of the cons expressed were from a liability standpoint. Others were from a philosophical viewpoint, in that perhaps there is a conflict inherent in providing weapons to the caregivers whose job it is to help, not hurt others. Another risk with carrying pepper spray, is the possibility that it might miss its intended target, hitting an innocent bystander. This concern was answered to some degree by choosing the proper form of pepper spray -- the foam-type is preferred, and through proper training in its use (Nordberg, 1996).

Robertson (1997) advocates a two-company response to drive-by shootings, using apparatus to barricade both ends of the street. This procedure is intended to help curtail further drive-by attempts while the incident is in progress (Robertson, 1997).

PROCEDURES

One of the main objectives of this research was to develop a Standard Operating Guideline (SOG) for fire units responding to or finding themselves in the midst of hostile situations. The action research method was applied to gain an understanding of the depth and scope of the problem, and examine various solutions for increasing personnel safety. Fact finding encompassed a search of fire and EMS trade journals and training manuals, fire department incident histories, policies from surrounding agencies, as well as NFPA standards and Oregon state laws. Other sources referenced herein include an untitled lesson plan under development from the Oregon Task Force on EMT Safety, legal references, and a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) publication.

The action research methodology first utilized a comprehensive literature review process, followed by an analytical examination of the findings as related to the problem of responding to unknown hostile incidents. The findings were then applied to each research question in a problem-

solving mode, finally culminating in a series of recommendations and a response policy statement, found in Appendix A.

The author attempted objectivity in evaluating the results, while also applying professional judgement for drawing conclusions and developing recommendations. Experienced as a member of rescue, engine, and ladder companies, as well as responding to emergency incidents as a command officer, he has gained a seasoned background during his seventeen-year fire service career. In addition, he is noted for developing curriculum, instructing, and writing numerous articles on Fire Service Communications, Incident Command, Incident Safety, Firefighting Strategy & Tactics for various professional trade journals.

Limitations

The research contained herein was somewhat limited in terms of time; a six-month project due date was allotted for completion, as well as the time constraints upon the author, who customarily works a minimum of sixty hours per week. Another aspect of time limits exists in that an analysis of the effectiveness of the new standard operating guideline upon Clackamas County Fire District #1 personnel will take months, if not years to determine.

The project was also limited due to conventional fire service data collection methods, which do not track threats or injuries to personnel due to violent incidents per se (Krebs, 1993). Although this did not constitute a significant barrier to completion, it offered very little statistical information.

Definitions

Code One A non-emergency response mode, without use of lights or siren, and observing all traffic laws.

EMS Emergency medical services.

EMT Emergency medical technician. A level of certification for performing emergency medical care.

Oregon EMT's are commonly certified in one of three levels: Basic, Intermediate, or Paramedic.

FEMA Federal Emergency Management Agency.

ICS Incident Command System. A systematic, organized method for managing emergency incident operations.

NFPA National Fire Protection Association.

OR-OSHA Oregon state laws regarding Occupational Safety and Health.

ORS Oregon Revised Statutes (state law).

Pepper Spray Oleoresin Capsicum, also known as "pepper mace" or "cap-stun," is supplied in canisters for self-defense purposes. The product is a compound of powdered cayenne pepper with a water propellant.

SOG Standard Operating Guideline.

RESULTS

1. What, if any, pertinent standards, laws, or recommendations exist?

The literature review revealed several regulations dealing with firefighter safety in general, though none that speak directly to the topic of responding to unknown hostile or violent incidents. Most notably, the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Standard Number 1500, 1997 Edition, prescribes that fire departments must have an organizational policy outlining specific goals and objectives aimed at preventing on-the-job accidents, injuries, and deaths. It states that the fire department has a responsibility to provide a safe working environment for its employees, and that

workers must be trained regarding any special hazards they may encounter in the field. This standard further requires that fire departments establish and enforce rules and standard operating procedures consistent with the objectives of NFPA Standard Number 1500, and that protective equipment shall be issued to provide protection from hazards to which the employee is likely to be exposed.

Echoing the intent of NFPA 1500 as stated above, the "general duty clause" of Oregon Occupational Health and Safety law (OR-OSHA) says that in addition to complying with all specific legal requirements, employers "generally have a duty to provide a safe working environment."

All Clackamas County Fire District #1 firefighters are required to be trained and certified emergency medical technicians, and most are certified at the paramedic level. As certified emergency medical technicians (EMT's), these firefighters are operating under standing orders, or protocols, issued by a supervising physician pursuant to the legal requirements of Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS). Although no specific policy in the protocols pertains directly to responding to unknown hostile incidents, a staging policy exists that deals with responses to incidents with known or suspected violence. This policy requires that units responding to potentially violent emergency incidents shall stage at least two blocks from the scene and out of the line of sight, until the scene is declared secure by police.

There are a variety of recommendations relevant to this applied research topic; several were found in professional journals, applied research papers, and various textbooks. Among them are the proactive approach of pre-planning for dealing with violent situations, to include developing appropriate policies and procedures (Brenneman, 1996).

In order to adequately prepare personnel for responses to potentially violent incidents a significant emphasis must be put upon training and equipment (Robertson, 1997). Also, teaching techniques for defusing hostile people and how to predict danger was advised to help neutralize violence

against responders (Hough, 1998). Martial arts maneuvers including protective stances and holds such as the “escort hold” will often provide beneficial when dealing with hostile people (Wilder, 1995).

Some experts suggested that fire department uniforms closely resembling police attire can be problematic; sometimes even eliciting violent behavior. A recommendation to evaluate duty uniforms and perhaps change to clothing such as T-shirts clearly marked "fire department" was given as a safety consideration (Robertson, 1997).

When emergency response personnel are confronted with violence that may involve self-defense measures a legal term dubbed the "reasonable person standard" applies (Wilder, 1995). This standard, also known as the "reasonable man doctrine," says in part that the conduct of response personnel "will be expected to be that which would be engaged in by a reasonable and prudent lay person (civilian) in the same or similar circumstances" (Wilder, 1995).

Oregon state law with respect to the use of self defense is covered under statutes ORS 161.209, 161.215, and 161.219 as follows:

1. A person is justified in using physical force upon another person for self-defense or to defend a third person from what the person reasonably believes to be the use or imminent use of unlawful physical force, and the person may use a degree of force which the person reasonably believes to be necessary to the purpose. This use of force is not justified if the person using force provokes the other person into using unlawful force, or if the person using force is the initial aggressor. Finally, "self-defense" can not be used as a justification for the use of force used in "combat by agreement" (a dual).

2. Deadly physical force is not justified unless the person reasonably believes that the other person is committing or attempting to commit a felony involving the use or threatened imminent physical force against a person; or committing or attempting to commit burglary in a dwelling, or is using or about to use deadly force against a person.

As a practical matter, a simple, yet crucial recommendation is the notion that firefighters must make certain that personnel safety is their top priority on all types of emergency scenes (Beck, 1996). Jacobsen (1997), writes:

Care providers need to understand that scene safety must be in the forefront of their minds every time they respond to a call for help. Safety of the responding personnel is a team problem and the solution also involves the entire emergency service team.

2. What have other adjacent fire departments done to address this issue?

To answer this question three adjacent fire departments serving the greater Portland metropolitan area were contacted regarding pertinent policies and procedures to the subject matter. Portland Fire Bureau, Gresham Fire and Emergency Services, and Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue all adhere to the *Staging for High Risk Response* policy contained in paramedic treatment protocols and protocols used at most dispatch centers in the area (Portland Fire Bureau SOP 30.00.190).

This policy is primarily written for response to *known* or *suspected* hostile incidents and states in essence that when personnel are responding to assaults, shootings, stabbings, or any incident suspected of being hostile, that units are to stage a safe distance from the scene and await clearance from law enforcement prior to entering.

To date, there have been few other policies or training activities directed towards this subject matter by adjacent fire departments. Instead, the focus has been primarily on response to *known* or

suspected violence. One notable exception is a recent training course on *Emergency Response to Terrorism*, which has similarities to unknown hostile incidents.

It appears that some consideration toward increasing safety when responding to *unknown* hostile incidents is on the near horizon. Currently under development via the Oregon Task Force on EMT Safety (1998) is a course that covers many of the issues raised in this report, including the following major topic headings:

Awareness & Mental Preparation

Pre-Arrival considerations

Verbal Control

Survival Techniques

Legal Issues

3. What factors suggest that a scene is not secure and/or there is a high potential for violence?

Often the type of call will offer reliable clues to responders to be on guard for danger. Drug related calls, injuries from weapons, suicide attempts, and assaults, are among those that should heighten the awareness aspect for responders; and awareness must be emphasized as fundamental in relation to personnel safety (Benson, 1995).

In its draft course outline, The Oregon Task Force on EMT Safety (1998) speaks, in part, to this question. As the task force lesson plan states, a "threat assessment" should be conducted looking for immediate and potential hazards; the following list of clues may be helpful in assessing danger:

1. An unruly crowd.

2. Too many people in a small area; with immediate or potential weapons.
3. A dark house or building; no sign of activity.
4. Signs: "This house protected by Smith & Wesson, "Beware of Dog," etc.
5. Excessive garbage or debris around site.
5. A dead-end street.

Identifying a possible or probable threat of violence is a critical skill for emergency responders. At times it can hold life-or-death consequences. Learning how to read certain particular behavioral signals is very important. These signals of impending violence can include: evasiveness and lack of eye contact, purposely ignoring your presence, authority, and purpose for being there, extremely irrational or over-emotional acting out, particularly if this includes loud verbal aggressiveness directed at emergency personnel, threatening postures or stances, a known violent history, or rapid intimidating movements (Jacobsen, 1997).

Unforeseen incidents of violence can be minimized by continually monitoring on-scene conditions. Margins of safety can also be effectively fortified by having a pre-determined safety plan (Jacobsen, 1997). Jacobsen (1997) promotes asking the following series of questions when evaluating the scene:

- Where are the potential hazards in the situation? While responding to an unknown medical, the crew is met by a person walking out the door towards the ambulance. Is this person the victim or the assailant? If the person is the victim, where is the assailant?

- Do I control those hazards? In the beginning scenario (above), there are threat locations that are uncontrolled. Any threat that is hidden is considered uncontrolled. The unknown hazard is always a high risk.
- If I don't currently control the hazard, how can I do so? In this situation, consider maintaining a safe distance while directing the person away from the residence toward a more secure place, such as close to the ambulance. While gaining information, make sure the person's back is toward the residence and caregivers are continuously scanning the scene for potential danger.

4. What indicators must be present to justify using physical force, and what are appropriate methods of self- defense?

This research question poses perhaps the greatest degree of controversy in that it mentions the use of physical force. As a practical matter, since this has many legal implications, the use of physical force in the course of defending one's own person will be dependent upon the particulars of a given situation. Regarding the specific indicators needed to justify self-defense per se, the fundamental necessary element will be the presence of a perceived threat of physical harm. In the event that a responder reasonably believes that an aggressor intends to assault or imprison him, and he reasonably believes that the threatened harm cannot be avoided by retreating, a reasonable degree of defensive force may be used (Sloan, 1987). Sloan goes on to say the "innocent person in this situation is under no obligation to retreat rather than use non-deadly force in his defense."

Although withdrawal may not be legally required, emergency response providers would be well advised when faced with violence to (1) carefully screen dispatch information and stage if a hostile situation is anticipated, and (2) retreat to a safe location and wait for arrival of police if the scene has

escalated into a hostile incident, and (3) apply verbal skills attempting to disarm the situation, and (4) use restraint or self defense maneuvers as necessary for self protection and preservation (Nordberg, 1996).

The ability to recognize imminent violence is a vital and possibly life-saving skill for emergency response personnel (Jacobsen, 1997). And, as Nordberg (1996) writes: "Your best defense against violent calls is to wait until police backup is available or retreat when danger becomes apparent."

As a legal concept, the implications of the self-defense question have been examined and discussed at great length. In his book *The Law of Self Defense: Legal and Ethical Principles*, Irving J. Sloan (1987) lavishly details self-defense dilemmas and arguments through case law and situational examples. Probably the most succinct portion of his writing in this regard is offered in the following passage:

Like most matters or issues in the law, the courts face a balancing act in rendering their decisions in self-defense cases. And, again, like so many legal situations, an assessment of conflicting values must be reviewed. There always remains the danger of over-valuing the rights of an attacker or over-valuing the rights of a law-abiding citizen to preserve his physical integrity. The problems of conflicting rights and value-preferences remain concealed behind the question of "reasonableness." Decisions may therefore be taken according to the concealed assumptions of the particular judge or jury who happens to be trying the case.

The issue of suitable levels of self defense encompasses opinions ranging from the edict "do nothing" to the issuance of body armor, to permitting the use of arms such as tear gas (Nordberg, 1996). In 1992, the Fort Worth, Texas, Fire Department took the bold step of issuing body armor to fire personnel and implementing policies for its use. Some of the issues considered were concealing the body armor from plain view so as not to antagonize unstable persons when wearing it, and/or when storing it on apparatus (Robertson, 1997).

Ultimately, interagency cooperation and training response personnel in survival skills, including cover and concealment procedures, is highly recommended for self protection in situations where violence and weapons may be involved (Krebs, 1993). Also, pepper spray (oleoresin capsicum) canisters have been gaining popularity with many emergency providers; and this comparatively "low-risk" defense mechanism may prove to be helpful to those who are properly equipped and trained to use it (Nordberg, 1996).

In terms of self-protection via protective equipment, soft-body armor also known as bullet-proof vest is gaining popularity among EMS providers (Jacobsen, 1997). Prices vary from \$200-\$600, with several protective levels available. Designed to stop common bullets such as .357 magnum and 9 millimeter rounds. According to Jacobsen (1997), the level II A vest is the preferred choice for non-tactical (police) work.

DISCUSSION

The problem of firefighter safety in non-fire situations is a relatively new issue to receive attention. However, the seeming abundance of literature devoted to this subject matter suggests that

solutions are being devised and knowledge shared toward an improved degree of safety for emergency response personnel.

This topic piqued the interest of this author several years ago, when, working as an engine company officer, he became aware of the changing nature of many of the calls his station was responding to. A couple of incidents typify the trend of an ever-increasing presence of violence and criminal activity.

An early morning duplex fire occurred in a low-income residential neighborhood. On arrival, firefighters found a working fire and reports of a person trapped. As they fought the blaze and attempted a rescue, they received a threat on their lives: a deranged bystander explicitly said he was going to get his gun and shoot the firefighters. Fortunately, police intervened quickly, and a catastrophe was averted.

A single engine company was dispatched to a car fire at about 3:00 a.m. in a neighboring jurisdiction. When the crew had nearly arrived on the incident, dispatch relayed the following information: the car fire resulted from a neighborhood gang conflict; police were being notified. This informational message transformed a routine car fire, a common call-type that firefighters are highly trained for, into a dangerous incident that they were not equipped or prepared for. In the years since that night, fire units have increasingly been dispatched on incidents such as drive-by shootings, stabbings, disturbances, domestic violence, etc.

Firefighters have traditionally been indoctrinated into the fire service with extensive training in fire behavior, rescue practices, hazardous materials response, etc. As the fire service has reacted to the increase of violence and hostile situations in general, a rudimentary awareness has evolved that firefighters as first responders face a myriad of previously unforeseen hazards. The advent of policies

such as *Staging for High Risk Response*, and some agencies issuing body armor serve as signs-of-the-times to indicate the profound changes in working conditions for emergency response personnel and highlight the reality of hostility in modern society.

This report culminates in a standard operating guideline for responders, and denotes a series of general recommendations for fire service agencies to consider. The literature review clearly revealed the need for personnel training in the subjects of awareness/scene assessment, planning and policy development, self-defense, defusing hostile situations, use of body armor and other equipment (Oregon Task Force on EMT Safety, 1998). An easy and pro-active self-defense measure is to simply carry a piece of equipment such as a hydrant wrench when departing the vehicle. This may be used to discourage violence or to keep an attacker at bay (Jacobsen, 1997).

Another frequently mentioned suggestion for preventing attacks on emergency personnel was the choice of uniforms. The more authoritative appearing and "police-like" uniforms bearing badges, etc. seem to contribute to incidents of violence, thus producing recommendations to soften the uniform appearance (FEMA, 1994, p.48). Similarly, uniform T-shirts boldly stating "fire department" or "emergency medical services" will likely prove helpful in averting hostility toward responders (Robertson, 1997).

The use of special protective gear for emergency response personnel is not yet widespread, but in 1997, New York City outfitted all municipal paramedics with personal body armor subsequent to a paramedic being stabbed (Spivak, 1998). Similarly, while the issuance of weapons to first responders remains controversial, organizations such as Huntsville, Alabama, EMS and United Ambulance Service, Lewiston, Maine, are among many other agencies allowing employees to arm themselves with canisters of pepper spray (Nordberg, 1996).

The author is largely supportive of the recommendations discovered in the literature review process, most of which have been incorporated into the recommendations section of this report. It would seem that one direction of the future is toward a thorough call triage process, to first decide *if* a response is warranted, and next determine *who (which agency)* is appropriate to respond first.

Although several experts promoted inter-agency training and cooperation, one area which remarkably lacked emphasis in the literature review was the need for a "holistic" approach to emergency response. From years of professional experience, this author has observed that the public safety (9-1-1) system functions more as several independent parts than as one integrated, well-oiled machine. Dispatchers, police, fire, and ambulance personnel often operate from their own distinctive policies and procedures, quite independently of the other agencies involved in a given incident. While the fire service touts the refinements seen with the evolution and application of the Incident Command System, many other public safety providers either lack training, or opt not to use it.

Many times, fire units, police cars, and ambulances are on the same incident, but each discipline is communicating on a different radio channel. Thus, dispatchers are put in a position to interpret and relay communications from one agency to another. This confounding ritual is repeated daily in many jurisdictions. Unfortunately, examples abound of misunderstandings between disciplines; this serious deficit must be reversed (FEMA, 1994, p. 129).

A multi-jurisdictional, systematic approach to incidents would help bring personnel safety to the forefront, for it would require training, pre-planning, and common communications between agencies. Application of an incident management system, or ICS, can be advantageously used in many types of emergency scenarios (Smith, 1997). This is most certainly not limited to fires and hazardous materials incidents, but also should be considered when dealing with hostility and other hazards.

In the face of rising hostility on the streets of our communities, the need has never been greater to break through the barriers between agencies and begin new levels of cooperation. We have seen that organizational mergers and consolidations can, if properly orchestrated, minimize duplication of services, streamline operations, and increase service levels. In the same way, the spirit of inter-agency cooperation in the areas of training, policy development, and emergency response, can result in comprehensive advantages to personnel safety and the public we exist to serve (Krebs, 1993).

It is hoped that the implications of this applied research project will be significant for Clackamas County Fire District #1 personnel. The intent of the SOG which was developed as a result of this process is to heighten awareness and create a greater margin of safety for emergency responders. This SOG will be submitted to fire department senior staff with a request for adoption and implementation. In addition, the recommendations contained herein will hopefully be given serious consideration, for they parallel and build upon the direction of the SOG. Summarily, the targeted results of this project are to elevate personnel safety for those responding to unknown hostile incidents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations produced from this applied research project can be categorized under three major subject headings: policy, training, and equipment. All of these categories apply directly to increasing firefighter safety either by *preventing* involvement with violent confrontations or by increasing personnel *preparedness*.

POLICY

It is recommended that a policy be utilized pertaining to response to unknown hostile incidents. Appendix A contains the standard operating guideline entitled *Standard Operating Guideline for Responding to Unknown Hostile Incidents*. This is intended for use as a companion policy to the *Staging for High Risk Response* protocol currently used in the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area. The thrust of this guideline is to emphasize that violence and hostility may lurk where responders do not suspect them to be. Therefore, applying a greater degree of caution to *all* emergency responses, and utilizing this guideline when appropriate, will result in increased firefighter safety.

TRAINING

Training is probably the single most important component for increasing safety, and the amount of relevant subject matter is vast. It is recommended that personnel training should include a periodic review of pertinent policies, procedures, and equipment. And, as enumerated previously, subjects such as those listed below should be covered in detail by experts in various fields.

Awareness	Defusing Hostile Situations
Survival Training	Legal Aspects
Self-Defense	Protective Holds
Using Restraints	Inter-Agency Cooperation
Weapons	Body Armor & Protective Equipment
Planning for Violence	Gang Mentality/Cultural Factors
Incident Command System	Interpersonal Communications

EQUIPMENT

The following recommendations are made under this proviso: Regardless of what equipment is chosen for increasing personnel safety in hostile situations, training in its use is imperative. It is strongly recommended that agencies assess the need for specific personal protective equipment in light of the prevailing potential for personnel exposure to violence. While in some cases it may suffice to require helmets to be worn on non-fire responses, circumstances in other jurisdictions may dictate the use of body armor on all incidents. Again, this is largely dependent upon current trends and situational conditions.

Research has indicated that the selection of uniform clothing for emergency response personnel is a significant issue with respect to personnel safety. Therefore, it is recommended that fire departments adopt a less formal appearance; without the use of badges and insignia that may be similar to law enforcement. Markings on uniforms should be clearly identified as being associated with the fire service.

A recommendation is also given to the issuance of pepper spray (oleoresin capsicum) for increasing personnel safety. This product is a less invasive tool than conventional weapons or martial arts and has proven to be very effective. It is used by law enforcement personnel on a regular basis, and typically available in three forms: foam, spray, and fogger, or mist. The foam type is said to be most effective in the field. Again, training is necessary, which will likely be a four-hour course available through a local police agency.

The use of martial arts, weaponry such as guns, collapsible batons, and other impact weapons should only be considered with the involvement of legal counsel, local law enforcement officials, as well as appropriate training and certification, as applicable.

The final recommendation is for further research to be conducted to determine the effectiveness of the Standard Operating Guideline (SOG) found in Appendix A, as well as other applicable standards, laws, and recommendations.

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APPENDIX A

Standard Operating Guideline for Responding to Unknown Hostile Incidents

PURPOSE

The purpose of this standard operating guideline is to provide for increased safety to those personnel responding to incidents which are hostile in nature, or those incidents which become hostile or violent, either after arrival or prior to arrival.

FIRE DEPARTMENT RESPONSE PROCEDURES

Dispatch - Listen carefully to dispatch information pertaining to the nature of and/or circumstances of the emergency incident. Question dispatchers for further details or clarification if needed. Stage apparatus if appropriate, awaiting further information or law enforcement response. Consider staging at fire station or other fixed facility, depending on situation, estimated police response time, and/or location of incident.

Response - Use knowledge of address, vicinity, dispatch information, observations while en route, or *any other pertinent data* to assess the incident prior to arrival. Immediately implement the staging procedure and call for law enforcement if safety issues are apparent.

Arrival - Upon arrival, *and throughout the incident*, assess the scene for potential hostility or violence. Consider implementing the Incident Command System. Call for additional resources

as needed. Establish direct contact with law enforcement. Assume any threatening statements or behavior to be dangerous and act accordingly.

If threatened - Whenever possible, all personnel retreat to vehicle and leave the scene promptly; notify dispatch of situation. If potential physical harm is imminent, defend yourself in any way possible, *attempting to use only enough force to eliminate the threat* to yourself and other people.

STAGING PROTOCOL

PROCEDURE

Fire units shall stage under the following conditions:

1. Any time so directed by dispatch, police, or supervisory personnel.
2. Any time an incident involves violence which might be dangerous to personnel.
3. Any incident, at the discretion of the company officer. NOTE: If any unit decides to stage, all other units shall stage.
4. Hazardous materials incidents, as appropriate.
5. After arrival at scene, if scenario reveals potential violence, hazardous materials, or other threats, retreat to safe staging area if possible.

POLICY

1. When the need for staging has been announced, all units shall respond *code one*.
2. Stage a minimum of *three blocks* from incident address and *out of the line of sight*.
3. Upon arrival, announce by radio the location of staging.
4. Turn off vehicle lights or use only four-way flashers in staging, if possible.
5. Do not enter scene until it is declared secure by law enforcement.

NOTE: Do not assume the incident scene to be secure merely because police are present.