

**FIREFIGHTERS' ROLE AT SCHOOL OR WORKPLACE VIOLENCE INCIDENTS**

(EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT)

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## ABSTRACT

The problem was that the St. Johns County Department of Emergency Services (SJCDES) did not have a policy that identified the roles and responsibilities of SJCDES firefighters during responses to in-progress incidents involving school or workplace violence.

The purpose of this research was to create a policy that identified the role and responsibilities of SJCDES firefighters during a response to an in-progress incident involving school or workplace violence. This research project was conducted using the action research method.

The following research questions were posed. 1) What are the necessary components of a policy for response to in-progress incidents involving school or workplace violence? 2) How have other departments like SJCDES dealt with policies for response to in-progress incidents involving school or workplace violence? 3) What limitations are there in the SJCDES to adopting other agencies policies?

A survey of area fire departments similar to SJCDES was conducted, and those departments with policies addressing the role of their firefighters during in-progress school or workplace violence were asked to submit copies of those policies. The policies were then analyzed to identify both the components included and how each component area was addressed. A review of SJCDES equipment inventories and training records was then performed to identify limitations to adopting other agencies' policies.

A policy was created that addresses specific limitations on when and how firefighters will enter a hostile area, and which addresses details of Incident Command, mass casualties, bomb threats and incidents, and hazardous material incidents, referencing existing policies

whenever possible.

The recommendations resulting from this research included (a) incorporating the sample policy into the department's policy manual, (b) contacting the local law enforcement agencies to create formal agreements on policy issues, (c) encouragement of SWAT medic training for firefighters, and (d) continued participation in joint drills with law enforcement, with drill critiques and policy modifications as appropriate.

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## INTRODUCTION

The problem is that the St. Johns County Department of Emergency Services (SJCDES) does not have a policy that identifies the roles and responsibilities of SJCDES firefighters during responses to in-progress incidents involving school or workplace violence. The purpose of this research project is to develop a policy that identifies the roles and responsibilities of SJCDES firefighters during a response to an in-progress incident involving school or workplace violence.

This research project will use the action method of research to develop a policy that identifies the roles and responsibilities of SJCDES firefighters during a response to an in-progress incident involving school or workplace violence. The following research questions were posed:

1. What are the necessary components of a policy for response to in-progress incidents involving school or workplace violence?
2. How have other departments like SJCDES dealt with policies for response to in-progress incidents involving school or workplace violence?
3. What limitations are there in the SJCDES to adopting other agencies policies?

## BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Fire and Rescue organizations across the country are increasingly faced with a new challenge, the risk of becoming involved in school or workplace violence. In the United States twenty one firefighters were killed as a result of assaults from 1977 to 1996 (Elliott, 1999).

Marlin and Vogt (1999) stated that “The National School Safety Center (NSSC) reported 225 school associated violent deaths between July 1992 and June 17, 1998.” These fatalities included students, faculty, and any other persons who were either on school grounds or going to or from school related functions when killed.

In recent years there have been a number of school, workplace, or firefighter related violent incidents reported nationally. In his book *Guns, violence, and teens* Cox (1997, p. 17) reports that “In 1989, Patrick “Eddy” Purdy, twenty-four, armed with a Chinese-made AKM-47 semiautomatic rifle and hundreds of rounds of ammunition, shot up an elementary school playground in Stockton, California. After firing 105 rounds, he had taken the lives of five children, wounded twenty-eight others, and injured a teacher.”

Springfield (Oregon) Fire and Life Safety paramedics responded to a school shooting that resulted in two fatalities and twenty-three students who were injured and required treatment. The incident occurred in the spring of 1998 when a 15-year-old student opened fire in the cafeteria of Thurston High School. (Springfield Paramedics, 1998)

In Conneaut, Ohio, two firefighter paramedics were shot by a driver who was upset that they were blocking traffic. One of the firefighter paramedics received a head wound and was in serious condition. (EMS USA, 1998)

In April of 1999 five Texas junior high students were arrested and charged with planning

to shoot students and teachers in a manner similar to that which occurred in Littleton, Colorado. In the same article USA Today (1999) reports that “Dozens of students around the country have been suspended and arrested since the Columbine High School shootings for making what were regarded as threats to carry out copycat attacks.”

Other recent school shootings include an incident at a Pearl, Mississippi high school which resulted in two dead and seven injured students (October 1, 1997), another in West Paducah, Kentucky which ended with three dead and five wounded students (December 1, 1997). A Jonesboro, Arkansas shooting on March 24, 1998 started when two boys set off a false fire alarm, and then opened fire from nearby woods, killing four girls and a teacher, and injuring ten others. (Nordberg, 1999b)

In a recent USA Today article Ron Stephens, executive director of the National School Safety Center, is quoted as saying that “schools have made significant headway in cutting down on deadly violence”. In discussing the Columbine shooting however, he points out that “They brought explosives into the school. That raises the bar. When the firepower increases, so does the violence.” (Bowles, 1999)

According to Naomi Paiss, of the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, “We’re getting away from the ‘business deal’ shootings that were a big problem in ‘93 and ‘94 with gangs and drugs. We’re seeing more of the maniacal massacre-type shootings, where kids aren’t killing for an economic reason, but to see how many kids they can wipe out at once.” (Bowles, 1999)

In his book Cox (1997, p. 22) states that surveys confirm that a large number of students carry illegal firearms at least occasionally or have easy access to them. He states further that “A 1993 nationwide poll of 2,500 sixth- through twelfth-grade public and private school students,

mostly from suburbs and small towns, found that 59 percent said they could get a handgun if they wanted.”

Garry L. Briese, Executive Director of the International Association of Fire Chiefs is quoted by Elliott (1999, p. 44) as saying “Historically, firefighters and paramedics have enjoyed a neutral, noncombatant status. Turnout gear and red crosses meant “Don’t shoot! I’m here just here to put out the fire or patch up the wounded.” In speaking about the perceived neutrality of the fire service he is further quoted as stating “We need to fight to keep it or it will go away . . . I believe the fire service is trusted, respected and generally perceived as neutral.” (Elliott, 1999, p. 44)

In January 1997 a bomb exploded at the rear of the Atlanta Northside Family Planning Service. A second bomb exploded about an hour later as emergency workers, including firefighters, were attempting to secure the scene and evacuate the area. John W. Magaw, Director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms stated that “This bomber placed secondary bombs designed to kill and maim rescuers, paramedics, firefighters, and police officers who rushed to the scene to help. He didn’t care who they were.” (Department of Justice, 1998)

During the recent incident at Columbine High School a fire department training officer wearing dirty turnout gear and holding a portable radio was targeted by a police sniper. The sniper believed the firefighter was a suspect in a trenchcoat and carrying a weapon. The sniper was authorized by his supervisor to shoot, and only a last second glimpse by the police sniper of reflective striping on the turnout gear prevented that. Officers on the ground also believed the training officer was a suspect, and tackled him to the ground before realizing their mistake.

(Elliott, 1999)

The Saint Johns County (Florida) Sheriff's Office (SJSO) has adopted a new primary entry policy for school shootings. Developed partly in response to the Columbine incident, the policy provides that the first supervisors on scene will enter the campus building immediately and apprehend the suspect or suspects. Sheriff Neil Perry said that the new policy will require training for fire and rescue officials in addition to law enforcement and school staff personnel.

(Merlo, 1999)

An interview with SJCDES Training Division Chief Johnny Colson was conducted on September 13, 1999. The interview lasted approximately thirty minutes, and was held to identify concerns of the SJCDES with the roles and responsibilities of its firefighters as they related to the new SJSO policy. Chief Colson was first asked to summarize the events which occurred during a full scale drill on the new policy. He stated that during the drill the SJSO officers first entered a school where a simulated suspect was actively "shooting" students and teachers. After the suspect was secured SJSO officers expected that SJCDES paramedics would be escorted into the incident area to treat injured students and teachers where they were found. The paramedics would be escorted by "Community Emergency Team" (CET) law enforcement officers wearing body armor and equipped with rifles. The escorts were intended to assure safety of the paramedics from any suspects that might not have been identified and from any potential explosive devices. SJCDES officials on the scene declined to perform that function, believing that the scene was not yet "safe." Chief Colson indicated that if the CET members felt that wearing body armor was appropriate then unarmed paramedics without body armor should not be asked to enter the area. SJCDES officials offered backboards to the CET team members, and

expected that patients would be removed from hazardous areas to a safe zone by CET team members, where treatment could be performed safely by paramedics. Chief Colson stated that the department did not have a formal policy that would guide decision makers in such an incident, and that it was unclear whose definition of “secure” would be acceptable before firefighters were allowed entry to a hostile scene.

This applied research project was conducted as a course requirement for the Executive Development class at the National Fire Academy. The project relates to three content areas of that course. The project relates to the section of the course dealing with teamwork, in that the establishment of clear roles and procedures for members of a department is one key to improving the ability of members to function effectively as a team. The project also relates to the organizational culture section of the course. The role of firefighters at a violent incident is often a part of the department’s organizational culture, and policies in conflict with the established culture will be more likely to fail. A third area of the course that is relevant is the section on service quality. Creating a policy that outlines the firefighter’s role at a violent incident improves the likelihood that the desired level of performance to the public will be provided.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Research Question 1.**

A report on civil unrest by a joint fire and police task force stated that careful documentation of a command structure agreeable to both agencies was very important in the effective management of this type of incident. The report also listed communications procedures, media relations procedures, and resource management procedures as being key

components of a policy to address civil unrest. (Joint Fire / Police Task Force, 1994)

The textbook *Emergency Response To Terrorism* discusses the need for an incident command system as being crucial to effectively manage such incidents. (United States Fire Administration, 1997)

The Littleton Fire Department's *SOP #2004: Assistance to Police Operations* includes the following components: purpose and scope statements, and sections on determination of incident type, staging and liaison, guidelines for three specific incident types (equipment delivery, medical services, and hazmat), and general recommendations addressing communications during sensitive operations, use of fire equipment for deception purposes, use of emergency lights and sirens, and traffic safety issues. (Elliott, 1999)

“Written procedures that define how joint operations will work together are needed. They must be thought out and orchestrated in advance and practiced regularly to work smoothly.” (Wallace and Brightmire, 1999)

“You must plan for the self-initiated response of nearby resources. Primary and secondary staging areas are important. Train all agencies' units to go to staging and report in.” (Wallace and Brightmire, 1999)

The Prospect Heights Fire Protection District (1995) has a policy in place for civil disturbances, which are defined in their policy as activity in which there is any “actual or possible gun fire, arson, or violence towards persons.” Their policy includes components addressing when members and apparatus may enter unsafe areas, and states that the police will determine when it is safe for firefighters to enter. The policy also includes specific provisions for the type of uniform clothing and protective clothing to be worn. Members are directed to

refrain from wearing uniform shirts or badges, and are required to wear helmets when operating in the field. The policy also includes a component that requires units to use Level 1 staging, and to remain there until the scene is declared safe to enter by police.

### **Research Question 2.**

In discussing how his department dealt with policies for the in-progress school violence they faced at Columbine High School, Littleton's Fire Chief Bill Pessemier stated that "We basically just used that portions of the Incident Command System that we thought were appropriate in coordinating all aspects of the incident in conjunction with the Sheriff's Department command center to work with the police and other agencies." (Firehouse, 1999 )

The National Fire Protection Association's *NFPA 1500 Standard on Fire Department Occupational Safety and Health Program* (1997) calls for the integration of risk management principles into the incident command process, and lists "Activities that present a significant risk to the safety of members shall be limited to situations where there is a potential to save endangered lives."

The United States Fire Administration (1996) also calls for the integration of these risk management principles into the written policies of the department, incorporating them into the responsibilities of each firefighter and officer.

Garry Briese states that the position of the IAFC is that "No fire service personnel, nor their equipment, nor their uniforms, should be used in law enforcement functions that compromise the perceived neutrality of the fire service." (Elliott, 1999, p. 49)

One recommendation made after a review of the Columbine tragedy is that fire departments should accept that they will have to be closely involved with many police and swat

type operations, and that they purchase equipment needed to reduce the risks found in those environments, including bulletproof vests. (Wallace, 1999)

The need for a common incident management system between police and fire agencies was identified as a lesson learned after the Littleton incident. (Wallace, 1999)

Since this type of incident will draw intense media coverage departments should be very careful in determining who will give interviews, and should give some consideration to attempting to keep responders away from the media. This is suggested as a way to both reduce unfavorable coverage and to reduce the stress on responders. (Wallace, 1999)

“Mass-casualty supplies must be available with redundancy of supplies so that more than one triage area can be set up as needed” (Wallace, 1999)

Paramedic Captain Jim Olsen, one of the first to respond to Columbine High School, suggests that future responders “Work within the incident command system and resist the temptation to do your own thing.” (Nordberg, 1999b, p. 46)

Three recommendations are being addressed by Littleton Fire Department administrators:

1. Establish a very broad regional communications plan. For example, use ICS Form 205 to preplan radio communications frequencies and channels that will be used during a major incident of this scale.

2. Establish a standardized emergency management system that can be used by fire, EMS, law enforcement and hospitals.

3. Be able to coordinate fire/EMS operations with police and SWAT team operations. (Nordberg, 1999a, p. 50).

According to Chief Pessemier “You need to clearly define the tactical objectives of the

fire/EMS operations and police/SWAT operations, and make sure those two sets of strategies are coordinated and integrated.” (Nordberg, 1999a, p. 50)

The Littleton Fire Department’s standard operating procedure (Elliott, 1999, p. 46) titled “Assistance to Police Operations” directs that their fire department “when assisting police, will not involve members in active danger areas. Units and personnel are only to be staged in cleared or safe areas.” With respect to staging the policy states that “Responding fire units to active police actions will rendezvous with police command in a safe staging area.”

In discussing the use of fire equipment for police operations the SOP states calls for trained police officers to use the equipment within hazardous areas. Firefighters are expected to deliver the equipment to a safe zone and provide on the spot training to officers who will use the equipment. (Elliott, 1999, p. 46)

Littleton’s policy states that “Paramedic calls to active police actions will be to safe or cleared areas.” The policy also calls for police to search all prisoners for weapons before treatment is begun. (Elliott, 1999, p. 46)

The policy also prohibited the use of fire department resources to deceive a suspect into thinking a police officer was a firefighter. (Elliott, 1999, p. 46)

The National Fire Protection Association (1997, p. 20) in a portion of *NFPA 1500* addressing civil unrest and terrorism, which is defined to include any incident which involves violence, unrest, or civil disturbance, sets out several standards for dealing with possible situations faced by firefighters. The standard requires complying departments to treat such incidents as primarily a law enforcement event, and “the fire department shall coordinate with the law enforcement incident commander throughout the incident.” In situations that are likely

to or do involve violence “the fire department incident commander shall communicate directly with the law enforcement incident commander to insure the safety of fire department members.” and “shall stage all fire department resources in a safe area until the law enforcement agency has secured the scene.” If emergency operations have already begun and violence occurs “the fire department incident commander shall either secure immediate law enforcement agency protection or shall withdraw all fire department members to a safe staging area.” The standard also calls for the creation of a standard communications signal to indicate “that an incident crew is faced with a life and death situation requiring immediate law enforcement intervention.”

### **Research Question 3.**

Section 6-7.8 of NFPA 1500 states that “Fire department companies or teams that provide support to law enforcement agency special weapons and tactics (SWAT) operations shall receive special training. Special standard operating procedures shall be developed that describe the training and safety of these fire department teams for such operations.” (NFPA, 1997, p. 20)

## **PROCEDURES**

### **Definition of Terms**

Swat Medic. An individual who is trained and qualified to provide emergency medical care as a paramedic, and who is assigned to perform these functions in a hostile environment while serving as part of a law enforcement special weapons and tactics (SWAT) team. Many swat medics also receive extensive law enforcement training and carry weapons for protection of themselves and other team members.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

Limitations on this research project included the requirement to complete the project within the six months time period allowed by the NFA Applied Research Project Guidelines. Time and cost constraints prohibited the selection of a larger population group. The population group for the survey was identified using the on line member search feature of the Florida Fire Chiefs Association's (FFCA) world wide web site, and does not include departments without a representative in the FFCA.

It is assumed that in most cases violent acts will be ended before or shortly after the arrival of public safety agencies. Incidents with violent acts continuing long after the arrival of fire / rescue units will be the exception, rather than the rule.

### **Research Methodology**

A survey questionnaire was sent to each of the career or combination departments in the identified population. The survey population was defined as all career or combination fire departments in the Northeast Florida Regional Planning Council District, which is composed of Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, Putnam and St. Johns Counties. The survey population was further defined as only those departments with at least one member in the Florida Fire Chief's Association.

Each questionnaire asked for a yes or no reply to the following question: "Does your department currently have a policy that identifies the roles and responsibilities of your firefighters during a response to an in-progress incident involving school or workplace violence?" Departments that answered "yes" were also requested to forward a copy of their current policy. Respondents were also asked to identify their department as being career, combination, or volunteer. Replies which indicated "volunteer" were not included in the results.

Two career or combination departments failed to return the survey. One was contacted by phone, and answered the survey questions at that time, indicating that their department had no policies.

On February 3, 2000 an interview was conducted with the Fire Chief of the second department, Chief Daniel J. Dugger of the Macclenny Fire Department. He was asked the same questions as included in the written survey, and indicated that his department did have such policies. He was unable to provide a copy of his department's policy for review, but agreed to discuss it. The Chief was asked to list the components of his department's applicable policy and described how each component was addressed. The interview lasted for approximately thirty minutes.

Once the replies were received the responses were reviewed to determine the number of departments who did have a policy in place. The policies submitted were then reviewed to identify components, and the number of times each component was included in a policy. Submitted policies were then reviewed to determine how each component was addressed in these policies.

The other department policies were then reviewed to determine the equipment or training required to carry them out. These equipment needs were then compared to equipment presently available or budgeted for purchase by SJCDES. Training records were evaluated to determine the number of personnel who had the required training.

SJCDES training files were reviewed to determine the number of career paramedics who are also certified as law enforcement officers or who have completed either the auxiliary or complete law enforcement academy course.

## RESULTS

A sample policy describing the roles and responsibilities of firefighters at in progress in incidents involving school or workplace violence is shown in Appendix A.

### Answers to Research Questions

**Research Question 1.** A number of components were identified as being necessary for a policy for response to in-progress school or workplace violence. Four of the thirteen departments surveyed indicated that they had a policy or policies that addressed the roles and responsibilities of their firefighters during an in progress school or workplace shooting event. A fifth department answered “no” to the question asking if they had a policy, but attached a copy of their policy titled “Riots and Civil Disorders.” This policy was included in the analysis. A table summarizing the components identified in these policies and the number of times each component appeared is provided in Appendix B.

One department submitted two policies, “Emergency Operations, Hostile Scene Incident” and “Emergency Operations, Bomb Threats.” A second department included portions of specific policies, including “Incident Command Safety,” “Hostile Situations,” “SWAT Operations Support” and “Explosive Devices and Bomb Threats.” A third department submitted a single policy titled “Mass Casualty Incident.” The fourth department answering yes to question number one of the survey could not provide a written copy for review. Its components were identified by an interview with that department’s Fire Chief.

An analysis of the policies submitted identified twenty-one components that were present in one or more of the policies. Three areas were addressed by all four of the departments. These were staging of incoming units, coordination with other agencies through liaisons, and

communications procedures.

Components addressing restrictions on approach of fire units, use of emergency warning lights or sirens, and specific procedures for withdrawal from a hostile incident were present in three of the department's policies.

Sections on use of firefighters to evacuate occupants in bomb threat situations, use of firefighters to search for explosive devices, wearing of specific personal protective clothing, use of incident command procedures, and command relationship between law enforcement and fire units were found in at least two of the policies submitted. Two policies also identified requirements for appointment of subordinate officers, including safety officers.

Several components were present in only one of the policies submitted. These included triage procedures, description of mass casualty incident (MCI) kits, hospital notification, field operations guides for various command positions, requirements for police protection of fire units, and restrictions on fire Explorer ride alongs.

As conveyed by Chief Dugger, the Macclenny Fire Department policies had components addressing the use of fire apparatus to shield police personnel, use of fire department equipment by police, entry to hostile scenes, procedures to evacuate victims from hostile areas, treatment of patients in secure areas, and use of firefighters to control rioters.

**Research Question 2.** Five area departments similar to SJCDDES had policies that dealt with response to in-progress school or workplace violence in the following manner. Four of the policies submitted provided for staging of resources. Three of these policies require responding apparatus to stage some distance away from a hostile incident until the scene has been declared safe, or until law enforcement units can provide an escort. The fourth requires staging for

additional responding resources but does not address staging of initial units pending law enforcement response. Most of the policies call for law enforcement agencies to declare the scene safe for entry, but one calls for firefighters and apparatus to remain outside the area until it “has been declared secure by Local Law Enforcement Command and the Fire Chief.”

All four of the departments had components that provided for a liaison position to or from law enforcement. One policy simply calls for assignment of a liaison officer as needed. Another calls for the firefighter who has withdrawn from a hostile scene to meet with police, briefing them before they enter the incident scene. Two of the policies specifically call for a firefighter (either the fire “Officer In Charge” or “Fire Department Liaison Officer”) to be assigned to the law enforcement command post to coordinate communications and operations.

Communications procedures were included to some extent by all four departments. The MCI policy described specific information that should be conveyed from various officers to the IC and to the communications center, as well as to and from area hospitals. Two of the policies prohibited radio transmissions near any incident involving a bomb threat. One policy specifically requires that for hostile incidents, the dispatch center shall notify the fire units when law enforcement is on scene and when they report the situation under control.

Three of the responding departments required provided for restriction against firefighters entering a hostile area until the police agency had declared the scene safe or secure. The same three departments also had some type of policy for withdrawal from a hostile area. One department provided a general application provision that directed the IC to recall all personnel to the command post whenever a immediately dangerous situation occurred. The withdrawal would be announced over the radio and by a series of short air horn blasts. Another department had a

provision that required all firefighters to withdraw from an area if any of them were molested or attacked in any way. The third department's provision directs the senior officer present to withdraw all firefighters from a possibly hostile scene whenever he / she feels that such action is necessary to protect the firefighters.

Two of the policies reviewed called for responding without warning lights and sirens when responding to a reported bomb threat. The third policy had a provision that prohibited the use of warning lights and sirens in an area subject to civil disturbance.

Two of the policies provided for firefighters to assist in evacuating citizens from the area of a bomb threat, but they also specifically prohibit using firefighters to search for such a device.

Two of the bomb threat policies addressed the command role. One stated that the fire department would operate under the direction of the police department commander. The second stated that the fire department officer in charge would assume overall command of any incident in which an actual explosion had occurred.

One department's policy provided specific responsibilities for an Incident Commander and sector officers, and required the establishment of a safety officer position for incidents that exceeded a second alarm. The MCI policy used by one department called for the first arriving officer to establish command, and for appointment of various other positions including triage, treatment, and staging.

The policy on riots and civil disturbances directed that firefighters wear structural firefighter protective clothing inside the disturbance area. Another department's incident command safety policy had a provision directing that members inside a safety perimeter wear protective clothing appropriate for the hazard, and required those outside the perimeter to wear

helmets and reflective vests as a minimum.

The MCI policy provided specific criteria for triage of injured, and called for the first arriving officer to locate and remove the walking wounded to a location away from the incident. This officer should also appoint someone to keep the walking wounded together. The MCI policy also provides a requirement to notify certain area hospitals, with the number of hospitals notified based on the number of victims. A predetermined response plan for additional fire / rescue resources is also triggered by the number of casualties. The MCI plan also describes the contents of a MCI bag. The bag contains colored plastic ribbons for initial triage, with mettags for later use. The bag also contains logs and FOGs (field operations guides) for various ICS positions. Sample FOGs are included in the policy, and they provide step by step directions for each position in a checklist format.

The policy for riots and civil disturbances also called for law enforcement protection of units operating in the disturbance area. This policy also prohibited fire department Explorers from riding on any unit during a disturbance.

One department specifically required that fire / rescue personnel operating in support of a SWAT type incident wear reflective vests and helmets for on-scene identification.

As described by Chief Dugger, the Macclenny Fire Department's policies direct that firefighters not enter any hostile area until police declared the area secure. They specifically prohibit the use of fire apparatus to shield police during a hostile incident. The department will loan equipment such as forcible entry tools and self contained breathing apparatus to police, and will provide training in the use of that equipment. Their procedure directs them to provide scoop stretchers, back boards and similar items to police when needed to remove victims from a hostile

area to a safe zone for treatment by firefighters. Their policy does permit firefighters to enter a hostile scene for the purpose of treating victims, but only when law enforcement officers are able to secure one portion of the scene for that purpose. Their policy specifically prohibits the use of firefighters to control hostile crowds, including instances of civil disorder or riots.

**Research Question 3.** Limitations to the adoption of other departments’s policies for in-progress school or workplace violence by SJCDES include the following. A review of SJCDES training records revealed that a total of six SJCDES firefighters also hold an active certification as a full time or auxiliary law enforcement officer with jurisdiction in St. Johns County. One of these firefighters has received special training for and been assigned to function as a “swat medic” with the St. Johns County Sheriff’s Office “Community Emergency Team”.

A review of existing SJCDES policies shows that, except for differences in predesignated response units and hospital resources, the department has already adopted a regional mass casualty incident policy that is identical to that used by one of the surveyed departments.

A review of the St. Johns County Sheriff’s Office (1999) policy manual shows that plain clothes or off duty law enforcement officers with that agency are required to wear orange colored reflective traffic vests to identify themselves at in-progress school or workplace shootings. The vests have “SHERIFF” on the front and back in large letters.

A review of current SJCDES equipment inventories shows that some, but not all, units are equipped with reflective traffic vests. Some of the existing vests are labeled “FIRE” or “FIRE RESCUE” while others are unlabeled orange vests. Several vehicles are also equipped with a selection of reflective vests labeled with incident command position titles such as

“Staging,” “Treatment” and “Transportation.” The department does not possess any type of body armor or ballistic vest.

## DISCUSSION

The policy, which represents the results of this research, is a broad policy that addresses incidents of all types with violence in-progress. Neither the reference material or the policies analyzed in the study included a policy that was specifically intended to address in progress incidents involving school or workplace violence. In each case the policy was either intended to address violent incidents in general, or other types of violence incidents. Each had components that could be or were applied to in progress incidents involving school or workplace violence.

A large percentage of the surveyed departments indicated that they did not have a policy addressing the role of their firefighters at in progress incidents involving school or workplace violence. I believe that most of the other departments have policies in place that address at least some of the components desirable in such a policy, but that the respondents did not recognize them as such. For example, the mass casualty incident policy submitted by one area department had language indicating that it was a standardized regional policy that was adopted for use by several surrounding counties. Several of the departments from within those counties answered the survey indicating that they had no applicable policies. The use of the policy created by this project should insure that firefighters utilize their existing policies to the greatest extent possible.

One provision that seemed to be almost universal was that firefighters should not enter violent scenes until law enforcement had secured the scene, or should withdraw until police

protection could be provided. *NFPA 1500* (1997, p. 20) states that fire departments responding to potentially violent scenes “shall stage all fire department resources in a safe area until the law enforcement agency has secured the scene.”

The research results also found that area departments typically called for use of the incident command system, with command of such incidents by the senior law enforcement officer and for a fire department liaison officer assigned to the command post. This is consistent with NFPA’s *Standard on Fire Department Incident Management System* (1995, p. 6) which states “The fire department shall develop an integrated incident management system in coordination with other agencies that are involved in emergency incidents....Where the incident is under the overall jurisdiction of an agency other than the fire department, the fire department shall utilize the incident management system to manage its own operations and coordinate its activities with the agency having overall jurisdiction.”

In cases where this is not possible the consensus is to reduce the risk by creating policies that provide for this contingency, including maintaining a neutral pose and establishing standard distress signals. “The fire department shall develop a standard communication method that indicates that an incident crew is faced with a life or death situation requiring immediate law enforcement intervention.” (NFPA, 1997, p. 18)

Both the authors reviewed and local department’s policies were consistent in how they dealt with use of fire department resources for police purposes. They had language that prohibited using fire department resources to deceive citizens, and limited the type of assistance firefighters could provide to police to achieve law enforcement objectives. Garry Briese of IAFC states that his organization’s position is that “No fire service personnel, not their

equipment, not their uniforms, should be used in law enforcement functions that compromise the perceived neutrality of the fire service.” (Elliott, 1999, p. 49) However, in discussing the use of a fire engine to shield police approaching the Columbine High School Garry Briese stated that it was a case where “circumstances force us to cross the line.” (Elliott, 1999, p. 49)

One department responding to the survey provided a MCI policy for analysis, indicating that they felt such a policy had a significant role in dealing with in-progress school or workplace violence incidents. Several of the articles reviewed discussed some component of an MCI policy as being important in handling these incidents.

One area department had a provision specifically directing that the fire department officer in charge withdraw firefighters from a scene whenever he or she felt such action was necessary to protect the firefighters. None of the area fire departments provided language that specifically provided for the use of risk management principles in the decision making process. In the section of *NFPA 1561 Standard on Fire Department Incident Management System* (1995, p. 9) that addresses roles and responsibilities it states “Risk management principles shall be employed routinely by supervisory personnel at all levels of the incident management system to define the limits of acceptable and unacceptable positions and functions for all personnel at the incident scene.”

Firefighters also have a history of performing extremely dangerous activities beyond the scope of their training and equipment when such actions were the only way to save a life. Most would probably agree that all of our decisions and activities should be governed by the principle of risk / benefit analysis, in which the potential risks of an action are weighed against the potential benefits. Firefighters performing activities that place them at a high risk of death or

injury when the only possible benefit is to save property with little value makes no sense. On the other hand, it is reasonable to assume that firefighters will continue to place themselves in great danger to rescue those who would otherwise die, whether the dangers involved are from a fire or hostile gunmen. The organization may find that firefighters will act outside of policy restrictions when there is no leeway for discretion, or when circumstances occur that were not contemplated when the policies were established.

Fire departments may also find themselves at increased risk of liability if they choose to ignore industry standards such as those issued by NFPA. SJCDES and similar organizations that do not create policies for these incident types may find themselves trying to deal with a major event outside the normal scope of operations with no existing guidelines. They might then face intense local or even national criticism for failing to prepare and train for such incidents.

It is clear that existing policies of many area departments do not plan for the various types of hostile incidents in a detailed and thorough manner. In many cases there is no one policy that covers the key issues in one document. This is likely to result in firefighters acting on their own discretion, without reference to department guidelines.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The SJCDES should adopt the policy for hostile incidents as shown in Appendix A. SJCDES should integrate the policy into its in-service training program and should insure that the incident command and mass casualty incident kits needed to implement the policy are readily available. Other fire departments should review the proposed policy for possible adoption by their department.

The SJCDES should make contact with the local law enforcement agencies and attempt to obtain formal agreement on the use of the incident command system, unified command, and liaison officers for hostile scene incidents involving both agencies. Other fire departments who do not currently have such agreements in place should make similar contacts.

The SJCDES and other fire departments should make contact with local law enforcement agencies to determine if they can provide ballistic vests for firefighters at such an incident, through an advance issue or by providing vests from stockrooms at the time of a major incident. If this is not possible the fire department should research other means of funding the purchase of such vests.

The SJCDES should also encourage the provision of SWAT medic training for those firefighter / paramedics who are already certified law enforcement officers, to provide a larger number of personnel capable of acting in this role at major incidents. This would result in better care for those citizens who are injured and unable to exit a hostile incident scene, while reducing the risk to those firefighters providing the care.

The SJCDES should continue to participate in drills with the Sheriff's Office, incorporating the use of the new policy. Post incident critiques of those drills should then be held to identify potential problems with the policy and suggest possible revisions. Joint participation in these drills should also lead to a better working relationship between the agencies, with improved safety and efficiency in emergency response as the end result.

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## APPENDIX A

### Policy for Response to Hostile Incident Locations

#### General

**1) Scope:** This policy shall apply to all incidents where violence is occurring or is likely to occur.

**2) Discussion:** Violence which poses a hostile work atmosphere for firefighters may occur at any incident. Firefighters may find themselves facing a threat to their lives without notice while performing emergency response functions or other activities. Incidents which pose a danger of violence against firefighters include but are not limited to assaults, robberies, domestic violence, medical calls for police prisoners, school or workplace violence, bomb threats, and domestic terrorism. The role of firefighters is limited to actions that are intended to protect life and property but that do not involve performing a law enforcement function. Firefighter also perform only a support role to law enforcement when dealing with explosive devices.

#### Basic Response Policies

**3) Dispatch:** The communications center shall include any information indicating that a hostile scene may exist when initially dispatching an incident. Firefighters shall be informed when law enforcement officers are on scene, and when they have declared the scene secure. Any additional resources dispatched shall also be informed that a hostile scene exists.

**4) Ride alongs:** Junior firefighters, observers, or other visitors shall not be permitted to respond on apparatus dispatched to any incident known to involve a hostile scene. If they are present they shall not be permitted to enter such scenes for any reason, but shall remain in a staging area unless they would be at increased risk.

**5) Siren / emergency warning light usage:** Responding DES personnel will shut down warning lights and sirens before entering the immediate area of a hostile incident.

**6) Staging:** Initial fire department units responding to any violent incident shall stage nearby but out of view of the incident (Level I Staging), and shall remain at that location until the scene has been declared secure as described in Section 12 of this policy.

Additional resources should report to an incident specific staging area designated by the Incident Commander (Level II Staging), unless they are directed by Command to report to a specific location for immediate assignment.

**7) Firefighter Identification:** All firefighters operating at the scene of a hostile incident shall

wear their structural firefighter helmet for identification purposes. Other protective clothing, including structural firefighting protective clothing, traffic and command vests, identification name tags, and blood borne pathogens protective equipment shall be worn as directed by existing policies when appropriate.

**8) Withdrawal:** If hostile action begins after firefighters have entered an area they shall withdraw immediately unless law enforcement protection is immediately available.

**9) Distress Signal:** Any firefighter in immediate life or death danger from hostile action shall notify communications with the signal "10-24," indicating "officer in distress." The DES communication's center will relay that message to the Sheriff's Office communication center, and appropriate law enforcement assistance will be provided. The DES communications center shall place the channel used on emergency traffic only to insure that the firefighter in distress has communications priority.

### **Coordination with Law Enforcement Agencies**

**10) Incident Command:** Incident Command shall be established and maintained as directed in the department's incident command policy.

A "unified command" shall be established whenever a mass casualty or long duration hostile scene event occurs. The senior SJCDES and law enforcement officers shall jointly command the incident from a common command post, or a liaison officer from the fire department shall be physically present at the law enforcement command post to insure coordination of strategy and response activities.

**11) Command Principles:** Command decisions on the use of firefighters into hostile areas shall be made by all levels of command using the following risk management guidelines:

Firefighters shall not be permitted to perform activities that pose a significant risk to their safety unless there is a potential to save endangered lives.

Firefighters shall not be permitted to perform any activity that poses a safety risk when there is no possibility to save lives or property.

**12) Scene Entry:** The senior law enforcement officer shall typically determine whether a scene is secure for purposes of permitting entry of firefighters. The fire department incident commander shall have the discretion to seek out specific information about scene security and jointly determine whether the scene is secure enough to permit firefighter entry, using the risk management principles outlined above.

**13) Deception:** The SJCDES will not provide uniforms, bunker gear, vehicles or equipment to law enforcement agencies where the intent is to deceive a suspect into identifying a law

enforcement officer as a firefighter.

**14) Equipment Use:** SJCDES will loan equipment to law enforcement agencies for police purposes, but will deliver and provide instruction in the use of such equipment only in a safe area.

**15) SWAT Medic:** Members of SJCDES who are SWAT medics with the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office "Community Emergency Team" are also employed by and subject to the policies and procedures adopted by that agency. When functioning as SWAT medics they are not subject to this policy, and are not under the operational control of the SJCDES incident commander. They are, however, still subject to the patient treatment protocols as adopted by the SJCDES Medical Director.

### **Related Policies**

**16) Mass Casualties:** Mass casualties shall be handled as described in the regional MCI plan adopted by the department. Incident Commanders shall be aware of the potential need for multiple triage and treatment areas, especially at in-progress incidents involving school or workplace violence. The MCI plan includes provisions for the following:

- MCI Level designation based on number of victims.
- Dispatch of pre designated fire / rescue resources based on MCI level.
- Notification of area hospitals.
- Triage of victims.
- Establishment of certain ICS command positions.

**17) Explosives / Bomb Threats:** Firefighters shall be aware of the potential for explosive devices at incidents involving other types of violence. At explosive related incidents firefighters shall consider the potential for secondary devices intended to kill or injure emergency response personnel. Firefighters shall not search for explosive devices, but may assist in evacuating citizens from areas with a suspected explosive device. See policy on bomb threats for additional guidelines.

**18) Hazardous Materials:** Firefighters shall be aware of the potential presence of hazardous materials, including but not limited to flammable liquids and biological weapons, at incidents involving violence. See the hazardous materials response policy for guidelines on handling any incident involving these items.

**APPENDIX B**  
**Hostile Incident Policy Components**

| <b>Policy components present in submitted policies:</b>        | <b>Times appearing:</b> |
|--|-------------------------|
| Staging procedures   | 4                       |
| Coordination with Law Enforcement Agencies                     | 4                       |
| Communications procedures                                      | 4                       |
| Restrictions on approach to scene                              | 4                       |
| Withdrawal from hostile scenes                                 | 3                       |
| Use of warning lights and sirens                               | 3                       |
| Firefighter's role in evacuating occupants during bomb threats | 2                       |
| Firefighter's role in searching for explosive devices          | 2                       |
| Command roles, law enforcement versus fire department          | 2                       |
| Use of Incident Command System                                 | 2                       |
| Personal protective clothing                                   | 2                       |
| Assignment of subordinate officers, including safety officers  | 2                       |
| Senior officer discretion - scene safety                       | 1                       |
| Triage procedures  | 1                       |
| Hospital notification  | 1                       |
| Mass Casualty Incident (MCI) kit description                   | 1                       |
| Field Operations Guide (FOG) for various command positions     | 1                       |
| Police protection for fire companies                           | 1                       |
| Restrictions on Explorer ride alongs                           | 1                       |
| Use of firefighters to control rioters                         | 1                       |
| Use of fire department equipment by police                     | 1                       |
| Procedures to evacuate victims from hostile areas              | 1                       |
| Procedures to treat victims under police protection            | 1                       |

**APPENDIX B****Hostile Incident Policy Components**

| <b>Policy components present in submitted policies:</b> | <b>Times appearing:</b> |
|---|-------------------------|
| Use of fire department apparatus to shield police       | 1                       |
| Firefighter identification                              | 1                       |

**APPENDIX C****SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE**

Department Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Does your department have a current policy or policies that address the roles and responsibilities of your employees during an in progress school or workplace shooting event?  
  
(Circle )      YES                  NO
2. Is your department all career, all volunteer, or a combination department?  
  
(Circle) Career                  Volunteer                  Combination
2. If the answer to Question # One is yes, please attach a copy of the policy or policies, and return the survey questionnaire in the envelope provided.

If you would like a copy of the survey results please check here: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return to:

Frank McElroy  
St. Johns County Fire Division  
4455 Avenue A, Suite 100  
St. Augustine, FL 32095