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Setting and Enforcing Maximum Shift Lengths at Incident Sites

SUMMARY

Fatigue and stress can affect emergency responders during long shifts of difficult work. Emergency managers and others in charge must set a maximum shift length for recovery workers, generally one twelve-hour shift per day per worker. Managers should set a proper example by following the rules themselves.

DESCRIPTION

Many responders participating in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing recovery effort worked for extended periods of time, sometimes longer than 24 hours. Most organizations involved in the response had their own guidelines for shift length, but these often went ignored or un-enforced as adrenaline was high and workers were determined to save lives.

Oklahoma City responders found that working beyond established shift times had a detrimental effect on their judgment and awareness. Responders believed that the potential for major accidents increased even though none occurred. Extended shifts also hurt long-term recovery efforts, as exhausted responders could not perform at peak effectiveness.

In retrospect, Oklahoma City responders realized that the lack of a uniform shift length placed rescue and recovery workers at risk. Responders working side by side preferred to continue working together; splitting them up because of shift restrictions was detrimental to morale. Some agencies did not establish a maximum shift length. Therefore, several leading responders in Oklahoma City recommended establishing a uniform shift length for agencies working side by side.

Enforcing existing shift length rules proved to be a greater problem in the Oklahoma City response. Responders felt that emergency managers and those in charge of support organizations must enforce established shift lengths or else rescue workers will not stop working. They believe that the key to compliance is to follow the same schedule of no more than twelve-hours-on, twelve-hours-off. Oklahoma City responders determined that these twelve-hour shifts should be the maximum time allowable for around-the-clock operations in the future.

Shift rules should also take into account the effect of working in high intensity areas or "hot zones" at the scene. Officials should ensure that responders are rotated for short shifts through the different zones of intensity. Excessive exposure to an area of high intensity can cause negative mental health effects for responders.

CITATION

National Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism. *Oklahoma City, 7 Years Later: Lessons for Other Communities*. April 19, 2002.

(<http://www.mipt.org/pdf/MIPT-OKC7YearsLater.pdf>)

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