

**Standard Operating Procedures Manual**  
**City of Poquoson Fire and Rescue**



**City of Poquoson  
Fire and Rescue**

830 Poquoson Ave.  
Poquoson, VA 23662  
757-868-3510  
F757-868-3514

**SAFETY AND HEALTH**


**SOP#:** SH 4.00

**Title:** Critical Incident Stress  
Management

**Effective Date:** 11/30/2008

**Revised Date:** 11/30/2008

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
**Fire Chief's Signature**

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
**City Manager's Signature**

**CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS  
MANAGEMENT**

**I. PURPOSE**

Effective management of critical incidents involves a comprehensive approach to managing both incidents and the resulting stressors. The goals of the Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program are:

- To minimize the emotional impact of critical incidents on members of the Poquoson Fire/Rescue Department
- To increase firefighters' resistance and resilience to this type of stress
- To prevent harmful emotional effects following critical incidents by working with response personnel at or near the time of such incidents.
- To prevent chronic effects, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, through the use of follow-up care and employee assistance programs

This SOP is not all-inclusive and cannot encompass all situations that may be encountered.

## **II. APPLICABILITY**

All career and volunteer personnel

## **III. POLICY**

The City and the Department values the health and well being of all personnel. It is acknowledged that Fire Department personnel encounter many stressful situations, especially during certain operational functions. Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) encompasses education in preparation for critical incidents and offers confidential assistance to personnel who have been involved with a traumatic incident that causes the employee(s) to experience emotional and physical reactions. Therefore, procedures for the constructive and use of CISM have been established.

## **IV. PROCEDURES**

### **THE CRITICAL INCIDENT**

Department personnel who experience a distressing reaction after responding to an incident may qualify for CISM assistance. Although different incidents might create different reactions, the following are some examples of incidents that may be appropriate for CISM support.

- The serious injury or death of a division employee or other emergency personnel working at or en route to an incident
- Mass casualties
- Suicide of or the untimely death of a member of the Poquoson Fire/Rescue Department

- Serious injury or death of a civilian resulting from department operations, e.g., collision of emergency units responding to a call
- Death of and/or violence to a child
- Loss of life following extraordinary and prolonged expenditures of physical and emotional energy during rescue efforts by department personnel
- Incidents that attract unusual or extensive media coverage
- Incidents in which circumstances are unusually bizarre and/or trigger profound reactions

**ON-SCENE CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS MANAGEMENT**

Command officers can minimize the impact of critical incident stress by limiting exposure of personnel and by rotating and/or removing initial and unnecessary personnel from the scene as soon as possible.

In the case of critical incidents of extreme magnitude (e.g., multiple deaths, transportation accidents, line-of-duty deaths), on-scene consultation will be done by the CISM team members who have been requested by the Incident commander (IC).

CISM team members will serve as advisers to the IC on incidents that require special team operations.

**ACTIVATION OF THE DEBRIEFING PROCESS**

Supervisors who observe an employee who might be experiencing or exhibiting physical or psychological reactions from critical events or

other reasons should contact the CISM team or Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Department members can activate the CISM team through the Peninsula EMS Council at no cost and is accessible through a 24-hour paging service.

The PEMS Council Regional CISM Team shall be utilized for training, demobilizations, defusings, and debriefings. The contact number is 757-220-4356.

An IC can initiate the call to the CISM Team Coordinator (TC) without a request from the field if the initial information indicates the possibility of a critical incident. TC is responsible for evaluating the need for assistance and, if appropriate, initiating and coordinating the type of critical incident stress support needed. Supervisors in conjunction with the TC shall notify the Fire Chief and the Deputy Chief in the event of activation.

### **Types of Critical Incident Stress Support**

#### **Informal Discussion and Support**

- Most situations, even those involving serious losses, will resolve themselves informally over time with or without intervention. For many situations, informal resources for support and discussion can be as successful as structured sessions. Informal avenues of support from peers, especially at the station level, can be very effective in coping with the event. This informal support provides a good foundation for more formal interventions that may be needed. These informal discussions do not involve any outside professionals.

#### **Defusing:**

A defusing is an informal process used to immediately reduce the pressure and anxiety surrounding a critical incident. The diffusing is conducted in a brief one-on-one discussion on the scene or when the units return to the station. Defusing also can be conducted in a more private

location if requested by the division member or if deemed appropriate by the CISM team member. It is a 20 – 45 minute casual interaction within 8 hours of an incident, usually before the shift goes off-duty. This step is very important when a critical event occurs on the last day of a work cycle.

Debriefing:

A debriefing is a confidential, educational process designed to accelerate the normal recovery process in individuals who have been exposed to highly abnormal events. The debriefing process provides an opportunity for personnel to discuss feelings and reactions in order to reduce the stress resulting from exposure to critical incidents. A debriefing is not a critique of division operations at the incident. Operational performance will not be discussed.

Debriefings are usually conducted in small groups of not more than 25 people; however, they also may occur on an individual basis. All debriefings shall be confidential.

- The type of debriefing conducted depends upon the circumstances of a particular incident. Following is a listing of the debriefings most commonly utilized singularly or in combination:
  - Formal Debriefing: A formal debriefing is conducted within 24 to 72 hours after a critical incident. It is a confidential, non-evaluative discussion about involvement in the incident, thoughts and feelings, and stress reactions. All units and personnel in attendance shall be out of service during this debriefing.
  - Follow-up Debriefing: A follow-up debriefing occurs weeks or months after the incident in order to address delayed or prolonged stress reactions.
  - Individual Consultation: One-on-one counseling sessions with a CISM team member are available at any time for any concerns related to critical incidents.

**Attendance**

- Attendance at a debriefing is encouraged but not mandatory for all personnel directly exposed to an incident. Only personnel involved in the incident are permitted to attend. All personnel and units in attendance at the debriefing shall be out-of-service during the debriefing.

**Location**

- Debriefings are conducted anywhere there is ample space, privacy, and freedom from distractions. The CISM team and Fire Administration shall determine the site selection. All department radios shall be turned off during debriefings.

**Relieving Personnel from Duty**

- Circumstances of a critical incident may result in a recommendation by the debriefing team that individual(s) or companies are taken out of service. Such action is neither negative nor punitive, and supervisors shall be responsible for making the appropriate arrangements. Personnel taken out of service shall be placed on administrative leave for the duration of the workday. At times, individuals placed on leave following a critical incident may be required to meet with the EAP staff prior to returning to service. The supervisor shall notify the EAP staff and the appropriate fire officer of personnel placed on leave following a critical incident.