

**Administrative Issues Concerning Establishing a Critical Incident Policy**

**Sgt. Charles F. Waits**  
**Russellville Police Department**

**School of Law Enforcement Supervision**  
**Criminal Justice Institute**  
**February 7, 2007**

## **Administrative Issues Concerning Establishing a Critical Incident Policy**

### **Introduction**

Everyone in America remembers where he or she was on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. The horrific events at the World Trade Center and Pentagon spread fear and anger throughout America and the world. People are still experiencing stress caused by that infamous day. The group of people who are having the most difficulty in dealing with the incident are the emergency services personnel. Just imagine being dispatched to the call at the Trade Center and arriving to see human beings fall to their death at your feet. The feeling of helplessness must have been awful. The anxiety felt by the firefighters and police officers as they rushed into the buildings with an overwhelming urge to save the lives of others, while fearing for their own, must have been almost unbearable. The sadness and vulnerability felt in the months of “cleanup” following that day was undoubtedly agonizing. Five years after 9/11, we all are still dealing with the stress caused by the events of that day. Long before September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, emergency services administrators were aware of the need to manage what they call “critical incidents” and the stress they cause. Administrators, (Chiefs, Captains, and Lieutenants) need to be aware of the issues involved in developing a critical incident policy. I will be discussing the need for administrators to develop and maintain a policy on dealing with critical incidents, as well as suggestions on proven procedures. Some areas that will be discussed are: what is a critical incident, signs of critical incident stress, who is affected by critical incident stress, pre-incident procedures, post-incident procedures, and a few of the liability issues of critical incidents.

## What is a Critical Incident?

Law enforcement officers deal with incidents and situations on a daily basis that the general public seldom experience. For this reason officers often become cynical, callused, or appear unaffectionate. These incidents cause stress affecting the officers' job performance, private relationships, and mental health. The incidents experienced by police officers are vastly different from the factory worker, insurance salesman, etc... Arthur W. Kureczka (1996) states that, "Critical incidents are typically sudden, powerful events that fall outside the range of ordinary human experience." He continues by saying, "they happen so abruptly they can have a strong impact, even on an experienced, well trained officer." Many websites dealing with critical incident stress have defined critical incidents. One website dealing with critical incidents gives the following definition by Roger Soloman, Ph.D: "Any situation beyond the realm of a person's usual experience that overwhelms his or her sense of vulnerability and/or lack of control over the situation." (heavybadge.com). I give the following definition from a police officer's perspective: Any incident experienced by an officer that causes stress and affects his job performance, personal life, or mental well being.

Numerous studies have developed types of incidents that are classified as critical incidents, but each officer will be affected by a wide variety of incidents that can be labeled critical incidents. I contend that it is virtually impossible to give a definitive list of critical incidents. Many people have developed a list, but they should not be viewed as absolute. In a James Horn lecture in September of 2006 at the Criminal Justice Institute, Little Rock, Arkansas, Mr. Horn gave a list of critical incidents taken from The Society for Police and Criminal Psychology (heavybadge.com)

1. Line of duty death/injury/shooting
2. Suicide of a Co-worker
3. Death of a child
4. Prolonged failed rescue attempt
5. Casualty Incidents
6. Safety of the officer is unusually jeopardized
7. Victim is known to responder

Being an officer with over fifteen years of experience, I know that the list is not or will never be complete. During an assignment as a detective I experienced stress when interviewing a suspect who casually confessed to sexually abusing his own daughter. I was shocked by his ability to talk so emotionless about a subject. I had to take a break from the interview; I had an overwhelming urge to batter the suspect. After regaining my composure, I re-entered the room and completed the interview. A few months later, I was interviewing another suspect for a similar crime. I relived the previous interview in my mind and became angry. My attitude toward the suspect affected my ability to obtain a confession. Another detective, who was monitoring the interview, had to step in and complete the interview. The initial incident would not normally be classified as a critical incident, but for me it was. I spoke to our police chaplain and other officers who had experience in this area to help me deal with the stress.

### **Signs of Critical Incident Stress**

There are two types of stress: acute and chronic. “Acute stress is severe, extremely intense distress that lasts a limited time and then the person returns to normal. It is sometimes called traumatic stress.” “Chronic stress, in contrast, is less intense but continues and eventually becomes debilitating. It is sometimes called cumulative stress.” (Bennett and Hess 2004)

Administrators need to be able to notice the symptoms of critical incident stress in order to effectively manage their respective units, divisions, or departments. There are the obvious signs such as shaking hands, sweating, rapid breathing, etc, but there are numerous unseen symptoms. As administrators, if you properly establish procedures on dealing with critical incidents, you can greatly reduce the stress on the officers who work for you, thus improving the effectiveness of your employees. Critical incident stress is exhibited in three areas: physical, cognitive, and emotional. (heavybadge.com 2006).

Common reactions to critical incident stress are discussed briefly. “Physical signs are seen in headaches, muscle aches; sleep disturbances, change in appetite, decreased interest in sexual activity, and impotence.” (heavybadge.com 2006).

Impotence has only been found in prolonged exposure to stress that was untreated. It is the result of chronic stress. If an employee reaches this point; an

immediate mental evaluation and medical treatment is recommended. It is likely that the employee may never be productive as a law enforcement officer and retirement should be considered if treatment is not successful.

“Emotional signs include anxiety, fear, guilt, sadness, anger, irritability, feeling lost and unappreciated, withdrawal.” (heavybadge.com 2006).

“Cognitive signs include debilitating flashbacks, repeated visions of the incident, nightmares, slowed thinking, difficulty making decision and solving problems, disorientation, lack of concentration, and memory lapses.” (Kureczka 1996)

In addition to the above signs, behavioral signs can be included, which are, withdrawing from family or friends, outbursts (crying or laughing), changes in normal humor patterns, excessive talkativeness or silence, and hyperactive behavior. (Horn 2006)

If a supervisor sees all or a few of these signs, he should explore relieving the employee from duty to seek help relieving the stress. Not all situations call for relieving the officer from duty. You should talk with the officer about your observations and both you and the affected officer should choose a possible course of action. It should be explained to the employee that if administrative leave is chosen, it is not a punishment and the leave will be paid. If you, as an administrator, show the officers that work for you that you are concerned and interested in helping them, they will be more loyal and dedicated.

As administrators and supervisors you should be aware that the greatest assets you possess are the officers. If you don't take steps to ensure that each officer is fit and ready for duty, the effectiveness and productivity of your department will decrease. Remember, if you fail your officers, your officers will fail you.

Some military personnel who experienced combat were known to suffer from the effects of battle fatigue, or “shell shocked.” In 1980 the American Psychiatric Association recognized the civilian version of battle fatigue, which became known as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Four to ten percent of officers who experience critical incident stress will develop full-fledged PTSD. (Kureczka 1996)

One third of the officers who experience a critical incident will have little or no reaction symptoms, one third will react moderately, and one third will have severe reaction symptoms (heavybadge.com). This is an alarming statistic for the law enforcement community. This translates to 66% of the officers who experience a critical incident will show signs of stress that will likely affect their performance. Without procedures in place to help your officers deal with the stress it can be argued that your agency will only be 33% effective in combating crime. In baseball, a player who has a batting average of .333 or 33% is considered an exceptional player, but in law enforcement a department that has 33% effectiveness on crime is problematic.

### **Who is affected by Critical Incident Stress?**

Many people are affected by critical incident stress. You may think that it is just the police officers that are affected, but it extends a little further than that. There are three main types of potential victims of critical incident stress. Those types are, primary victims, secondary victims, and tertiary victims. (Horn 2006) While discussing each type, I will compare how they relate to each other and some possible ways to reduce the stress in each type.

“Primary victims are those directly involved in the trauma/disaster.” It should be obvious who belongs in the group-officers, victims, and suspects. (Horn 2006) The officers who are involved in a critical incident may experience some difficulty in dealing with the stress of the situation. Administrators and the lower level management (Sergeants, Corporals, etc) should monitor the officer for any of the signs of stress discussed earlier. If any signs are evident, you should talk with the officer(s) about your observations and give suggestions to reduce the stress (vacation, counseling, etc). You should allow the officer(s) to take part in the decision to give them a feeling of being in control of the situation. It seems fairly simple, and it is. If the officer reduces his stress and returns to his normal level of productivity, then you have accomplished your job.

“Secondary victims are those who are in some way observers of the immediate traumatic effects that have been wrought upon the primary victims.” This group includes emergency response personnel, rescuers, and bystanders. (Horn 2006)

Several years ago when I was assigned to the detective division, we investigated a suspicious death of a small infant. The father of the infant was the focus of the investigation for neglect/abuse. Several detectives responded to the residence and found the child deceased. There were several bystanders as well as fire and medical personnel present. During the initial investigation at the scene, a female who assisted in performing CPR on the infant was very distraught. We contacted our police Chaplain Corp. and had them counsel with her. After the initial investigation, we were conducting follow-up interviews with everyone who had contact with the infant prior to police arrival. One of the persons interviewed was a firefighter who assisted medical personnel. The firefighter just happened to be a friend of mine so he felt comfortable talking to me. While interviewing him, he admitted to having a difficult time dealing with the death of this child. He felt depressed, sad, and angry. Several of the detectives and I talked with him informally after the interview was completed. The informal discussion was not documented and it helped everyone who took part. Both the firefighter and the bystander were secondary victims.

“Tertiary victims are those affected indirectly by the trauma via later exposure to the scene of the disaster/trauma or by a later exposure to primary or secondary victims.” Examples of this group are: members of the general public, family members of victims or emergency personnel. (Horn 2006).

We all know that officers go home and talk to the spouse about work, or should they? If any officer becomes involved in a critical incident, he will undoubtedly begin to experience stress. The officer's spouse will also experience stress in several ways-being concerned and worried about the officer's well being, worrying about civil litigations, the spouse losing his job, etc... It has also been known to cause domestic problems between the officer and spouse to the point where domestic violence occurs. This is why as an administrator you should offer some type of counseling for family members of officers who are involved in critical incidents. It may prevent a divorce or domestic violence from occurring. It also allows the spouse to feel more involved in helping the officer cope with the stress.

## **Pre-incident Procedures**

I feel the most important area of critical incident stress management is pre-incident. If you properly prepare your officers, they will experience less stress and perform more effectively. In the Police Academy every police officer takes part in mock traffic stops and calls for service to prepare them for the day-to-day activity of the job. Administrators should prepare their officers for critical incident stress by establishing procedures to help the officers during critical incidents.

The first step in enabling their officers in fighting critical incident stress is to establish a policy. If a department doesn't have a policy, it should be their first priority to establish one. My department doesn't currently have a policy to deal with critical incidents, and I am currently discussing the need for a policy with my supervisors. I have spoken to several officers at my department about having a critical incident policy. Every officer I spoke with related that if a policy was in effect, it would lessen the stress that would be experienced during critical incidents. The consensus was that whether or not they agreed with the policy they would know what was going to take place in the event a critical incident occurred. Each officer felt that it would provide more of a sense of control, thus alleviating stress. (Interviews Oct. 2006)

In-service training has been and remains an integral part of law enforcement. That in-service training must include critical incident stress. Administrators should begin by starting in-service training classes that better enable the officers to deal with post-traumatic stress when it occurs. Administrators cannot control all of life's events or the nature of criminal activity that turns to violence; they can take steps to educate the officers to deal with the incidents when they arise. In-service training should be provided by the people with whom the officer will be dealing with in the event of a critical incident, for example, the department's Chaplain or mental health personnel. (Mashburn 1993)

Every department should start critical incident stress management with new recruits. They generally accept the message that they are vulnerable and need to take control of stress. All officers should receive stress management training as in-service and recertification training programs. In addition, the upper management in police



departments should learn how to recognize officers' exhibiting symptoms of stress so intervention can take place. (Kureczka 1996)

At my department, we work 12-hour shifts and the administrators schedule training on the officers' days off. A lot of the officers resist any in-service training because of this policy. The officers need this training and the first line supervisors (Sgts.) should ensure that each officer understands the need. It can be a difficult task, but I feel that once a program is in place the officers will see the benefits and look forward to the annual training.

In addition to training the officer, your agency should consider offering training to friends and family members of the officers. Again, the training should be conducted by the individuals who will be dealing with the officers and their families. The Chaplain Corp., if your department has one, is an excellent group to conduct this training. The officer's family will be more open to talking about what they expect from the department if an incident occurs involving their loved one. The training will inform the family what will happen during a critical incident. Training the officer and the family is just the beginning. The real test is how will your department respond when a critical incident occurs?

### **Post-incident Procedures**

The way an agency responds to a critical incident is the major concern to the individual officers involved. Once an officer is involved in an incident, his first concern is what the department is going to do to help him or her. As administrators you need to respond to each incident with consistence although each incident will not be the same. Overall, the response to each incident should have a set order of procedures to follow. Agencies should follow the same guidelines in respect to the treatment of its officers involved. For example, if one officer is given a mental evaluation, then all officers should be required to be evaluated.

In a lecture given by James M. Horn, M.F.S. at Criminal Justice Institute in September 2006, he provided a list of procedures to follow for officer-involved shootings. I have adapted this list for use in other critical incidents.

- At the scene: Show concern! Give emotional and physical first-aid.
- Psychological break- get the officer away from the scene of the incident. Officer can be with a peer or supervisor and should only return to the scene when necessary.
- Explain to the officer what will happen administratively during the next few hours and why, so the officer does not take an investigation as a personal attack.
- If a gun is taken as evidence, replace it immediately with another weapon and replace the original as soon as it is appropriate.
- The officer should be advised to retain an attorney to watch out for his or her personal interest.
- The officer should have a recovery time before detailed interviewing. The officer should be in a secure setting, insulated from the press and curious officers.
- Totally isolating the officer breeds feelings of resentment and alienation. It is important to show concern and support to the officer during this time. The officer can be with a supportive friend or a peer who has been through a similar experience. (To avoid legal complications, it may not be advisable to talk about what happened prior to the preliminary investigation and formal statement.)
- Opportunity for family counseling (spouse, children, significant others) should be made available.
- If the officer's phone number is published, it may be advisable to have a friend or telephone answering machine screen phone calls as sometimes threats to the officer and family occur.
- An administrator should tell the rest of the department (or supervisor tell the rest of the team) what happened, so the officer does not get bombarded with questions and so that rumors are held in check.
- Expedite the completion of all investigations and advisement of the outcomes to the officer.
- Consider the employee's interests in media releases.

- The option of talking to peers who have had a similar experience can be quite helpful to all personnel at the scene. Peer support personnel are an asset in conducting group debriefings in conjunction with a mental health professional, and in providing follow-up support.
- Allow a paced return to duty (e.g., officer can ride around with a fellow officer, work a different beat or shift).

It should be noted that this list is a suggestion and not the absolute answer to critical incident response. Each agency should evaluate its needs and adjust its procedures accordingly. For instance, if you have an officer who is involved in a failed rescue attempt, you might only use part of the list. As a supervisor you would respond to the scene and assess the situation. You may notice that the officer is experiencing emotional problems and seems to be disoriented. You might choose to remove the officer from the scene. At that point, tell the officer that you are concerned and you are going to give him a break from the scene. Then ask him who he would like to take him to a police station. Once he chooses an escort, you should inform the escort officer to let him talk and just listen to him. Once at the station, allow the officer some quiet time. Another option to explore is a peer support team of critical incident debriefing.

In a February 1999 article published in an FBI law enforcement bulletin Vincent J. McNally and Roger M. Solomon, Ph. D. state, “After the initial investigative issues (e.g. conducting preliminary interviews and taking statements) have been handled, the CISM team will convene a defusing.” The article explains the team is an informal group or individual who discuss the incident a few hours after it occurs. These discussions help to reduce tension and determine future needs. (McNally & Solomon)

Every department uses some type of peer support whether they realize it or not. Officers often gather in the parking lot or a room in the station after these types of incidents to prepare reports. They inevitably begin to talk about the incident. During these informal talks officers often express their feelings (sadness for child victims, anger at suspects, feelings that they might have done more).

Michael D. Mashburn addresses the use of local clergy in his article in an FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, September 1993. He states that the local clergy can be a cost-effective way to deal with the stress police officers experience. They provide officers with counseling during critical times when the employee experiences an unusual amount of stress.

My department uses a Chaplain Corp. to respond to incidents for counseling purposes. During the time I was assigned to the detective division, I called the Chaplains out to scenes to talk with victim's families. The Chaplains spoke to the victim's family and helped make funeral arrangements, living arrangements for the victim's children, etc... They also spent time talking with the officers and handling their needs or concerns. These meetings are only the first level of counseling used in law enforcement. The second level is a more intensive meeting that is scheduled by an agency that sees the need for a more thorough meeting to alleviate employee stress, a critical incident stress debriefing (CISD).

Critical incident stress debriefing is "officers who experience a critical incident such as a mass disaster, a crash with multiple deaths or a particularly grizzly murder are brought together as a group for a psychological debriefing soon after the event." (Bennett & Hess)

My wife worked at the Pope Co. 911 center for approximately five years. In that time she experienced several incidents that she had a hard time dealing with emotionally. One incident was one that involved a co-worker's spouse. She dispatched a rural fire department to a residential fire; and as they responded, there was a call of a car accident in the same area as the fire department. They dispatched the sheriff's department to the scene and it turned out to be a fatality. The co-worker was off duty at the time of the accident and called in to see if the fire department had checked en route to the fire. She said she always waited to go back to bed until she heard her husband check en route and she had not heard from him yet. At the same time one dispatcher was on the phone with her, another was taking a call from the officer on scene that the fatality was her husband; he called in so that she would not hear it on the radio. The one thing that my wife found to be the hardest was that she and every other dispatcher had to repeatedly lie to the co-worker and tell her that they didn't know who was involved until they could get the chaplain out to tell her the news that her husband had died responding to the accident.

The director of the dispatching center scheduled a large meeting wherein all agencies who were involved in the critical incident were invited to attend. During the meeting each person who was affected spoke about his or her role in the incident and how they felt about what happened. The meeting lasted several hours and went into detail about the response. They talked about what they did correctly as well as some areas they could have improved. The most important part of the meeting was that employees spoke in detail about what and how they felt. The meeting helped reduce the stress experienced by everyone involved.

I know of several departments who use these teams. The teams are not just made up of officers. They can and do include dispatchers, paramedics, firefighters, etc. The discussions allow the personnel involved to tell their role in the response and to describe how they are feeling about the outcome. The personnel essentially help each other work out their emotional frustrations. These meetings should occur 24 to 72 hours after the incident. (McNally & Solomon)

### **Liability issues**

Every administrator in America knows the need to protect his or her department from lawsuits. What most of them don't realize is critical incident stress is a major liability. We all have seen the news coverage of a barricaded suspect or a dynamic entry of a SWAT team into a drug house. What people don't see are the lawsuits that follow those incidents. Liability issues involving critical incidents are a fact of life in the law enforcement community; but if administrators manage critical incidents properly, liability can be reduced.

Try and imagine what it would feel like to take someone's life in the line of duty, to be cleared of wrongdoing by the investigation, and then to be sued by the suspects family for a number of civil rights violations. As an administrator you might not be able to stop the lawsuit, but you can help your officer emotionally during this time. It is likely that you and your agency will also be named in the suit.

The basis of these lawsuits could be that your officer was experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder and was unfit for duty and alleging that you as an administrator should have taken steps to alleviate the stress or terminate the officer. This situation is a

major concern (or it should be) to you and your agency. You should also be aware that if an officer is sued, the officer could allege that during the incident he suffered from PTSD and tried to get assistance through his department but didn't receive any help. This would also show negligence on your part. The allegation that you were negligent in your supervision is one you can avoid by implementing a critical incident policy and maintaining it. If you insist on not having a policy, then you leave yourself open to everyone that might wish to sue your agency.

## **Conclusion**

Law enforcement has come a long way since the early years. Better weapons have been developed and new and improved equipment is available. What hasn't changed is the police officer's ego, the mindset that "I can handle anything." I have been told that if an officer has a hard time dealing with a critical incident, whether it is an officer-involved shooting or a child's brutal rape and murder, then they are weak and emotionally unfit to be an officer. This is not true; officers are not superheroes. I have never seen an "S" on the chest of an officer. We as administrators need to get out of the "old school" way of thinking and focus our attention on the officers' mental and emotional well being as well as their physical health.

As supervisors and administrators we need to be aware of the signs of critical incident stress in order to help the officers we supervise. We can also help our agency retain good officers, avoid excessive sick leave, and reduce civil litigations.

If your department doesn't have a policy regarding critical incidents, I encourage you to develop one as soon as possible. The health and well-being of your officers depend on it.

## References

- Anonymous Interviews, Law Enforcement Officers at Russellville Police Department, October 2006.
- Bennett, Wayne, Hess, Karen, (2004), Management and Supervision in Law Enforcement, 412-426.
- Horn, James M., Director of James M. Horn & Associates, Guest speaker Criminal Justice Institute, Little Rock Ar., September 2006
- Kureczka, Arthur W. (1996), Critical Incident Stress in Law Enforcement, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, pg13-23.
- Mashburn, Michael D., (1993) Critical Incident Counseling, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, pg. 17-20.
- McNally, Vincent J., Solomon, Roger M. (1996) The FBI's Critical Incident Stress Management Program, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, pg 20-25
- Solomon, Roger M., (2006), Critical Incident Stress Reactions, Retrieved October 21, 2006, from <http://heavybadge.com/cisd.htm>