

PREPARATION OF FIRE DEPARTMENT

STANDARD OPERATING GUIDELINES (S.O.G.'S)



TEAM LEADER OUTLINE

DRAFTING & IMPLEMENTING DEPARTMENT GUIDELINES

INTRODUCTION

The operation of fire departments and the provision of emergency medical services have become progressively more challenging and difficult tasks. The increasing complexity of the job, the rapidly changing technology, the enactment of new regulations and requirements, the rising number of lawsuits, the expanding importance of documentation, and the proper management of shrinking budgets all necessitate the artful drafting and enforcement of departmental policies and guidelines.

A quick glance shows how obvious this is when you consider that we are now routinely engaged in such things as high-level rescue, emergency medical response, underwater rescue, hazardous materials, and the like. Such was not the case too many years ago.

These considerations are further compounded by the fact that the turnover in personnel occurring because of illnesses, retirement, terminations, and other causes requires the continual education, training, and retraining of those persons called upon to discharge these tasks. This training and retraining is simply a method of imparting to the continuing personnel, as well as a method of reinforcing for the replacement personnel, that conduct and behavior which is expected of them in given circumstances. This objective is best accomplished by reducing to writing the departmental policy outlining the expected behavior and response in such situations.

This will describe a step-by-step guideline for drafting and implementing such departmental policies and guidelines. You may not need to follow all of these steps in this process if the guideline or guideline which you will be enacting is a fairly simple one. However, you should take into account as many of the considerations listed here as possible. Also, be concerned with terminology. You may be more familiar with the terms shall, will, should, mission statement, policy statement, standard operating guideline, or some other form of nomenclature. These terms will be used throughout this document. The "shall" has an entire different meaning than the word "may."

STEP ONE Identifying The Objective

The quest for a workable departmental policy must begin with a clear identification of the objective to be accomplished by the policy. For instance, if your department has been experiencing an increase in motor vehicle accidents while responding to or returning from emergency calls, your objective then becomes the establishment of a set of rules which will cover driving guidelines in a fashion that will make responses safer both for the emergency personnel involved as well as the affected public, yet have a minimal negative impact on response time.

If your department is incurring an inordinate number of smoke inhalation injuries, your objective must be the drafting of a policy that will provide proper respiratory protection for your personnel, taking into account the limitations you may have to deal with in terms of available self-contained breathing apparatus, spare air tanks, and the resources available for recharging them.

The increasing concern about the spread of infectious and contagious diseases should signal to you the importance of effecting a guideline for the control of this problem. The safety of personnel whose well-being and protection have been entrusted to you as their supervisor mandates that appropriate action be taken.

While identification of the problem to be addressed is critical, it is equally important that you make a realistic assessment of your ability to deal with the problem. A guideline which is unworkable because the drafter was unrealistic about what could be accomplished is not just an exercise in futility. It will also result in a lack of respect for other policies, since the credibility of all policies will tend to be drawn into question. It is therefore wise to continually bear in mind whatever limitations there are that may be inherent to your operation and will impact on this particular policy. While you may work in the future to modify or remove these limitations, draw your present policy by taking into account your current restrictions. Your policy can be modified later to adjust for future changes.

STEP TWO Assembling The Necessary Resources

Once you have identified the problem or potential problem to be corrected, your next step should be to assemble and research the necessary resources to enable you to fully understand the nature of the problem. It is usually at this point that the "Lone Ranger" syndrome sets in. The policy maker begins to feel that his problem is unique and that his task in dealing with it is insurmountable. In fact, few problems are truly unique and frequently there are already in existence sample or model plans, codes, guidelines, and the like which, with minor modification, can serve you well. Consequently, the gathering of the necessary resources should involve considerations such as contacting other departments to learn how they have dealt with these situations, reviewing appropriate publications and trade journals, reading owners' and operators' manuals, contacting experts in the field, and reviewing applicable statutes, rules and regulations. Professional associations can be of great value here, since they often can prevent you from reinventing the wheel.

You will frequently learn after having done this research that a great deal of information is available. This information can not only reduce the magnitude of the effort which you must expend in drafting your policy, but can also help to insure that your planned activity is appropriate. For instance, it is not only embarrassing, but could easily give rise to legal liability problems, to draft and enact a policy or guideline, only to later discover that it may be in violation of some law, administrative rule or regulation, or the recommended uses and practices as established by the manufacturer. Adequate research can obviate such problems.

STEP THREE Reviewing The Available Material

Though Step Three may seem evident or trite, it nonetheless must be stated. Having collected the available information, you next must thoroughly and intelligently review it. Surprisingly enough, it is frequently this stage of the guideline which people are inclined to shortcut or overlook entirely. At the risk of stating the obvious, it must be observed that the effort expended in assembling the necessary resources as mentioned in Step Two will be for naught if you neglect to avail yourself of the information and knowledge contained therein. Only a thorough command of the subject at hand will enable you to successfully carry through the remaining steps.

Furthermore, thoroughly acquainting yourself with the subject matter will streamline the remainder of the guideline. At this point, you should be able to sift out the extraneous material, as well as make an informed decision regarding the personnel needed to complete the balance of the process.

Your having culled out the irrelevant material now will avoid that situation of causing several other people to read the same material later, only to ultimately discard it, and thus in the long run will result in a significant time savings.

STEP FOUR Assembling The Necessary People

Having a clear picture in your mind of your objective and the information available on the subject, you are now ready to assemble the team of people you will need to deal with the subject matter. Your selection of personnel will be governed by the expertise needed. To return to the examples in Step One, in establishing driving guidelines, you may want to avail yourself of the services of driving instructors, members of the office of the city traffic engineer, representatives of the city attorney's office, representatives of the city police department, and related professionals.

When dealing with your policy regarding the use of self contained breathing apparatus, you might consider securing the advice of manufacturers and suppliers, members of other fire departments, and field sales representatives. Your policy regarding infectious and contagious disease control will probably mean that you will want to add to your team the expertise of physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals.

While the expertise of team members is an important consideration, the team composition should not be governed exclusively by the concern for expertise. It is also necessary to include those people most directly affected by the policy, namely, department members. Input regarding policy formation should be sought from at least two levels within the department. The first level should be that one which will be directly responsible for following the policy. In our examples, this would mean the apparatus drivers, the firefighters engaged in fire suppression activities, and the E.M.S. personnel directly involved in providing patient care. Their input is necessary because they are able to furnish the element of realism.

They are frequently able to assess the workability of guidelines based on pragmatic considerations that may not be readily apparent to those not directly occupied with day-to-day operations.

The advice of the supervisory level is also important. It is easy to overlook the fact that once the new policy is in place, it must be enforced. This is a difficult duty, though it is certainly a key element of supervision. Enforcement of a policy becomes much easier when the policy is well thought out and reasonably designed to do what is intended. In order for supervisory personnel to be effective, it is helpful to have them enforcing policies that they understand, believe in, and helped to formulate.

If the guideline being adopted concerns major policy decisions, such as what types of calls will be answered or whether responses will be permitted outside of your jurisdiction, for example, then a third level of participation becomes necessary. This level is the top policy making body, not of your department, but of your municipality. This means the involvement of the mayor's office, city council or city manager, county commissioner, or equivalent positions is called for. Approval from this level is necessary because this is the employer, the office with which ultimate authority resides. We sometimes tend to overlook the fact that the "buck" does not stop with the fire chief or head of the rescue squad, but indeed comes to rest at this administrative level. Consequently, the ultimate authority rests there to approve these major policy decisions, or, perhaps even more importantly, to disapprove them and direct that responses not be made outside the jurisdiction, for example.

STEP FIVE Task Assignment

If the policy or guideline under consideration is fairly extensive, your advisory team will probably be rather large. In order to avoid duplication of effort and to maximize productivity, you will have to assign various tasks to different team members.

Some members, for instance, may be assigned to data collection. Others may be responsible for reviewing possible alternatives, while yet others may act as resource people and possibly seek the input of additional, non-team members. The allocation of responsibility will, in large part, be dictated by the size and composition of the team and the complexity of the tasks.

This is a good point at which to establish a tentative timetable for completion of the tasks. While it is usually necessary to maintain a certain amount of flexibility here, the establishment of a timetable tends to avoid the stagnation that can set in when people are not required to report back to you by a certain date.

STEP SIX Reviewing, Revising, and Refining

The number of meetings needed to review, revise, and refine the work product of the team will be directly affected by the magnitude and complexity of the policy. However, regardless of the number of meetings required, it is important to keep the entire team up to date on what other team members are doing. This will enable you to avoid the frustration of learning that various team members have spent considerable time unintentionally duplicating the efforts of other members.

As more information becomes available, it sometimes happens that the anticipated policy takes on new dimensions or heads in unexpected directions. In this event, it is often necessary to consider the addition of new team members, and/or the reallocation or reassignment of responsibilities.

STEP SEVEN Drafting

When you have secured the benefit of adequate input from your team members, you are now at the point of beginning the actual drafting process. Depending again upon the complexity of your proposed policy, this step may range from being a fairly simple, straight-forward undertaking to being a project which will involve writes, re-writes, editing, revision, and the like.

Regardless of how great or small this element of the proceeding is, it is important to maintain team involvement. Although frequently not all team members will be actively involved in the actual drafting, all members should be furnished with copies and required to provide input, so that the final product will indeed address the concerns of all involved.

STEP EIGHT Submitting For Approval And Enactment

If you are in the position to provide final approval for the policy or guideline, then this step becomes a simple one. If, on the other hand, the approval of the governing body is needed as outlined in Step Four, it is at this point that you should submit your finished product to the governing body.

This step may require you to educate the governing body as to what you have done. Bear in mind that by this time, you will have spent considerable time in putting your product together and will be thoroughly familiar with it, while the members of the governing body who will be voting on it may have little or no understanding of the issues. An informative, diplomatic, and, if necessary, forceful presentation of your proposed policy may be called for. If your proposal is approved, you are then ready to go on to Step Nine. If, on the other hand, your proposal is not so favorably received, then it may be necessary for you to return to Step Six. There, once more drawing upon the expertise of your team members, you should revise the policy to make it acceptable to the governing body.

STEP NINE Circulating and Educating

Now that your guideline has been drafted and approved, you are ready to circulate it to your department. The importance of this step is frequently underestimated. It is unfortunate that some of the best prepared policies have stalled out at this point and ended up in someone's desk drawer, never again to see the light of day. Just as it was necessary to educate the governing body about the guidelines, likewise your department must be informed and educated. Depending upon the guideline being adopted, this may necessitate substantial changes in behavior that has been learned and followed for years by at least some of the personnel affected.

We all know that "old habits die hard." Enactment of a new guideline will not mean that compliance will automatically occur. While compliance must be insisted upon, it will be much more readily achieved if the affected personnel understand the reasoning, purpose, and necessity for the change. The education process in which you must engage may be accomplished in any number of ways. Perhaps you will want to personally make a presentation of it to your entire department. Perhaps, instead, you may prefer to present it to your supervisory personnel, and let them educate the rank-and file. Any method that is effective is fine, but it is at this point that the benefit of having included the supervisory level as well as the rank-and-file level in the earlier steps of this drafting and implementation process will be seen. The more active and meaningful that participation has been at the earlier steps, the more enthusiastic and better informed that the education process will be now, and consequently, compliance will be more readily achieved.

STEP TEN Supervision and Enforcement

Once your new guideline is in place, it will be necessary to use it and, when required, enforce it. This will be the responsibility of your supervisory personnel. It is important to impress upon them the important role that they play in this process.

You should also bear in mind the undesirable situation that can arise if the new guideline is ignored. It is easy to argue that this new guideline is the only appropriate response in the identified circumstances. Thus, using a practice other than the one prescribed may spawn the argument that improper action has been taken. It is therefore necessary to insure that the new guideline is adhered to

STEP ELEVEN Review and Amendment

As we all know, circumstances continually change. This, of course, means that your guidelines should be reviewed periodically and amended, if necessary to keep it current. Updating your guidelines as needed will enable you to keep in place rules that are relevant, workable, and credible.

CONCLUSION

Drafting and implementing departmental policies can be a lengthy, time-consuming process, or a rather summary guideline, depending upon the complexity of the tasks involved. For those simpler tasks, the guideline outlined in this article can be streamlined. However, it is still wise to consider as many of the suggested factors as possible. It is hoped that this presentation can furnish you with guidelines that will assist you in drafting and implementing useful, meaningful, and functional departmental policies, and thus enable you to better meet the challenge of modern-day management.

Why Is All Of This Important?

As has already been described, the drafting and implementation of departmental policies can be a real challenge. Most of us already have demands on our time that make it nearly impossible to complete all of the tasks required of us. These considerations alone may tend to lead us to regard these drafting and implementation chores as just another "paper shuffling" detail. Since this temptation is a very real one, it is appropriate to reflect upon a few of the incentives for making time for this important task.

Increased Safety

Many departmental policies either deal directly with the subject of safety, or impact on it indirectly. In either case, the reward of increased safety in itself should provide an adequate incentive for drafting and implementing appropriate policies.

For instance, written policies relating to vehicle operation are very important. They will address such things as who is qualified to operate certain vehicles, the speed at which vehicles may be operated during emergency responses, under what circumstances such vehicles can disregard traffic control signs or signals, when they can be operated in the wrong direction on one-way streets, and similar concerns. If these policies are based upon that past experience of your department, they should reflect such considerations as traffic flow, street conditions, rush hours, and limited access highways. The net result of consideration of these factors and the drafting of policies to deal with them should be a marked increase in vehicular operation safety, both for your own personnel riding on these vehicles and for the general public forced to share the streets with them.

Written policies relating to the use of protective equipment and self contained breathing apparatus serve a very useful purpose. They should set out the requirements for the use of this gear as well as emphasizing the importance which your department places upon safety. It can serve as an opportunity to make a statement regarding the priority of protecting your personnel, and be a step toward changing the mind set that our degree of dedication is somehow directly proportional to the number of our members that we can manage to injure. The end result should be decreased injuries for your personnel.

While these are only two examples, it is not hard to see that written policies, if enforced, can contribute greatly to safety. The act of reducing our guidelines to writing forces us to review and critique the way that we have been doing things in the past and to reflect upon safer ways of accomplishing our assigned tasks in the future.

Increased Effectiveness

Drafting written departmental policies can increase the effectiveness of your organization. The delivery of fire protection and emergency medical services is very much a team effort. Such a team effort requires that team members operate in a uniform and predictable manner if confusion is to be avoided and maximum effectiveness is to be achieved,

This desired uniformity is most readily achieved by having the appropriate operational policies standardized. Such standardization minimizes the opportunity for various people to lend their own personal opinions or interpretations to what is considered to be appropriate action. Just as a professional football team has a play book so that every player will know exactly what is required

of him on a given play, likewise a written policy can assure that each member of your department will understand the duties assigned to him or her in a given circumstance and be able to discharge those duties. This understanding will enable your department to perform at peak efficiency, eliminating much confusion and wasted motion.

Easier Training And Orientation

Training of new personnel is always a challenge. As the turnover of personnel increases, this challenge sometimes becomes almost insurmountable. The objective, of course, is to train and educate the new member as rapidly and thoroughly as possible to enable the member to become a productive part of the organization as soon as can be accomplished.

Written departmental policies make this job much Easier, both for the trainer and for the rookie. The trainer has ready reference material upon which to draw. The new member has the benefit of being able to read the policies at his or her convenience as often as necessary rather than trying to absorb a multitude of verbal instructions on subjects that may be totally foreign. Thus, a policy manual or the like can greatly assist the trainer, bring the newcomer into the mainstream much sooner, and relieve some of the culture shock which accompanies joining a new organization. Also, the objective of uniform training as mentioned above, is once more achieved in this fashion.

Discipline

Discipline of a member is a task no one enjoys. However, from time to time discipline becomes necessary. When it is necessary to impose discipline, it is important that the infraction being addressed is clear.

Civil Liability

Written departmental policies are a critical starting point here. It is very difficult to impose discipline on a member unless there is a clear statement available of what the member should have done. It is through the use of a written policy that it is possible to demonstrate the appropriate action expected of the member as well as the fact that the member should have been aware of this policy. When the disciplinary measures are challenged by the member, the necessity of a written policy becomes especially clear.

Many municipal employees, including firefighters, enjoy the protection from law suits afforded by statutory immunity. However, this protection is frequently dependent upon whether the firefighter was acting within the scope of his employment at the time of the occurrence of the incident giving rise to the law suit. Properly drawn departmental policies can be critical in answering this question.

A recent case serves as an excellent example. In *Carrel v. City of Portage, Inc.* 609 F. Supp. 314 (D.C. Ind. 1985), two on-duty firefighters were in a fire truck returning from a fire when they observed an intoxicated person stumbling along the side of a busy highway. They parked their fire truck and radioed the police for assistance. Before the police arrived, the pedestrian walked onto the highway in front of an oncoming automobile. The firefighters flashed a spotlight in the direction of the oncoming automobile and the pedestrian to warn the driver to avoid the pedestrian. However, the warning was to no avail and the driver struck and killed the pedestrian.

The administrator of the pedestrian's estate brought suit against the firefighters, as well as the driver of the vehicle which struck the pedestrian, alleging that when the firefighters shined the

spotlight, they blinded the oncoming driver and placed the pedestrian in greater danger than he otherwise would have been. The firefighters argued that they were entitled to be discharged from the lawsuit because they were protected by statutory immunity.

Summary

The Court disagreed with the firefighters and ruled that they were indeed subject to suit. It ruled that the firefighters had no duty as part of their job to police the highways and effect rescues of pedestrians. The immunity for which they argued required that they act within the general scope of their statutory duties. Since they had exceeded that scope, they forfeited their immunity.

Had the municipality desired to do so, it could have assisted these firefighters in avoiding this dilemma. A written departmental policy specifying that firefighters had an obligation to attempt rescues in these situations would have given these firefighters the benefit of the statutory immunity.

On the other hand, had the municipality desired not to assume possible responsibility for such rescues, a written policy so stating would likewise have afforded guidance to the firefighters. They would then have been in a position to decide what action they wanted to take, being aware of the possible consequences of the various choices.

Drafting and implementing departmental policies is not a great deal of fun, but then it probably is not supposed to be. On the other hand, as in so many other instances, proper advance planning can be of great value later on.

FLOW CHART

Drafting & Implementing Departmental Guidelines

1. Identifying The Objective
2. Assembling The Necessary Resources
3. Reviewing The Available Material
4. Assembling The Necessary People
5. Task Assignment
6. Reviewing, Revising, and Refining
7. Drafting
8. Approval/Enactment
9. Circulating/Educating
10. Supervision/Enforcement
11. Review/Amend

Suggested Goals For Standard Operating Guidelines

A partial list of general operating and administrative subjects, as well as items to be considered in an organizational statement, are included to get you started on your own list. Be sure to develop your own list and not just copy a neighbor's.

100.000	Organizational Goals	300.0013	Tactical Considerations
100.001	Statement of organizational purpose	300.0014	Nozzles, hoses, fire streams
100.002	Membership and loss of Membership	300.0015	Ventilation
100.003	Officers	300.0016	Ladder operations
100.004	Elections	300.0017	Rescue
100.005	Meetings	300.0018	Apparatus placement
100.006	Rules to conduct business	300.0019	Fire control - interior, exterior
100.007	Methods of financing	300.0020	Small tools
100.008	Additions/Amendments to Manual	400.000	Incident operations
100.009	Certification or qualifications	400.001	Residential
100.0010	Promotion	400.002	Multi-family
100.0011	Discipline	400.003	High rise
100.0012	Medical	400.004	Commercial
200.000	Administrative Guidelines	400.005	Industrial
200.001	Departmental policies	400.006	Vehicle and mobile equipment
200.002	General regulations	400.007	Wildfire
200.003	Position descriptions (top to bottom)	400.008	Airport
200.004	Job descriptions (top to bottom)	500.000	Hazardous Materials
200.005	Reports and records	500.001	Response/isolate
200.006	Personnel and staffing	500.002	Vehicle Flammable/Combustible Liquids
200.007	Personnel and staffing Scheduling		Spills
200.008	Personnel Training	500.003	Storage
200.009	Budgeting	500.004	Highway
200.0010	Accounting and finance	500.005	Radiation
200.0011	Purchasing	500.006	Evacuation
200.0012	Payroll	500.007	Incident command
200.0013	Uniforms	500.008	Mutual aid
200.0014	Use of apparatus - private and public	500.009	Special considerations
200.0015	Pre-incident planning	500.010	Carbon Monoxide Response
200.0016	Code policies	600.000	Fire Investigations
200.0017	Inspection	600.001	Cause and origin
200.0018	Public education	600.002	Arson
200.0019	Safety	600.003	Referral of other crimes
200.0020	Health and accident	700.000	Medical/Special Rescue Services
200.0021	Forms	700.001	Response
200.0022	Funerals	700.002	Small incident
300.000	Operational Guideline	700.003	Mass casualty
300.001	Alarm	700.004	Drowning
300.002	Dispatch	700.005	Infectious dispenser
300.003	Emergency response	800.000	Inspections
300.004	Staging	800.001	Residential
	operations	800.002	Commercial
	medical	800.003	Industrial
	rehabilitation	800.004	Code enforcement
300.005	Protective clothing	900.000	Training
300.006	Respiratory protection program	900.001	Recruits
300.007	Fire ground safety	900.002	Firefighters
300.008	Incident command System	900.003	Fire Equipment Operators
300.009	Communications/Radio guidelines	900.004	Fire Apparatus Operators
300.0010	Mutual aid	900.005	Line Officers
300.0011	Engine/Tanker/Truck operations	900.006	Chief Officers
300.0012	Strategic considerations	900.007	Staff Officers
	size up	900.008	Administrative Staff
	water supply	900.009	Training Officers/Instructors
	rescue	900.0010	Interior Live Fire Structure Training
	ventilation	900.0011	Exterior Live Fire Training
	confine	900.0012	High Angle Rope Rescue
	extinguish		
	exposures		
	overhaul		
	salvage		

WEBSTER'S DEFINITIONS

PROCEDURE; \prose-jar\ n

- 1: a particular way of doing something**
- 2: a series of steps followed in a regular order
(surgical)**

GUIDELINE; \'gid-lin\ n

an indication or outline of policy or conduct