

FIRE SERVICES EXAMINATIONS BOARD

STUDY NOTE

EXAMINATION

SUB-OFFICERS EXAMINATION

PAPER

OPERATIONS

SUBJECT

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES AND INCIDENT
COMMAND

ITEM

VICTIM SUPPORT

STUDY NOTE No.

2103

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY NOTE

This study note has been prepared as the basis of study in connection with the qualifying examinations for promotion.

Candidates will be expected to demonstrate knowledge of the information contained in the study note and understand how it should be applied:

The 'References' made at the end of the Study Note are included for information only and candidates will not be expected to study these as part of the bibliography.

VICTIM SUPPORT

1. Introduction

In the course of their duties fire officers may have to deal with the victims of an incident.

Victims occur as a result of being involved:

- (a) directly; and
- (b) indirectly.

Directly involved victims could be the occupiers who were inside a property when it was on fire or the passengers inside a car involved in an accident.

A firefighter could also be a directly involved victim by being affected by the disturbing aspects of an incident.

Indirectly involved victims could be the witnesses or bystanders to an incident, a friend or relative to someone directly involved in an incident whom appears on the scene after being told of the incident.

2. Categories of Victims

There are two categories of victims:

Distressed Persons; and

Deceased Persons.

At the majority of incidents there are likely to be both direct and indirect victims and at incidents where there are fatalities, there are usually other distressed persons.

Both these categories of victims may therefore require attention at the scene.

It is important that Fire Service personnel recognise the signs and symptoms associated with victim distress and actively deal with the situation in a manner that reduces suffering and enables the incident to be dealt with, without the distressed person(s) affecting the management of the incident.

3. Distressed Persons

3.1 Causes

Distress in people is usually caused by shock and anxiety brought about through many different reasons at an incident eg

Vulnerability
Guilt
Blame
Bereavement
Injury
Financial Loss
Sentimental Loss.

When the human body is asked to adapt to stressful situations it will react in different ways. If the stress load is low then the body mechanism will react adequately, however if the stress load is high the victim's body may be unable to cope. This can be evidenced by the onset of differing signs and symptoms.

These signs and symptoms can be classed under two distinct headings:

(a) Physical Symptoms

These may include one or more of the following:

Severe headache or dizziness
Blurred vision
Trouble in swallowing
Asthma
Excessive sweating
Skin rashes.

(b) Psychological and Behavioural Symptoms

Other signs and symptoms may be shown as a result of changes in the normal psychological and behavioural activity of the distressed victim. These may include one or more of the following:

Depression
Anxiety
Outburst of temper or irritability
Inability to relax
Feelings of guilt
Uncontrollable outburst of emotion such as fearfulness.

3.2 Managing Distressed Persons

Everybody responds differently to stress and it is impossible to eliminate all the stress in the victims' environment, however steps must be taken to manage the effects of it. One of the Fire Officers main objectives when bringing an incident to a successful conclusion is the reduction in distress to persons affected.

Much of the reaction to distress in the incident environment depends on our own feelings of being able to cope. Fire Officers must be sympathetic yet constructive, providing the victims with a supportive contact that they are able to rely on.

The dignity and modesty of victims must always be of paramount importance and firefighters must ensure that the victims needs are dealt with in a manner that takes account of the prevailing circumstances.

Once the distress has been identified the victims should be taken to a "more friendly" environment than the immediate incident scene.

Resources at the incident may mean that firefighters cannot stay with the victims very long as they will probably be required for other duties to resolve the incident.

In these circumstances it is likely that the help of others will be required to resolve the problem in the short term. This help will probably be restricted to:

- (a) relatives and friends;
- (b) neighbours;
- (c) police officers;
- (d) ambulance personnel; and
- (e) a local general practitioner.

In the longer term help may be required from a variety of agencies such as:

- (a) Department of Social Security;
- (b) County or Metropolitan Council Social Services Department;
- (c) District Council Housing department;
- (d) Citizens Advice Bureau;

- (e) Animal welfare ie RSPCA; and
- (f) Voluntary Support Groups eg:

- British Red Cross.
- Help the Aged.
- WVS.
- Salvation Army.
- CRUSE - Bereavement Care.

All of these services provide sources of help and the officer-in-charge should request their attendance as appropriate. Fire Control would normally have necessary contact telephone numbers.

The roles of these services are covered in Appendix 1.

3.3 Distressed Persons with Special Needs

The distress in victims is often exacerbated when the persons involved have a physical, psychological or behavioural condition whereby they cannot easily communicate their feelings or condition clearly to emergency service personnel. Establishing early effective two-way communication is vital to assist in reducing the distress to these groups.

Appended overleaf is basic guidance that would assist distressed persons in these special risk groups;

(a) Hearing Impediment

If the individual is able to lip-read you should try to remember the following guidance:

- (i) Stand or sit facing the deaf person at the same level as them.
- (ii) Face the light - do not position yourself in front of a bright window.
- (iii) Check that the deaf person is looking at you before you begin to speak.
- (iv) Do not shout as this will distort your lip pattern. Speak normally.
- (v) Give the deaf person time to absorb what you have said.
- (vi) Do not look away during a sentence.
- (vii) Use gestures where relevant.

- (viii) Make sure the deaf person understands if you change the subject.
- (ix) Check that the deaf person is following what you say – lip-reading can be tiring.

In the event of the deaf person being unable to lip-read, but able to understand sign language, you should consider asking Fire Control to arrange for the attendance of an interpreter.

(b) Visual Impairment

Visually impaired people are more comfortable knowing the layout of the room and location of the objects within the home or work environment. They can, as a result of an incident, become disorientated which in turn can increase their distress. When being led to safety or moved to a more amiable location close contact will be required to avoid injury, particular care should be taken to avoid surrounding objects that are projecting or hanging out of place. If an incident is minor and the individual chooses to remain in their accommodation great care must be taken to ensure that everything is returned to its original position or that any subsequent alterations are relayed to the individuals.

Some visually impaired persons rely on guide dogs and where victims have become separated from their dog, attempts should be made to reunite them at the earliest opportunity.

Registered guide dogs can be recognised by a tagged collar bearing the symbol of a silhouette of a dog in a harness leading a person.

(c) Cerebral Palsy

Persons afflicted with Cerebral Palsy may often have a speech impairment that could lead to incorrect assumptions being made relating to their ability to communicate. In some cases the individual might be very intelligent and able to communicate through writing or by the use of closed questioning and simple action based responses such as blinking. In other cases a trained supporter or carer may be available through the organisation SCOPE.

(d) Mental Illness

On occasions fires have been started intentionally by individuals suffering from mental illness. They may be minor incidents as a 'cry for help' or a more serious attempt at suicide. In cases such as these where the mental reasoning of an individual appears to be impaired, the Police should be requested. If necessary the Police have the power under the 1983 Mental Health Act to remove such individuals to a place of safety.

In other cases where the incident is accidental but the individual is suffering from mental illness the Social Services Department will be the appropriate agency to help.

Fire Control should be requested to pass on the details.

(e) Persons Alone

In cases where accommodation has become uninhabitable and the person involved has no relatives or friends to help them, the Social Services Emergency Duty Team are the appropriate agency to contact for assistance. In addition, there are a number of specialist support groups who may be able to offer assistance. Although these groups work predominantly during office hours most have a 24 hours answerphone service and messages requesting contact with people involved in incidents can be left. In such circumstances the incident commander should ask the person involved if they would like the support group to be contacted on their behalf.

Fire Control should be requested to pass on the details.

4. Deceased Persons

4.1 Deceased Persons

Firefighters may discover the bodies of victims, burnt and often part buried in debris, that are often difficult to recognise. If there is any reason to believe that a victim is still alive it will be essential to move them to hospital as quickly as possible. If an ambulance is not already in attendance one should be summoned immediately and first aid provided until it arrives.

If the victim is obviously dead, the Police must be informed immediately.

In many Fire Brigades a specialist Fire Investigation Officer and a photographer would be requested to assist in the subsequent investigation.

Pending the arrival of the Police, the Fire Service officer-in-charge should give instructions to leave a body and the debris surrounding it as undisturbed as possible.

For operational reasons there may be a requirement to move the body, for example:

- (a) the body is obstructing firefighting operations; and
- (b) the body may be destroyed or further damaged by fire.

If the officer-in-charge determines that the body should be removed in these circumstances, the details of where and how the victim was lying etc needs to be recorded as carefully as time allows. A diagram would be very useful for future reference.

Any articles, which may have fallen from the victim, should be recovered and handed to the police at the first opportunity.

Any further damage caused to the deceased body as a result of the extrication process must be immediately noted and the police informed.

The Police will require full information about the circumstances in which the body was found, for presentation to the Coroner at the subsequent inquest.

If practicable at the incident, or on return to the Fire Station, crews involved in the discovery or removal of a deceased person should formulate a statement under the supervision of an officer in case of further investigations.

The responsibility for removing a victim prior to certification of death rests with the Ambulance Service. The recovery of a body, where death has been certified is the responsibility of the Police.

Fire Service personnel may be requested to assist the Police or Ambulance Service in the recovery of the body by improving access/egress or effecting extrication.

The officer-in-charge should ensure that personal protection measures are implemented for those personnel involved in the recovery and effective decontamination undertaken for firefighters who have contacted the deceased person directly.

Where there is the possibility that body fluids have come into direct contact with the unprotected skin of firefighters, then disinfectant should be applied and immediate advice sought from the brigade's medical advisor of the circumstances and the course of action to be followed. Where the advice cannot be immediately obtained then the firefighter should be despatched to hospital for examination.

The removal of the body should be carried out with dignity and respect, with consideration being taken to protect family and friends from any additional distress. An appropriate method of carrying the body, such as a body bag (carried by ambulances) should be used and consideration should be given to sheeting off the affected area for reasons of privacy. Wherever practical, in order to minimise the potential for witness distress, the removal of a body should be done with the area cleared of bystanders.

On completion of the incident the crew(s) should be debriefed.

If it is considered that there are personnel who may have been adversely affected by the incident, advice should be sought from the appropriate brigade officer on the necessary course of action. Organisations specialising in bereavement counselling are available and could be contacted if necessary

It is the responsibility of the Police to approach family members of the deceased. Any enquiries regarding the deceased and their family should be directed to the Police.

5. Summary

On arrival at any incident, it is the responsibility of the officer-in-charge to identify victims of distress that are either directly or indirectly affected as a result of the incident and make a judgement with regard to the level of victim support required.

In the case of minor circumstances where the victims of the incident suffer little distress, it is good practice for the officer-in-charge to provide advice and issue an appropriate "After the Fire" publication.

If the circumstances at an incident dictate that a greater level of victim support is required, the officer-in-charge should request the attendance of a relevant agency in line with Appendix 1.

6. Animals

Firefighters may also have to deal with dead or traumatised animals burnt or injured during incidents. It should be remembered the fondness owners have for their pets and any further distress to the owner should be minimised by the careful handling of the deceased or injured animal.

Bodies must be removed and placed in a garden, yard or other convenient place and covered with a sheet prior to handing over to the care of the owner, occupant or neighbour.

In the case of an injured animal, wherever possible the agreement of the owner should be obtained prior to seeking the services of a veterinary practice to attend to an injured animal.

Pet bereavement counselling services are available to distraught owners and are available via the local veterinary practice.

References

Fire Services Examinations Board

AGENCIES

SERVICE NAME	SERVICE ROLE
District Council	Housing and accommodation
Department of Social Security	Furniture, bedding, money
Citizens Advice	Legal and general advice
County or Metropolitan Council Social Services Department	Advice, money, clothing, emergency accommodation for the elderly
Ambulance	Medical care and advice
Police	Coroners officer, general advice
Fire Brigade	Fire safety advice, investigation
RSPCA	Animal welfare
British Red Cross Society	Food, clothing, accommodation
Help the Aged	General advice
Salvation Army	Food, clothing, accommodation