**Standard Operating Guidelines**

**An Introduction**

In today's society, it is essential that all emergency service organizations (ESOs) develop, adopt, and implement standard operating procedures and guidelines (SOGs). Concepts such as limited immunity (individual vs. government), have been significantly limited and narrowed by the courts, and SOGs must reflect these limitations.

Many of the federal, state, tribal and provincial laws allow for legal action against individual leaders of ESOs. Terms such as “duty to care”, “breach of omission or commission”, and “joint and several liability” are entering the vocabulary of emergency services personnel. One important way to prepare for this challenge is to develop, adopt, and implement a comprehensive set of SOPs/SOGs.

During the process of compiling SOPs/SOGs, the difference between documents may become blurred. For instance, often the distinction between policy and procedure do not seem so clear. Policy is different from SOPs/SOGs. All procedures and guidelines come with policy. Policy should be viewed as the attitude, philosophy, and intent of top management to the organization's personnel. It provides a framework and guidance to the organization's personnel in making decisions. To aid in the development of SOPs/SOGs, understanding specific definitions of terms is essential.

**Policy** - A guiding principle or course of action adopted toward an objective or objectives. Describes the general principle that will guide behavior or a definite course or method of action to guide and determine present and future decisions.

**Procedure** - Prescribes specific ways of doing specific activities and regulates the formal steps into an action. It provides a series of steps followed in a particular order.

**Guideline** - A statement, indication, guide, or outline of policy used to determine a current or future course of action.

**Regulation** - A rule or order prescribed by authority to regulate conduct.

**Rule** - A principle set up by authority that prescribes or directs action or forbearance.

In the evaluation of policy, it is essential to obtain input from the organization's members. The following are questions that should be considered regarding policy:

* Is it founded on sound judgment?
* Is it reasonably attainable?
* Is it within legal and/or regulatory boundaries?
* Is it definite, positive, and clear?
* Does it need further definition or explanation to those affected?
* Is it applicable to all organizational units?
* Is it flexible? Should it be flexible?
* Does it reflect the general thinking and enforcement philosophy of all levels of personnel?
* Will (or must) it be supported by procedures, guidelines, rules, and regulations?
* Can it be enforced?
* Will it be enforced?

**Conducting a Needs Assessment**

Whether it is the starting point or part of the process, the SOP/SOG process should include a needs assessment. Every ESO should periodically conduct a formal review of SOPs/SOGs. These assessments should be conducted by a task force/committee of organizational members representing all ranks and possibly other agencies (e.g. an attorney or policy analyst from the local government). The product of this formal review results in a document to be used as a "roadmap" for developing SOPs/SOGs

The needs assessment process must be consistent, systematic, and take place at regular intervals. The end product should include a written analysis of current SOPs/SOGs, recommendations, the rationale for changes (if any), any priorities, and a plan for action. Although major changes in legal and/or operational requirements will prompt a formal needs assessment, the process should be performed annually to help keep SOPs/SOGs current and valid.

While prioritizing, it is important to remember that SOPs/SOGs must be realistic.developing SOPs/SOGs that cannot be implemented with existing resources serves little purpose and may create a safety hazard. Revisions to critical health and safety SOPs/SOGs should receive a high priority in the action plan since they influence the health and safety of responders and the effectiveness of operations.

**Formulation Procedure**

Decrees issued from those in charge may not receive widespread support. It is not realistic to expect members of an ESO to enthusiastically support SOPs/SOGs when they are formulated and issued without member input and involvement. However, the formulation procedure can be an integral component in having the SOPs/SOGs be effective and realistic, as well as supported.

Although the exact methods used to develop SOPs/SOGs will vary, certain strategies will help define a successful process. The needs assessment process establishes the foundation for the SOP/SOG development effort. Various organizations have found the following recommendations very effective in developing and implementing SOPs/ SOGs:

* Inform the membership of the need to develop, adopt, and implement SOPs/SOGs and how the process should be undertaken.
* Build the development team. Commit to utilizing task forces, committees, or guideline groups involving the members of the organization.

SOPs/SOGs are most effective when members of the organization are included in the development process.

As a general rule, organizations should get input from all groups potentially affected by the SOPs/SOGs.

A key variable in determining success or failure during implementation is keeping the product “user friendly”. The following are some suggestions to help attain this goal:

* Level of detail: SOPs/SOGs should provide only broad procedural guidelines.
* Clarity and conciseness: SOPs/SOGs must be clear, concise, and written in plain English. Clear and simple statements using language that members can easily understand are the best way to describe actions in SOPs/SOGs.
* Target audience: Generally, SOPs/SOGs should be written to address the needs and educational level of the majority of the organization members.
* Flexibility and ambiguity: To be effective, SOGs must be clear and concise. An organization's SOGs should be precise but inherently flexible, permitting an acceptable level of discretion that reflects the nature of the situation and the judgment of the incident commander.

A related issue involves the use of the terms "shall" and "may" when writing SOPs/SOGs. Personnel generally consider an action preceded by the word "shall" to be an inviolate rule (SOP), while using the term "may" implies greater flexibility and discretion by personnel (SOG).

SOPs/SOGs content must be trained on, however, they are not training manuals. They are broad organizational guidelines for performing tasks that members have been trained to accomplish safely and effectively. SOPs/SOGs must be communicated effectively. You cannot expect to simply write them down and expect personnel to read and implement them.

A standard format for SOPs/SOGs helps streamline the writing process. Different formats may be used for SOPs/ SOGs depending on the intended audience and purpose. Several items are usually included in a SOP/SOG:

* Numbering system
* Effective date
* Expiration/review date
* Title
* Description of purpose or rationale statement
* Authority signature(s)
* Scope
* General procedures
* Specific procedures
* References

**Periodic Review**

SOPs/SOGs are not static documents they should be regularly reviewed and updated. This is not to suggest that every SOP/SOG should always be changed annually but that each one should be checked for updating, correcting, fine-tuning, or otherwise changing if necessary. The procedure of having the SOPs/SOGs reviewed and revised is more important than how many SOPs/SOGs are changed. Change just for the sake of change is not recommended. Personnel become familiar and comfortable operating under established procedures/guidelines.

Evaluation is not the same as performance monitoring. The purpose of performance monitoring is to make sure that personnel comply with the SOPs/SOGs and perform them correctly. In effect, performance monitoring asks, "Are we doing things right?"

Evaluation, on the other hand, looks at the same employee action, but asks, "Are we doing the right thing?" The goal in this case is to assess and redesign the SOPs/SOGs. Most organizations strive to review SOPs/SOGs annually. If the resources are available, this is desirable. Many smaller organizations conduct an annual review but only cover one-half of the SOP/SOG manual. This provides a biannual review and individual SOPs/SOGs are changed when it becomes necessary.

This section depicts examples of the potential content for SOPs/SOGs for aspects of emergency services operations. It is by no means inclusive on all needs AND SHOULD NOT SIMPLY BE COPIED AND ADOPTED. Use this example to improve or develop your department wide SOPs/SOGs.

The following examples of Standard Operating Guidelines are included for your review. You may wish to expand them to include other elements as identified in standard guideline format:

* Backing Apparatus
* Collision Investigation
* Crash & Injury Investigation
* Driver Qualifications
* Driver Selection
* Drug & Alcohol Policy
* Highway Safety.
* Intersection Navigation
* Limitations of Warning Devices
* Motor Vehicle Record Check
* On-The-Quiet Response
* Priority Dispatching
* Reflective Striping and Roadway Vests
* Regulatory & Statute Compliance
* Responding in Private Vehicle
* Routine Maintenance
* Safe Driving Award Program
* Seat Belt Use and Hearing Protection Policy
* Speed Limitations
* Traffic Preemption
* Vehicle Design & Construction
* Vehicle Inspection
* Vehicle Safety Program Management

All of the Key Points to Consider/Include and other suggestions provided here are basic points to consider, but your own organizational characteristics or needs must also be taken into consideration