

Are you ready to respond to a violent incident?

These nine questions can help you prepare for your department's response to a violent incident.

1. Do you use risk/benefit for every call? *“With incidents where there is a threat of, or actual violence, it must be remembered that a judgment is required to ensure that risks to personnel are not out of proportion to the benefits to be gained from achieving a given task” (Labour Research Department, 2005). Risk Management is not new to the fire service. The balance of perhaps limited potential benefit in light of substantial risk should be foremost in every responder's mind.*

2. Do you have an effective relationship (both at the 'boss' level and 'street' level) with the law enforcement agencies in your community? *As noted by the Columbine Review Commission (2001), familiarity of personnel and roles prior to an incident through training and planning exercises provides for better communication and operation during the event. Fire Department personnel should have access to, and use, law enforcement intelligence information in order to preplan response to incidents. This may include information regarding domestic terrorism, gang violence, known or suspected drug factories and/or houses.*

3. How good is the information you get from your Dispatcher? *Response to an incident of violence carries significant uncertainties. The ability of the dispatch staff to reduce the uncertainty while increasing the level of information provided is critical. It is also helpful for responders to have the ability to communicate on a specific, shared, common, radio frequency to remove the potential for message*

corruption as it is passed through another person. Dispatch staff should critically and carefully monitor the operations radio channel of personnel responding to and operating at incidents of violence and perform Personnel Accountability Report (PAR) checks on a prescribed interval.

4. Do you allow members to 'first respond' directly to the scene? *Many jurisdictions have response and deployment plans that include the dispatch of individual first responders and/or a single person in a response vehicle. This should be prohibited or at least limited to the extent possible. The ability of a single person to react to an act of violence is limited. It may not even be possible to retreat. Responding and deploying in a group provides added protection, awareness, and visibility.*

5. Does your law enforcement agency use an incident management system? *Each agency should strive to ensure that the IMS used in that community is applied as uniformly as possible. Fire departments should take a leadership role in assisting their law enforcement compatriots, particularly at the street or service delivery level, to understand and apply the IMS.*

6. When responding to a potential violent incident, do you seek out a law enforcement officer when you arrive? *Fire department personnel should communicate, face to face, directly with the law enforcement component on scene. Direct face-to-face communication, with clear understanding of the hazards, risks associated, potential outcomes, and planned actions on the part of each agency should precede any fire department response into a hazard area.*

7. Have you told your fire officers/personnel that it is OK to leave the scene if things go ugly? *If fire department operations have commenced and violence erupts, fire service personnel should consider leaving the scene until the law enforcement component has stabilized the situation.*

8. Is there a point where we don't respond or limit our response to violent incidents? *Fire department personnel may not respond into a hazard area due to the potential for additional violence or because the situation is not yet under control. Some responders and organizations fear their community will view this in a negative light. A 2005 Labour Research Department report stated 'the key issue here is the extent to which fire crews can make decisions when dealing with an incident and with the confidence that they will be backed up by senior management if criticized by the local community or in the press for leaving a fire to burn or holding back from attending (responding to) an incident.' It is imperative for the department leadership to establish relationships with key stakeholders in the community to ensure they understand and support the response protocol.*

9. What does your uniform look like? *Uniform insignia, style, and color should be of sufficient difference that fire department personnel would not be mistaken for police officers.*