TASK FORCE SAFETY ANNEX

A. INTRODUCTION

Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) operations constitute one of the most complex and difficult activities emergency responders may encounter. Fundamentally, US&R operations are dependent on various disciplines working in close concert with each other. If any Task Force element fails to carry out their respective assignment in a safe and professional manner, the risk of injury or death of a Task Force member is increased.

Task Force personnel conducting US&R activities are exposed to many risks and hazards when carrying out assignments. Examples include earthquake aftershocks, unstable structures, uneven footing, energized electrical equipment, falling material, flying objects, exposure to hazardous materials, excessive noise and dust, confined space operations, smoke and fire, contaminated air and water, dangerous equipment, heavy lifting, excessive fatigue and stress, adverse weather, armed thieves and looters, and working in unfamiliar surroundings. If safety is compromised at any time, the consequences could be serious.

Even with the formal position of Task Force Safety Officer, it is essential that all Task Force members recognize the high priority that safety and welfare issues command. In the course of a mission or training exercise, there are so many potential safety issues that no one person can be expected to recognize them all. Therefore, each member of the Task Force assumes a personal responsibility to conduct their assignment in a professional and safe manner. The Task Force Safety Officer has the primary responsibility for monitoring and assessing the overall safety aspects of the Task Force during incident operations. This is accomplished by ensuring good safety practices are identified in the operational Tactical Plans, during Task Force briefings and critiques, and ensuring that all operations are monitored for compliance. However, all Task Force personnel have the responsibility to identify unsafe acts and hazardous conditions, report them to their supervisor, and mitigate such situations if possible.

Ideally, the way to ensure proper emphasis on safety issues is to establish a strong, positive attitude during Task Force development, training sessions, and field exercises. Accidents and injuries are prone to occur when there is a lack of safety awareness among Task Force members, as well as members conforming to unsafe group norms, tunnel vision, faulty judgment, lack of leadership, lack of safety training, and a general poor attitude about training. It is necessary to evaluate safety concerns during every phase of Task Force operations from the time of activation and mobilization through deactivation and demobilization.

Task Forces should train and operate in compliance with all Federal regulations issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) of the U.S. Department of Labor as well as a number of non-governmental organizations, such as the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI). States that have adopted the Federal OSHA regulations are required to cover rescue workers. Non-OSHA states may not have to comply with all regulations; however, all Task Forces should make every effort to operate under the regulations as a matter of good practice and for the benefit of the team members. These are found in the General Duty Clause of 29 United States Code (USC), Section 654(a)(1) and applicable portions of Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Sections 1901, 1910, and 1926. Some non-Federal standards that should receive attention are: NFPA 1470, and appropriate sections of NFPA 1500 and 1521.

Although the risk of injury to Task Force personnel is greatest during incident operations, injuries can also occur at other times. For this reason, a number of safety considerations associated with each phase of Task Force missions are listed below.

1. Pre-Activation Phase

This phase can set the tone for safety of all personnel at all training sessions and mission responses. Safety Officers should attend all training sessions. They should also be knowledgeable of all position descriptions on the Task Force and interact with the individual teams as often as possible to increase familiarity and develop a close working relationship and understanding of their methods of operations. This relationship will help to heighten trust during a deployment. As part of the regular Task Force training, the Safety Officer’s role and authority as specified in NFPA 1521 and its relationship to the Task Force’s operations should be stressed.

Task Force supervisory personnel should ensure that all Task Force members are physically fit and have passed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)/Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Task Force Physical Agility Evaluation or comparable employer sponsored physical assessment. They should be properly inoculated and their Responder Information Sheets should contain information on emergency contacts and next-of-kin.

The selection of perishable foods that will be taken on a mission should be reviewed by Task Force supervisory personnel along with Safety Officers prior to any mission to ensure it does not adversely affect the performance of the team. Some foods can prolong or act to increase the body’s intolerance of stress, such as the continued use of caffeine and high-fat foods. The type and quantity of supplemental food and drink should be pre-determined prior to the mission.

2. Activation

The Safety Officer should be included in the initial Task Force briefing after the Alert Notice is issued to begin forming a safety plan for the activation. Task Force supervisory personnel should, with input from the Medical Team Manager and the Safety Officer, research environmental conditions at the incident site to determine the appropriate clothing for deployment.

At the Point of Assembly (POA), the Safety Officer should ensure that all personnel check-in with the proper personal protective equipment and appropriate clothing for the environment.

The Safety Officer and the Medical Team Manager should work together to ensure that all members selected for the mission are physically well and meet medical criteria for deployment. The initial Task Force briefing should be used to highlight safety concerns and reiterate that everyone is responsible for their own safety.

3. Point Of Departure

Caution must be exercised when working around and loading aircraft.

Also at this stage the well being of deploying personnel must be monitored. Delays can occasionally cause stress to those waiting to deploy. Activities should be arranged to defuse excess stress that could create dysfunction among the members while standing by. This is a good time to ensure that members begin to hydrate. Quality food should be available to Task Force members so they can arrive at the incident site ready to work.

4. During Transport

Air and ground transportation are the two basic transportation methods for Task Forces to an incident. The probable method of air transportation is by military aircraft. There are significant differences between military and civilian air transport. Military aircraft can be very loud, requiring the use of ear protection. The aircraft can also have wide temperature variations, necessitating warm clothing for the flight. Task Force personnel should stay seated and attempt to rest as much as possible. They should not stray into the cargo area as injury could result from shifting cargo. Medical personnel should have immediate access to their medial treatment backpacks. The use of radios or other electronic equipment is not permitted because of their possible affect on aircraft navigation and communications systems.

If the Task Force is deploying by ground, drivers should be rotated regularly. Other Task Force personnel should attempt to rest as much as possible during the trip. It the Task Force contracts out drivers for buses and trucks, the Task Force must ensure the drivers maintain their professionalism at all times, especially during down times, as the Task Force may be requested to move at any time with little advance notice. This holds true for the duration of the mission.

While at mobilization centers or other stopping points, Task Force members should not be allowed to leave the main body of personnel without specific permission from their immediate supervisor.

5. At Incident Site

When establishing a Base of Operations (BoO) site, there are specific safety considerations that should be factored into the final location decision. It should have good sanitation, good foot traffic flow, and lend itself to proper security. The facility should be set up to provide security to personnel and equipment. No valuables should be stored near the perimeter nor should it be easy for outsiders to enter the facility except by one common, monitored entrance. It should be located in an environmentally safe location with no chance of contaminated runoff entering the site. It should have proper drainage to reduce ground water saturation. The site should also be located to allow for proper rest and relaxation of team members and out-of-sight of the incident work location to reduce stress. A combined effort between the Safety Officers and the Medical Team Managers should ensure an appropriate food preparation protocol is established and garbage is disposed of properly. Facilities must be incorporated to collect and dispose of gray-water. Proper hand washing stations and toilet facilities must be put in place. Proper lighting is mandatory at night to reduce the chances of injuries. Any tent rigging or other wire should be flagged with highly visible tape so they may be easily seen. The Safety Officer should perform a risk analysis on the BoO site, mitigating hazards where possible, and properly marking and advising the Task Force of hazards that cannot be removed.

6. During Incident Operations

Incident operations provide the most challenging aspect of the safety mission for both the Safety Officer and each individual Task Force member. Past incidents have shown that this is where the majority of injuries occur. The Safety Officer's function should be focused on providing for and monitoring safety for the entire operation and address the potential causes of team members' accidents and injuries. The Safety Officer should attend all planning sessions with the Task Force Leader (TFL) and Task Force supervisory personnel to offer insight into the safety aspects of a particular course of action. The TFL should have the Safety Officers develop a safety plan for the operational mission and include safety items in the daily Task Force Incident Action Plan (IAP).

One of the most effective ways to monitor overall operations while on a mission and ensure compliance with the safety plan is the use of check sheets. This can help in identifying, recording, and prioritizing items that need to be addressed. These can be developed by the Safety Officers and can be completed by Task Force supervisory personnel. The Safety Officer can review completed check sheets to monitor safety compliance. The following items should receive attention:

a. Planning/Management

- Conduct a risk and hazard survey of the assigned work site, mitigating hazards where possible. Conspicuously mark hazards which cannot be eliminated. Also identify the hazards on a sketch map and advise the Task Force supervisory personnel;

- Liaison with local jurisdiction's Safety Officer to ensure continued coordination and information exchange on safety within the disaster area;

- Gather information on weather forecast;

- Alert all Task Force personnel of the possibility of exposure to poisonous snakes, rats, spiders, wild dogs, etc., as appropriate;
- Ensure escape routes are preplanned, clearly identified, and understood by all assigned personnel. These should be for each individual work site as well as for the BoO;
- Ensure helmets or vests indicating their assigned position properly identify appropriate personnel;
- Ensure infectious disease control measures are adhered to;
- Monitor Task Force safety equipment stock to ensure adequate supply is available;
- Investigate all accidents, collect data on how an accident occurred, and take steps to prevent recurrence. Include generic accident data in the IAP; and
- Fill out accident and injury forms as required.

b. Personnel Safety/Well-being

- Ensure that all personal protective equipment is being properly used;
- Ensure that Task Force briefings reinforce proper sanitation and hygiene procedures;
- Ensure that all assigned personnel recognize the Task Force alerting and evacuation system;
- Ensure all personnel are decontaminated prior to leaving the site and returning to the BoO;
- Ensure that Task Force personnel do not operate alone;
- Ensure personnel accountability with a Personnel Accountability Identification System;
- Ensure that all Task Force personnel have adequate means of communications both on and off site with the Task Force Command Post;
- Ensure rest, rotation, and feeding of Rescue Specialists during prolonged rescue;
- Ensure personnel are constantly alert for new hazards in the work area;
- Ensure proper food preparation techniques are adhered to; and

- Ensure proper personal sanitation and hygiene by members prior to eating.

c. Operations

- Establish a hot zone and operational working area around assigned work sites in order to avoid injury from falling objects, overcrowding, etc. Ensure that these zones are properly identified;
- In order to minimize any further collapse, ensure that a structural stability assessment and required mitigation are completed before search and rescue operations are started;
- With the Hazardous Materials Specialist, check work area for hazardous materials before starting operations;
- Ensure monitoring of atmospheric conditions in confined spaces;
- Ensure that utilities are shut off, tagged, and secured before beginning operations;
- Ensure that shoring and cribbing is of proper size and type and is correctly installed. These should be reviewed periodically and after any breaching or lifting operation;
- Ensure adequate ventilation when working in confined spaces, where possible;
- Ensure adequate lighting is provided inside voids or at night;
- Ensure tools and equipment are used appropriately;
- Ensure helicopter over-flights are restricted to avoid excessive vibrations and down-wash on unstable structures; and
- Restrict the use of heavy equipment on or adjacent to the structure where US&R activities are occurring.

The Safety Officer should ensure compliance with the items listed by reinforcing basic safety considerations at daily briefings, ensuring that safety resources and equipment are available for each site and ensuring that each operation has a site-specific Safety Officer.

7. Demobilization

Personnel returning from the mission may be extremely exhausted, not properly nourished, and lose their focus on safety when loading and unloading the equipment cache. It is especially important to reiterate safety procedures during this time.

8. Return To Point Of Departure

The Sponsoring Organization should ensure that sufficient non-deployed personnel are available to support the unloading and moving of the equipment cache once the Task Force arrives. Incident stress management and defusing must be conducted at the appropriate time.

In the days following the return home, the Safety Officers should participate in the after-action critique of the mission and ensure all safety concerns are incorporated into the final Task Force After-Action Report. It is imperative that the safety findings and lessons learned are highlighted and incorporated into future training sessions, field exercises, and operational procedures.

Task Force supervisory personnel should ensure that all personal safety equipment is restocked to original levels before the equipment cache is declared operational.