

Critical Incident Debriefing

PURPOSE & SCOPE

Studies of major incidents involving numerous injuries or fatalities, (or high stress incidents not resulting in death or injury), have shown that a significant number of rescue personnel experience stress-related symptoms following such events. While many symptoms are temporary, a small percentage of personnel may experience long-term detrimental effects. These effects can be delayed and, without professional intervention, may result in stress related issues that can include decreased work performance, strained family relationships, and increased health problems.

GUIDELINE

The San Mateo County Harbor District is committed to providing support through trained intervention immediately after major incidents to minimize stress-related injury to personnel. Overtime for Defusing and Debriefing will be approved by your supervisor.

1. Managing the Incident

a. Certain incidents may require "critical incident debriefing" due to their emotional impact. Examples include:

Mandatory Debriefing:

- Serious injury or death of a District employee or other emergency personnel.
- Suicide of a District member.
- Death of a child or violence against a child.
- Mass casualty incidents.
- Serious injury or death of a civilian during District operations.
- Loss of life following extraordinary rescue efforts.
- Emotionally charged incidents.

Recommended Debriefing:

- Incidents receiving significant media coverage.
- Disturbing or highly unusual events that may trigger strong emotional reactions.
- Body Recoveries.

- b. To reduce stress exposure, supervisors should rotate personnel, reassign initial responders to less stressful duties, and consider relief from duty if necessary.
- c. Personnel directly involved in high-stress incidents should be given priority for reassignment or removal from the scene. Peer support personnel may recommend relief or reassignment to the employee's supervisor.
- d. On-site evaluation by debriefing team members should be considered when circumstances allow. These team members can provide support, observe for acute stress reactions, and assist personnel in managing stress.

2. Activation of the Debriefing Procedure

- a. District personnel at all levels should identify incidents that may require debriefing and make a request as soon as possible.
- b. The senior staff member on duty (may initiate the debriefing process by requesting a Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) response through County Communications 650-363-4915. If the senior staff member on-site is not the Harbormaster, immediately contact the Harbormaster or if not available the Director of Operations.
- d. District staff will oversee the debriefing process, follow-up care, and other necessary support.
- e. Critical incident debriefing is not an operational critique; it is a strictly confidential process focused on emotional well-being.
- f. Participation in debriefing is strongly encouraged for personnel directly exposed to traumatic events. If a participant cannot attend, a one-on-one follow-up with a CISM team member is required for all mandatory events.

3. Types of Debriefings

- a. **On-Scene or Near-Scene Debriefing:** Immediate, on-site evaluation and support by a debriefing team member to help personnel process stress reactions.
- b. **Initial Defusing:** Conducted shortly after the incident to provide information, review stress-related symptoms, and identify personnel in need of further support.
- c. **Formal Debriefing Meeting:** Held within 72 hours for a confidential discussion of involvement, thoughts, and feelings related to the incident.
- d. **Follow-up Debriefing:** Conducted weeks or months later to address delayed or prolonged stress symptoms.

e. Individual Consults: Available at any time for one-on-one counseling related to the incident.

Debriefings should be conducted in a private, distraction-free environment, such as a church or meeting facility, selected by the Debriefing Team or District Staff.

The debriefing team consists of trained personnel, San Mateo County CISM Team Peers, and/or mental health professionals. Trained personnel assist professional counselors in facilitating discussions and supporting affected members. Any necessary follow-up care must be approved by the Human Resources through the General Manager or designee.

In some cases, the debriefing team may recommend that individuals or entire staff be taken out of service temporarily. Personnel removed from duty should be viewed as receiving care comparable to a physical injury.

A list of San Mateo County CISM Debriefing Team members information as follows:

Heather Mulligan-Gonzalez/President,
San Mateo County Critical Incident Stress Management Team
650-660-5530 (cell);

Jennifer Shoemaker
650-766-4746;

Jody Greenhalgh
650-740-5639.

f. Additional Resources:

A list of additional resources can be found at <https://www.san-mateo-county-cism.org/for-first-responders.html>.

For additional support, employees may contact the Bay Area Critical Incident Stress Team or the Center for Living with Dying at (408) 980-9801 at no cost.

Also follow up Counseling/Therapy is available through the District's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Call Lynette Shahoian/Client Services Specialist/Holman Group- Monday-Friday 7:30 am to 5:00 pm and ask to have a session scheduled with a specialized first responder therapist. If an employee has a current relationship with a therapist or wants to go to a particular recommended therapist, see if the therapist is willing to go through the EAP Holman Group. Main number for the Holman Group is 800.321.2843 Ext. 2239. Alternatively, employee's personal insurance policies may cover counseling/therapy sessions.

In the event that the employee is not receiving the care they need contact District HR staff to discuss other potential avenues and communicate problems encountered receiving help.