

Operating Guideline # 213

Potentially Violent Situations

September 27, 2019



PURPOSE:

The purpose of this (OG) is to set out standard practices to guide staff when they find themselves confronted with potentially violent situations.

GUIDELINE:

1. Personal identifying information (i.e. – employee phone and address lists) should be kept safe and secure so that they are not accessible to unauthorised persons.
2. Building security systems have been installed for the protection of all workers and staff shall NOT render these inoperative or ineffective (i.e. – doors with security locks shall not be “propped” open).
3. Muskoka Lakes Fire Department support vehicles (Car 1, Car 2, Car 3) should be parked in a well-lit, visible and easily accessible parking locations. Keys shall be maintained and kept in the possession of the operator at all times.
4. Administration, training and fire prevention staff members should attempt to schedule their day’s activities so as to avoid working alone.
5. All entrances to the stations shall be kept locked and secured.
6. No unauthorized person shall be permitted into Muskoka Lakes Fire Department stations or office area’s unless they have an appointment with a specific staff member and they are under escort. All visitors to fire stations shall sign in utilizing the “Visitors Log” provided at each facility.
7. Where any member finds themselves confronted by an individual or persons who appear to be agitated, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, appears to be suffering from a mental illness or in any other way makes them feel uncomfortable or vulnerable to workplace violence, the staff member should alert co-workers to the situation immediately.
8. Co-workers shall summon help from other staff members in the building (i.e. – Fire Prevention or Suppression Division members) as soon as practical or call for assistance from the OPP as appropriate in the circumstances. In no case should an agitated individual be confined or locked in, rather the individual should always have the option of leaving the facility.
9. Six basic steps to deal with someone in an agitated state include:
 - a. Don’t argue or make accusations
 - b. Speak in normal tones and volume (don’t escalate)
 - c. Apologize for any perceived inconvenience
 - d. Sympathize with the persons situation, show empathy
 - e. Ignore insults, don’t personalize any comments made
 - f. Leave the area and get help
10. Usually, the most experienced person available is the best to deal with someone in an agitated state.
11. Suspicious persons or activity should be reported to supervisors and potentially the police based on the circumstances.

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12. In an emergency situation, staff members shall utilize the station portable to alert communications staff and shall attempt to disengage from the offending individual by moving away from him or her to a protected area of the building, or exit the building.

13. Any staff member who finds themselves the subject of workplace violence shall immediately attempt to de-escalate and/or disengage themselves from the situation and shall report all such instances to their supervisor and the OPP as soon as is practical.

14. Muskoka Lakes Fire Department staff members who work in an office environment should follow the same provisions as outlined above in order to limit their exposure to potentially violent situations.

15. Where staff finds themselves outside of a Fire Department facility, they should always have a means of communicating and calling for help (i.e. - portable radio, cell phone).

16. Fire Prevention staff when exercising their authority as provided for by the FPPA (e.g. - entering with or without a warrant, removing persons, etc.) shall exercise professional judgment and consult with supervisor if necessary to take additional precautions and/or protection up to and including making a request for police assistance.

17. When planning to enter dwelling units or similar areas where occupants may have a heightened expectation of privacy, Fire Prevention staff shall exercise professional judgment and consult with supervisor - if necessary, take additional precautions including the utilization of the buddy system. Similarly the buddy system should be considered when working in remote or isolated areas such as large complex buildings; conducting fire investigations; working at times of increased vulnerability such as late at night, early in the morning, where large crowds are present; or where alcohol consumption is an issue.

18. Prior to visiting a property, Fire Prevention staff shall check all available sources to determine if there are any indications of potential threats prior to attending the premises. If staff become aware or encounter a potential threat, they shall ensure that it is subsequently identified prominently in the Township of Muskoka Lakes relevant records (e.g. Property Files).

19. Fire Prevention staff should initiate a "check in – check out" procedure for premises visited with an Administrative Assistant at the office. The Administrative Assistant will notify a supervisor if there is no response to the scheduled "check out".

20. Any staff member who finds themselves the subject of workplace violence shall immediately attempt to de-escalate and/or disengage themselves from the situation and shall report all such instances to their supervisor and the OPP as soon as is practical.

21. Personnel responding to an emergency will wear clothing such that they are immediately recognizable as a firefighter. At emergency scenes this will consist of issued bunker gear or coveralls as appropriate.

22. If upon arrival at a scene, the first arriving person determines that a situation may be violent, no entry shall be made until police are on scene and have rendered the scene safe.

23. Should personnel be operating in a location, which is initially safe and then becomes violent, they shall leave the area immediately and report the incident to Command. Re-entry shall not occur until police determine that the area is safe. Staff assigned to emergency operations shall be cognizant that they may - at any time - find themselves confronted by persons who may be intoxicated by alcohol or drugs, emotionally upset, agitated, suffering

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from mental illness, suicidal or any combination thereof, and while these persons are generally encountered at medical emergencies, *any* incident can have the potential for violence. Company officers/crew supervisors in particular should be particularly attentive to any dispatch information that might suggest the potential for violence (e.g. – an “unconscious person” at a bar late at night may be the result of a fight; a call for an uncontrolled bleed at a residence may be the result of a domestic assault etc.) In Muskoka Lakes, this can include the response to any situation where large numbers of people are in attendance (i.e. – community festivals, camp grounds).

24. Where the Company Officer responding to any incident reasonably suspects that a physical altercation may have led to the response of Muskoka Lakes Fire Department (or has any reason to suspect that the response to the situation may place the crew at risk for exposure to workplace violence), he or she may stage the responding apparatus at a safe distance from the scene and request police response to ensure the scene is safe for Muskoka Lakes Fire crews to enter/approach.

25. Where the Company Officer responding to any incident receives information that leads him or her to believe that the crew may be subject to workplace violence, they SHALL stage the responding apparatus in a safe location and request police respond to make the area safe before allowing crews to enter.

26. Staff should be mindful that threats may present themselves in differing forms, not the least of which is the potential to uncover an illicit drug lab while conducting “normal” operations. Electrical systems that have been tampered with, alterations to structural elements (i.e. – holes cut in floors), the use of chemicals in an uncontrolled environment, and “booby-traps” are some of the related situations to be aware of in these circumstances.

27. Threats that occur as a result of an individual’s attempt to harm themselves are also becoming more prevalent. Chemical and/or mechanical methods of committing suicide should be regarded as very real possibilities as access to the web increases awareness.

28. All staff should work in groups of at least two equipped with a portable radio whilst engaged in field operations.

29. Any staff member who finds themselves the subject of workplace violence shall immediately attempt to de-escalate and/or disengage themselves from the situation and shall report all such instances to their supervisor and the OPP as soon as is practical.

30. Staff members engaged in emergency response situations that require the immediate response of police shall notify communications immediately utilizing the phrase “Need Priority Police Assistance”. This phrase will designate that an emergency condition exists requiring the response of police.

31. Where there is a threat of an individual using a weapon and purposefully attempting to injure or kill others, firefighters shall stage back from the known incident location and not proceed into the area until police service having jurisdiction have confirmed it’s safe.

Communications

32. Communications staff processing all calls for assistance shall attempt to gather all pertinent information and where the potential for violence is present at an incident, shall attempt to gather specific information about the perpetrator (including description and location), actions, weapons, and the potential for violence towards responders. When

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Dispatch receives information that a call may involve a violent situation, or if they determine, due to the nature of the call, that it may become violent, they will communicate such information in the initial dispatch report. Under these circumstances the police will be contacted immediately to respond.

33. Where the potential for violence exists, all information obtained during initial or subsequent calls to 9-1-1 shall be shared immediately with police and EMS responders as well as Muskoka Lakes Fire Department response crews. It is critically important for relevant information including updates to be relayed to responding fire crews and every attempt shall be made to ensure that crews receive this information in as timely fashion as possible.

34. Communications staff, upon hearing a "Need Priority Police Assistance" transmission from any Muskoka Lakes Fire Department radio, shall immediately notify the OPP that crews have declared an emergency which requires an immediate police response.

Domestic Violence

35. The Township of Muskoka Lakes/Muskoka Lakes Fire Department has an obligation to protect all its workers from the potential threat that domestic violence presents. When the MLFD becomes aware that a member of the department is the subject of domestic violence, steps that will be taken to support staff may include: a) jointly creating a safety plan; b) contacting police; c) establishing enhanced security measures; d) screening calls and blocking certain email addresses; e) setting up priority parking or providing escorts to transportation; f) adjusting shifts and work locations; and g) facilitating access to counseling through EAP or other community programs.

36. Staff who are the subject of domestic violence are encouraged to notify their supervisor in confidence. Supervisors may elect to involve senior management and/or Human Resources where appropriate.

Internal Reporting & Investigating

37. All incidents of workplace violence are to be reported to a supervisor, and up the chain-of-command. The Fire Chief or Deputy Chief will cause a formal investigation/report to be completed and shall be responsible for reviewing each report and making recommendations where appropriate. Completed incident investigation reports shall be forwarded to Human Resources.

38. The Joint Health & Safety Committee shall review each such report submitted.

39. Where it is necessary from an "organizational learning/continuous improvement" perspective, the District Chief may also elect to complete a Post Incident Evaluation & Review (P.I.E.R.) where a Fire Suppression crew has been involved in an unusual incident involving the threat of workplace violence.

40. In addition to corporate policies, staff should be aware that harassment and discrimination may also fall under the purview of the Ontario Human Rights Code.

RESPONSIBILITY:

It is the responsibility of all Emergency Operations Division staff to comply with the provisions of this Operating Guideline.

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DEFINITIONS:

“Workplace” means any place that an employee of the Gravenhurst Fire Department is in attendance while he or she is on duty and includes places in Ontario that are outside of the geographical boundaries of the Town (i.e. – Ontario Fire College, Canadian Emergency Preparedness College, Conferences & Seminars).

“Workplace Violence” means a) the exercise of physical force by a person against a worker, in a workplace, that causes or could cause physical injury to the worker; b) an attempt to exercise physical force against a worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to the worker; or c) a statement or behaviour that is reasonable for a worker to interpret as a threat to exercise physical force against a worker, in a workplace, that could cause physical injury to a worker.

“Workplace Harassment” means engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome. (See the “corporate policy” for additional information.)

REFERENCES:

- Section 21 Guidance Note 6-13, Violence and Harassment in the Workplace
- Occupational Health & Safety Act, RSO
- Ontario Human Rights