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Memorandum

Special Directive 91-8

Annual Review

To: Directorate, Field Directorate, WASO Office and Division
Chiefs, and all Superintendents

From Acting Director, /s/ John H. Davis

Subject: Critical Incident Stress Policy and Guidelines

Introduction

National Park Service (NPS) personnel involved in emergency operations are exposed to a multitude of incidents that produce unusually strong emotional reactions which may impair immediate or long-term job performance. Some of these stress symptoms arise out of a single significant incident, such as confronting death; others may be the result of the accumulation of exposure to less stress. Significant events may produce a variety of undesirable behavioral, social or emotional problems. Symptoms may be short-term and self-limiting or long-term and very serious.

This policy recognizes that Critical Incident Stress (CIS) can be job related, and that the NPS has certain responsibilities as a result. It also acknowledges the need for in-service training and other formal and informal programs which will alert management, supervisors and emergency staffs to the symptoms of CIS and the availability of services for its treatment.

Emergency operations are known to generate extreme levels of stress in some persons. The guidelines are intended to mitigate this stress and provide a smooth, orderly and compassionate post incident process.

Policy

For the purposes of this directive, CIS is a serious potential risk for emergency service personnel and the NPS will provide assistance to employees who have been involved in an incident or series of incidents that have the potential for resulting in CIS. By this policy, the NPS will encourage qualified, interested employees to obtain Peer Counselor Training and develop those skills. Employees and supervisors will be trained to recognize the symptoms of CIS and to provide initial assistance to co-workers exhibiting those symptoms. Depending on the severity and duration of symptoms, assistance may take any or all of the following forms:

Informal support provided by supervisors and colleagues in open and frank discussions.

Counseling provided by a trained Peer Counselor.

Counseling provided by a trained clinician in a formal "Critical Incident Debriefing" format.

Professional counseling and/or other forms of medical, social, and psychological assistance.

Guidelines

It is the intent of the NPS to support and assist emergency service personnel who risk their lives for the safety of others so they can continue to be valuable, productive employees.

Incident commanders, supervisors, emergency service personnel and their co-workers should all be aware of the potential for CIS particularly when employees are exposed to significant events or experiences which could interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later. CIS can affect a person's performance within the organization and his relationship with family; therefore, steps should be taken by an immediate supervisor to address any actual or potential CIS problems promptly.

Most available assistance is in the form of counseling. Counseling is intended to assist the employee to resolve emotionally difficult events and diminish stress symptoms. The fact that an employee is undergoing counseling is not indicative of a need for medical treatment or a change in duty status. However, the reaction of an individual involved in a significant emergency incident may exceed the need for routine counseling and result in the immediate need for medical attention and/or a change in duty status. A supervisor may have to consider placing an employee on administrative leave pending a visit to a medical facility or, in extreme cases, arrange for the employee to be transported to an emergency room for immediate treatment.

If symptoms persist and appear to adversely affect the employee's ability to function effectively, the supervisor may need to take appropriate action to initiate a fitness for duty evaluation.

Certain situations automatically require formal CIS debriefings conducted by professional(s) experienced in emergency service operations. These debriefings, whenever possible, should be conducted 24 hours to 1 week after the end of the event. Employees should be directed to attend the debriefing session, which are to be confidential (no written records) and limited to only those individuals and dispatch personnel directly involved with the incident. Attendance at a debriefing is mandatory; however, participation while at a debriefing is voluntary. To assist the debriefing process and to serve as liaison between employees and the clinician, trained Peer Counselors should be present during formal sessions. Other personnel and supervisors that did not directly participate in the incident should not be permitted to attend.

The following are examples of critical incidents that should require mandatory formal debriefings:

Serious injury or death resulting from emergency service activities.

Serious injury or death of an employee in the line of duty.

Other situations that the incident commander or supervisor determines significant enough to require assistance (e.g., a mass disaster, death or serious injury to children, prolonged searches without positive results, wildland fire shelter deployments, search and rescue in extreme exposure conditions or requiring extraordinary expenditures of physical and emotional energy, extensive negative media attention, etc.)

The NPS will offer CIS Recognition/Coping Skills Training as part of existing training programs that address or are geared to emergency services. The Service is currently developing specific training in Critical Incident Stress and Peer Counseling for all employees.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
BRIEFING STATEMENT

REGION/ISSUE: Division of Ranger Activities

PROJECT/ISSUE: Critical Incident Stress

BACKGROUND: The National Park Service (NPS) recognizes that personnel exposed to emergency situations such as a particularly traumatic accident, a major search or rescue, a crime scene, or long-term exposure to a series of less stressful situations may produce a variety of undesirable behavioral, social, or emotional problems. Symptoms may be short term and self limiting or long term and very serious and can be costly to the human resources of the Service. This policy recognizes that Critical Incident Stress (CIS) can be job related and that the NPS has responsibilities to its employees as a result. It also acknowledges the need for in-service training and other formal and informal programs that will alert management, supervisors and emergency personnel to the symptoms of CIS and the availability of services for its treatment.

CURRENT STATUS: The Service lacks a comprehensive policy to provide for the welfare of personnel exposed to unusually stressful incidents which may impair immediate or long-term job performance.

SERVICE POSITION: The attached policy directs the Service to adopt a CIS Debriefing Program. This program provides for the support and welfare of personnel and their families, involved in stressful emergency operations. Appropriate NPS guidelines will be amended in a timely manner to include this CIS policy. Program costs are minimal. Research has shown dramatic benefits are realized in overall productivity and personnel well being.

POSITION SUPPORT: Director of the National Park Service, Division of Ranger Activities, senior WASO staff, senior managers of the 10 national park Regions.

POSITION OPPOSED: We are aware of no opposition to this program.

FUNDING REQUIREMENTS: Critical Incident Stress/Peer Counseling funding requested \$50,000.

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