

## Critical Incident Review Protocol

### Introduction

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Criminal justice professionals are, by the very nature of their work, in the risk management business. No amount of research, experience, or foresight can consistently and without failure anticipate how others will behave in the future. Proactive professionals will plan for the occurrence of unexpected, unfortunate, and potentially tragic events. Doing so will equip decision makers to rationally approach these occurrences in a manner that allows for understanding them, managing their consequences, and, importantly, learning from them.

### Purpose

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The purpose of the *Critical Incident Review Protocol* is to plan, in advance, for the occurrence of such events. This protocol is drawn from experiences and writing from a variety of emergency management fields. The protocol is designed to encourage discussion and consensus among collaborative teams about the process they will use to identify and address critical incidents.

### Steps to Take; Agreements to Make

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Policy teams are encouraged to work through the questions below to develop their critical incident review protocol. Agreements should be documented thoroughly and, ideally, signed by team members.

#### **1. What will constitute a “critical incident”? Possible discussion items:**

- a. Who determines if an incident is a critical one?
- b. Must a negative outcome occur for the incident to be identified as critical? If so, what type of negative outcome?
- c. Who can call for a critical incident review?

**2. What are the purposes of the critical incident review? Possible discussion items:**

- a. Is the purpose to debrief the facts of an incident and identify what went right and should be repeated in the future?
- b. Is the purpose to debrief the facts of an incident and determine if actions can be taken to prevent such occurrences in the future?
- c. Is the purpose to debrief the facts of an incident and determine what the next steps are relative to the current incident?
- d. Is the purpose to debrief the facts of an incident and form a strategy for communicating with one or more audiences about the incident?

**3. Who is on the Critical Incident Review Team? Possible discussion items:**

- a. Are there permanent members who will consistently participate?
- b. Are there situations when ad hoc members might be included? If so, what types of persons (e.g., those with specialized knowledge of procedures, those involved in the incident)? Is their participation different from the participation of permanent members in terms of opportunity for input or decision making?

**4. Are there key roles that will be assigned to members of the review team? If so, what personal qualities are important for each role? Who will assume these roles? Possible discussion items:**

- a. Chairperson
- b. Co-chair
- c. Facilitator
- d. Recorder
- e. Other

**5. Are the meetings open or closed?**

**6. Are there principles that should guide the review team's work? Possible discussion items:**

- a. Focus is forward-looking, on understanding and improving policies and practices
- b. Humans make errors
- c. Most people seek to succeed, but decisions are sometimes made under stressed conditions, without appropriate tools, or with incomplete information
- d. Even when everything is done right, things can go wrong
- e. When everything is not done right, learning and improvement is possible

**7. Are there ground rules the review team should agree to follow? Possible discussion items:**

- a. Agreements around information sharing and confidentiality
- b. Prohibitions against finger-pointing and blaming
- c. Process for making team decisions

**8. Should a memorandum of understanding (or similar document) be developed to codify the purposes and processes of the review team?**

**9. Is it helpful to have a structured agenda that is routinely followed in order to organize and manage the conversation, and ensure key topics are consistently addressed? Possible discussion items:**

- a. State the purpose of the meeting: Remind the group that the purpose of the critical incident review is constructive analysis and problem solving. Set the tone for the conversation. Revisit the principles and ground rules. Define the length of the meeting and the outcome the meeting will produce.
- b. Recap the event: Describe the facts associated with the critical incident, including key steps and processes that led up to and that followed the incident. Omit opinions and assumptions from the description. Identify information gaps that still exist.
- c. Debrief the event: First, discuss what went right. Be specific. Next, discuss what went wrong. Be specific (and mindful of the principles and ground rules). Identify any signs that were missed that might have helped anticipate the incident and its outcome. Consider whether established systems failed or are lacking and, if so, in what ways.
- d. Improve processes: Discuss specific strategies to prevent similar incidents and ameliorate outcomes in the future. What needs to be put into place? Who is responsible for leading the effort? What is the expected timeline? Develop a specific action plan.
- e. Manage the outcome: Discuss what needs to be done to address any harm caused by the incident or its aftermath. What harms have been done? In what ways can these harms be addressed most effectively? Who will carry out these strategies? What is the expected timeline? Develop a specific action plan.
- f. Develop communication strategies: Discuss how the team will handle communication about the incident going forward with, as applicable: (1) the affected parties, (2) internal agency staff, with identification of the particular agencies, (3) the broader professional community, (4) the media, and (5) the broader public. Develop a specific action plan that identifies the persons (or groups) with whom communications should occur, the goal of the communication, the information or messages to be communicated, the person who will lead the effort, and the expected timeline.

**10. How will review team decisions be memorialized? Possible discussion items:**

- a. Create a template that will be routinely followed for the critical incident report. Describe the problem, and detail in objective terms what worked and what didn't. Include an action plan template that is routinely used to document planned next steps.
- b. Consider who will receive copies of the report or aspects of it.