SOPs

SOPs. What Are SOPs? According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), a standard operating procedure is "an organizational directive that establishes a standard course of action." In other words, SOPs are written guidelines that explain what is expected and required of fire service personnel in performing their jobs. A comprehensive set of SOPs defines in significant detail how the department intends to operate. SOPs don't describe how to do the job (technical skills), they describe the department's rules for doing the job (procedural guidance)

SOPs may be prepared for any function that fire service organizations perform, including administration (hiring, equipment maintenance, building inspections, rehabilitation, etc.) and emergency response operations (fire suppression, medical services, hazardous materials response, etc.). The procedures can be organized and presented in many different ways, depending on the department's needs and preferences.

An issue sometimes arises within organizations about whether to use the terminology "standard operating procedures" (SOPs) or "standard operating guidelines" (SOGs) or even other nomenclature. Some experts feel that the term "procedures" implies relatively inflexible task steps or instructions, while "guidelines" implies more discretion in performing the job. Since emergency incidents are unpredictable and flexibility is essential, these experts advise that organizations develop SOGs, so not to limit responder's abilities to make informed decisions. Other experts believe the opposite is true: the term "guidelines" implies too much flexibility and discretion, thus reducing control and increasing the likelihood of mistakes.

A review of related legal proceedings indicates that terminology is less important than content and implementation of SOPs/SOGs. Courts tend to assess liability based on factors such as:
- Systems in place to develop and maintain SOPs/SOGs
- Compatibility with regulatory requirements and national standards
- Consideration of unique departmental needs
- Adequacy of training and demonstration of competence
- Procedures used to monitor performance and ensure compliance

Other alternatives—including General Orders, Departmental Orders, or Executive Orders, to name a few—may be equally appropriate. Below are listed some definitions which may clarify, or not, what the terminology is actually trying to say.
- SOP - compulsory instruction
- SOG - states in general terms what is expected to be accomplished
- Policy - adopted course of action
- Procedure - established way of doing something
- General Orders - provide guidance in how we operate on the emergency/non-emergency scene

For the sake of clarity in this material and in class, we shall use and refer to "standard operating procedures" (SOPs) as the written guidelines that explain what is expected and required of fire service personnel in performing their jobs.

As an officer, or acting officer, the use of SOPs will provide several benefits. First, your intent will be communicated to all individuals on the crew or within the unit. Second, SOPs provide consistency in the way you provide guidance as a leader. Third, SOPs provide subordinate employees with the desired end state and allow them to use their discretion if decisions need to be made. SOPs provide leaders the framework to conduct business safely by allowing them to focus on critical decisions instead of routine ones thus enhancing their decision-making ability in stressful situations. Finally, SOPs provide a mechanism to identify needed changes, implement agency policy, enhance training, describe desired performance, and evaluate operational performance. The result is improved operational efficiency, greater accountability, and increased safety.

SOPs are not meant to limit the ability of on-scene personnel to make decisions. In fact, if developed and implemented properly, SOPs will provide the desired end state and allow decision makers a great deal of flexibility in their decision-making processes. SOPs also set the standards for basic crew operations. A variety of tasks such as wearing of crew uniform, rules of engagement, use of the Risk Management Process, and communication procedures can be addressed through the development and implementation of SOPs.

SOPs can minimize the chances of team members committing errors while performing a procedure, thanks to their step-by-step instructions. Properly crafted SOPs also enforce the organization's values within these instructions, so team members maintain a level of professionalism while performing specific tasks. They also foster accountability among employees. This is crucial where the work processes could pose safety hazards to employees and the general public. SOPs thus help mitigate the risk of accidents, litigation, and fines for violating industry regulations.

By having SOPs for different processes, training new hires becomes easier. From the start, employees are informed of the quality of work expected of them and how they can meet this standard. This is especially important for members of multiple fire departments. Different departments may have established ways and techniques that work for them but are counter to the needs, expectations, and equipment of this, or other departments. The same benefits apply when refreshing the skills of older employees or transferees. SOPs also serve as a reference for further organizational improvements in the future. Since they already present the current best practices for conducting procedures, it would be more effective for an organization to build on them rather than starting from nothing.

The purpose of documenting a standard operating procedure must be clear. It must be based on both the previous and current friction areas in a work process so that the SOP you'll be presenting can adequately address them and prevent their recurrence.

Eight steps are critical in developing SOPs that are effective and relevant:

1. **Develop organizational support for conducting the needs assessment.** Support can take many forms, from providing appropriate resources (personnel, time, meeting space, etc.) to demonstrating the commitment of fire and EMS managers to make changes based on the results of the study. The purpose of the needs assessment should be clearly stated and understood by all members of the department.

2. **Develop a plan of action.** Assign responsibilities, divide tasks, and create a realistic schedule. Conducting a thorough needs assessment can be an intense and time-consuming process. Creating a plan of action helps maintain interest, promote accountability, and helps the group stay focused.

3. **Review current SOPs.** Develop familiarity with existing SOPs. Look for previously identified problem areas and inconsistencies among SOPs. Consider potential impacts of the department's operating environment on existing SOPs.

4. **Gather information on internal factors affecting SOPs.** Examples include other department documents, post-incident analyses, exercises, drills, surveys, and interviews.

5. **Consider external factors affecting SOPs.** The impact of laws, regulations, and standards should be considered here. Information sources may include literature reviews, professional and trade organizations, Federal and state agencies, other departments, accreditation manuals, and the Internet.

6. **Develop a list of required SOPs based on the needs identified in Steps 4 and 5.** Consider the impact of internal and external factors, as well as the operating environment and standard of practice.

7. **Analyze existing SOPs based on the information gathered in prior steps.** Compare existing SOPs to the list developed in Step 6. Identify areas where new SOPs are needed, or existing ones should be modified or deleted. Realistically prioritize the results in light of department resources. SOPs required by laws or regulations must receive a high priority, as should those addressing critical health and safety issues.

8. **Create a formal needs assessment document.** Summarize findings and provide recommendations. Explain priorities and provide a specific rationale for adding, modifying, or deleting SOPs. (e.g., SOP is needed to comply with Federal regulation 29 CFR §1910.120; SOP is needed to address the emerging trend of domestic terrorism, etc.)

Design or choose a template that fits the needs of your fire department. Be sure your SOP template includes:

- SOP title, scope, and purpose
- Date of initial approval, effective date, and version number (or date), SOPs are a living document that will evolve with time
- Numbering system – important for reference, usability, and integrating SOPs into an overall manual
- Expiration/review date – important for ensuring the currency of SOPs by establishing a date for periodic review and revision, if needed
- General procedures – the body of the SOP; sets forth broad procedural guidelines for operations
- Specific procedures – specific actions necessary under the SOP to safely mitigate a situation
- References – source material used to create the SOP or useful in the future evaluations
- If your department requires SOPs to be reviewed/approved by a particular individual, include an area for their name, approval date, and possibly their signature/initials.
- Consider a printed master copy kept in a central location for immediate reference
- There should also be a printed and electronic master list of all SOPs and their current version date
- Have an electronic, read-only version available to everyone, whether computer, laptop, tablet, or cellphone
- Have one person, or a small group, responsible for updating the SOP master copy, printed or electronic
- Have a SOP how to update the SOP master copy, include a checklist of what needs to be done for this process

While SOPs need to be specific and reflective of workflow processes, they do not need to read like a legal contract. Legal council should review SOPs to ensure they are clear, concise, and legally defensible. One way to start drafting a SOP is to write out the steps of a given task as if you were personally explaining it to a friend and then ask a colleague if it is clear to them. Get together with an expert on that topic or procedure to assist. They may already have a SOP you can use or at least adapt to your department. After that, you can add more formal documentation language.

The language used in a SOP should be able to be understood by all levels of the organization, regardless of whether they are brand new or have been on the department for years. Remember, the purpose of a SOP is to ensure consistent outcomes regardless of who is performing the task. Ensure you are writing your SOPs in a way that clearly defines who (or what role) will be performing each task to help everyone understand where they fit into the process.

Since SOPs offer detailed instructions for accomplishing a task, they must be written very clearly to avoid confusion. Avoid using ambiguous terms, such as "might" and "could." Use "must" and "should" instead to underscore the necessity of following the

SOP every time. Use an active rather than a passive voice when writing instructions. Immediately bring the reader's focus to the action they must take to avoid confusion. Use subheadings and text formatting (bold, italics, etc.) in a thoughtful way to highlight important content. Use bullet points and checkboxes for step-by-step directions.

SOPs are a collaborative team effort and are usually best written by those who will eventually need to follow and use them. The Fire Chief has the ultimate authority to approve or disapprove a SOP, or the way it is written. But better buy-in and ultimate acceptance and usage will have a greater impact and approval if they are written by members who will use the SOP. Try to have a separate review team before finalizing a SOP. A fresh set of eyes may interpret things differently or provide areas for improvement in either the SOP or the process itself. For SOPs to best serve a fire department, its members, and ultimately the people they protect, they must be formulated under concerted effort from stakeholders at different levels.

Training is perhaps the most critical component of the SOP implementation process. Training is the means by which the SOP becomes a useful and intuitive operational tool. Some procedures will not require extensive orientation and are self-defining; others will require more explanations and definition. The best SOP will be ineffective or even dangerous if members are not capable of carrying it out. It is up to you to ensure that each member understands the SOP and is capable of carrying it out.

The implementation process should be designed to ensure that:
- Everyone is informed about the new or modified SOP and understands the significance of the change.
- Copies of the SOP are distributed as needed and readily accessible to all potential users.
- Personnel know their roles and have the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the SOP safely and effectively (including an understanding of consequences for failing to comply).
- A mechanism exists to monitor performance, identify potential problems, and provide support in the implementation process.

After you review the material presented online, work together with your class company on Assignment #2, SOP Development. Decide as a group what three SOPs are needed now for the Pfizer ERT. Also determine what your SOPs look like, their format, and what will be the best way to store and access them. Present a rough draft of your findings in the February 10 class. The class will make decisions based on your work and will be the basis going forward on Pfizer ERT SOPs.

Standardization creates predictability, and predictability enables fireground commanders to manage and forecast the needs of the fireground. Well established SOP's create operational effectiveness for fire departments across the country. The safe and effective management of fire service operations and incidents is dependent upon a structured, predictable, processes, based on firm rules of engagement.