

The DMAT Safety Officer
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Introduction:

The DMAT Safety Officer is a member of the Command Staff, and is directly supervised by the DMAT Unit Commander (incident commander). The safety officer (SO) is responsible for monitoring and assessing hazardous and unsafe situations and developing measures for assuring DMAT personnel safety.

Critical Factors:

There are three critical factors relating to the SO concept:

1. An SO should be appointed for every DMAT deployment, functional exercise, or field training activity.
2. The SO has the authority to directly intervene and immediately correct a dangerous situation.
3. Every team member is responsible for the safety of other team members.

The above critical factors are essential elements of an effective DMAT safety program are discussed in further detail in this module.

Safety Officer Appointment:

All team activities must be conducted with safety as a critical objective. The safety officer with his/her orange vest is a visible example of the safety concept, but the presence of an SO does not absolve team members from safety responsibilities. Team members must be encouraged to be alert to safety issues, and intervene when any team member is performing an unsafe act or procedure. In essence, when 35 team members deploy, there should be 34 safety assistants helping the team SO.

Ideally, a DMAT SO should have a formal safety background. Safety professionals include industrial safety officers, occupational safety specialists, industrial hygienists, risk managers, and fire inspectors. DMAT SOs should at least have a basic safety awareness obtained via a medical, fire service, or military background. Teams that do not have the luxury of having a safety professional as a member should begin a recruiting effort.

Safety Planning:

One of the primary duties of the SO is to attend all command staff planning meetings. During the planning sessions, the SO should advise the incident manager

(team leader) about safety issues and concerns. The SO must review the incident action plan (IAP), and prepare the safety message in the IAP.

To be effective, the SO must begin the planning effort before the team deploys. First the SO must become familiar with the destination state or country. Important areas of concern include:

1. Climate and weather patterns (especially severe weather)
2. Terrain features
3. Political conditions (especially in foreign countries)
4. Harmful animals, reptiles or insects
5. History of floods, thunderstorms, tornadoes, earthquakes, mudslides, volcanoes, tsunamis, wildfires, avalanches, or blizzards

There are many quick reference sources for this type of information. Sources include (but are not limited to):

1. Contact with emergency management officials in the destination region
2. Internet searches and internet websites
3. Library reference materials
4. National Disaster Medical System (NDMS)
5. University departments of geography
6. Survival manuals
7. Information from teams on-site

Pre Deployment Briefing:

During the pre-deployment period, all team members must receive safety information relating to the deployment. This information is especially important to the logistics officer who may have to obtain insect repellent, or severe winter protective clothing. Pre-deployment safety information also greatly assists team members in determining what clothing, medications, and equipment to pack.

A pre-deployment safety briefing should be conducted by the SO before team members board their bus or aircraft. This briefing should include:

1. Handouts relating to weather and geography
2. Information about conditions that affect safety
3. Reports from teams on-site
4. Personal security issues
5. Clothing and equipment necessary for personal protection
6. Maps

Safety Briefings:

After arriving at a disaster site, the SO should conduct a team safety briefing during each briefing period (a briefing period may be 24, 12, or 8 hours). The purpose of the safety briefing is to verbally emphasize the safety issues in the IAP, and answer questions. Injury prevention and personal preparedness should be stressed.

A safety briefing is also conducted when DMAT task forces or strike teams deploy on special missions. In DMAT operations, these assignments are usually for medical assessment of remote areas, establishment of remote clinics, or medical outreach missions. These remote sites often present their own set of hazards. It is important for the SO to evaluate special missions and determine safety issues related to a particular off-site mission.

Safety Assistants:

The SO position is very demanding and may overload the capabilities of a single person. This deficiency especially applies to cases where the team is geographically dispersed or several strike teams/task forces are deployed.

When an SO is over extended, safety assistants should be utilized. Safety assistants coordinate with the SO to ensure effective safety coverage. Safety assistant responsibilities are usually collateral duties. This means that the safety assistant will be performing normal medical duties as well as having safety responsibilities. For example, if a medical task force is assigned to establish a remote clinic, a paramedic on the team is assigned as a safety assistant.

The SO is responsible for determining when a safety assistant is needed, and appointing an appropriate person with approval from the team leader. Safety assistants should be thoroughly briefed and educated about safety issues relating to their assignments.

Coordination with other Safety Specialists:

Every deployment must have an infection control officer. This should be a separate individual from the SO. The SO must coordinate with the infection control officer and address issues such as medical protective clothing, body fluid isolation procedures, decontamination, exposure reporting, and medical waste disposal.

A safety officer may have to coordinate with special teams that have their own safety specialists. This includes a hazardous materials team, water rescue team, urban search and rescue team, high angle rescue team, confined space rescue team, SWAT team, and wildfire team. Each of these teams should have a safety officer that specializes in the teams' area of expertise. If any special team is working in conjunction with a DMAT, the safety officers must coordinate to ensure effective interface.

The Incident Medical Plan:

The incident medical plan (ICS form 206) is prepared by the medical unit leader and is reviewed by the SO. The medical plan contains key information such as:

- Incident medical aid stations (this will usually be a DMAT)
- Regional ambulance services with contact information
- Air ambulances with contact information
- Hospitals with addresses and contact information
- Procedures for medical emergencies involving team members

Coordination with the medical unit leader in the medical plan development is an important SO responsibility because the medical plan is an important safety document.

Operations Safety:

During DMAT operations there are multiple safety disciplines that apply. An in-depth discussion of these safety disciplines is beyond the scope of this module. (For example, there are volumes of reference sources on fire safety, electrical safety, etc). A non-inclusive list of safety disciplines that apply during a disaster deployment include:

- Aircraft operational procedures
- Electrical safety
- Fire safety
- Hazardous materials safety
- Lighting
- Medical chemical safety
- Medical infection control
- Patient transport procedures
- Public health and hygiene
- Traffic and vehicle safety
- Waste disposal procedures
- Weather safety operations
- Wilderness survival precautions

Accident Investigation:

The SO is responsible for investigating all accidents and writing a thorough accident report. An accident investigation and a formal accident report are important procedures because they are useful in preventing future accidents and become part of a workmen's compensation claim. These documents are also key documents in a legal case.

A thorough and professional accident investigation may not be within the scope of an SO's capabilities. In many cases, the SO will have to utilize the talents of other experts in the fire protection, law enforcement or medical fields to assist in an investigation. The SO should also collect all documents relevant to an accident investigation. This includes witness statements, photos, video, maps, and audio tape of radio traffic if available. An in-depth accident investigation is an effective learning and accident prevention tool.

Final Incident Safety Report:

When a deployment is completed, the SO job continues. As a post-deployment activity, the SO should prepare a final incident safety report that summarizes the safety activities during the disaster deployment. This report is a narrative that includes:

1. Analysis of safety planning
2. Major safety concerns
3. Summary of accidents
4. Lessons learned

The final incident report is an effective training aid. At least one DMAT meeting or training session should have a safety report discussion as part of the session agenda.

Summary:

The SO is an essential component of the DMAT incident management system. Remember that the SO must have the cooperation of the team; everyone on the DMAT is responsible for safety!

The safety officers' duties begin in the pre-deployment phase and end with a final report after the deployment. The safety officers' duties include:

1. Gather pre-deployment safety information
2. Conduct a pre-deployment safety briefing
3. Intervene to stop an unsafe act or procedure
4. Attend planning meetings and write the safety message for the IAP
5. Conduct a safety briefing at each briefing cycle

6. Brief strike teams or task forces
7. Appoint safety assistants if appropriate
8. Coordinate with special team safety officers
9. Review the incident medical plan
10. Conduct accident investigations and prepare accident reports
11. Prepare a final incident safety report

Suggested Readings:

1. Auerbach, P. S. *Wilderness Medicine*. St. Louis: Mosby, 1995
2. Fisher, M.J. et al. *Fire and Life Safety in Health Care Facilities*. Boston: NFPA, 2000
3. Jones, R. A. and Jones, J.G. *Electrical Safety in the Workplace*. Boston: NFPA, 2000.
4. National Fire Protection Association, *Flammable and Combustible Liquids Code*. Boston: NFPA, 2000.
5. National Fire Protection Association. *Hazardous Materials Quick Guide*. Boston: NFPA, 1997.
6. National Fire Protection Association. *Health Care Facilities Handbook*, 6th Edition. Boston: NFPA , 1999