FIRE AND EMS GUIDE TO BETTER SOPs

PowerDMS

Table of

Contents

About This Guide

Every organization needs a roadmap and sense of direction. Without it, they're left to wander without purpose and resigned to reactively "fighting the fires" of whatever crisis comes up that day.

Forward-thinking organizations find their North Star in a mission statement, values, and a vision for the future. The values solidified in these three are then translated into policies, which govern day-to-day tasks in light of a larger goal. For high-risk professionals like firefighters and first responders, policies play a special role in securing their safety and efficiency, as well as the reputation and welfare of the agency as a whole.

In Fire/EMS, these guiding documents are often referred to as Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), Standard Operating Guidelines (SOGs), or something else entirely. This guide is intended to help Fire/EMS professionals develop effective SOPs from the ground up. It is the result of qualitative research and in-depth conversations with individuals in the industry.

As FEMA points out in its SOP development guide, fire departments must juggle increasingly complex regulations, reporting requirements, and technology. And, even as budgets shrink, firefighters take on more roles—providing emergency medical care, public education, response to incidents of terrorism, and more. Each of these responsibilities must be accounted for within departmental policies. SOPs take vague principles and values and form them into something codified and concrete. They govern the practices of the department and make sure all staff members are on the same page.

Without SOPs, every staff member may take a different approach to a situation. This can result in chaos and may even put lives at risk. Well-managed SOPs prevent against disorder, leading to a consistent response across the department.

When everyone knows the procedures, they can confidently take action instead of wasting precious time debating what to do. This helps keep the community and first responders safe.

Well-written and comprehensive SOPs:

- Establish clear standards and expectations for staff behavior and performance
- Standardize activities and actions
- Provide a framework for training
- Reveal strengths and weaknesses within the department
- Clarify the department's mission and philosophy

The most likely scenario is that you already have SOPs that govern your department. Chances are, you're also missing some critical policies and your existing policies could be better.

Whether you're doing a complete refresh of your organizational content or your SOPs need a "tune-up," we hope this guide serves as a blueprint to help you safeguard your personnel with policies that reflect the unique needs of your community and agency.

What This Guide Will Cover

This guide will cover the four-phase cycle of SOP development. We call it the Cycle of Excellence. We'll break down each phase and give you step-by-step instructions on how to perform the following:

1. Assessing the Needs of Your Agency
2. Developing SOPs
3. Implementing SOPs
4. Evaluating SOPs

Much of the data and best practices contained in this guide comes from the extensive research done by FEMA and the USFA, which is credited throughout.

What's in an SOP?

This may seem obvious to most readers, but it's important to reconnect with the fundamental purpose of what an SOP is, and what it's not. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) defines a standard operating procedure as "an organizational directive that establishes a standard course of action."

For example, if emergency medical personnel encounter someone who has overdosed on opioids, a well-written SOP should guide them through how to communicate with other local first responders, and what to do after the incident. This provides clarity, removes ambiguity, and keeps your people physically and legally protected. While it's impossible to predict every possible scenario, department leaders should aim to create SOPs for as many scenarios as possible. The more situations covered in SOPs, the more control the department will have over the situational outcomes.

Standard operating procedures can cover everything from day-to-day operations to emergency situations. They answer questions as benign as "How do you handle a shift change?" to extreme situations such as "What do you do in the case of a structural collapse?"

SOPs or SOGs?

Emergency service departments and experts have different terminology preferences when it comes to procedures. Some refer to "standard operating procedures," others use "standard operating guidelines." Still others use both interchangeably or employ other terms.

After reviewing legal proceedings, FEMA experts concluded that the content and implementation of SOPs/SOGs matters far more than the terminology.

Regardless of the term used, organizational directives need to:

- ✅ Include systems to develop and maintain SOPs
- ✅ Show compliance with laws, regulations, and standards
- ✅ Fit the unique needs of the department
- ✅ Demonstrate the adequacy of training
- ✅ Include procedures for monitoring performance and compliance

"WHEN EVERYONE KNOWS THE PROCEDURES, THEY CAN CONFIDENTLY TAKE ACTION INSTEAD OF WASTING PRECIOUS TIME DEBATING WHAT TO DO."

Types of SOPs:

General Administration	Organizational	Emergency Operations	Public Information and Education
- Facilities - Equipment - Finance - Rules and Regulations	- Chain of Command - Hiring - Resignations/Terminations - Code of Conduct - Discipline - Strategic Planning - Training	- Accountability - Communication - Incident Safety - Tactical Guidelines - Medical Care	- Public Relations - Working with the Media - Public Education Guidelines

SOPs That "Stay in Their Lane"

Both standard operating procedures and pre-plans are important for emergency response, but they are not the same thing. Pre-plans are specific to one place. They lay out how to respond to a situation at a particular location. Meanwhile, SOPs provide more general operational rules. Pre-plan may address a particular type of emergency situation, but the procedures apply no matter where the incident occurs.

SOPs are also not the same as technical skills or technical guidelines. Emergency personnel learn step-by-step tasks through training and technical protocols, so SOPs don't need to provide all the mechanical details of each task.

As FEMA puts it, "SOPs don't describe how to do the job (technical skills), they describe the department's rules for doing the job (procedural guidance)."

For example, an SOP for operating emergency vehicles might cover certification requirements for drivers, communication between vehicles and command, and rules for safety (use of seatbelts, permissible speeds, passing, vehicle placement). It would not provide details about how to operate the vehicle controls, how to drive, or how to park.

The Four-Phase Cycle of Excellence

Phase 1: Assessing the needs of your agency
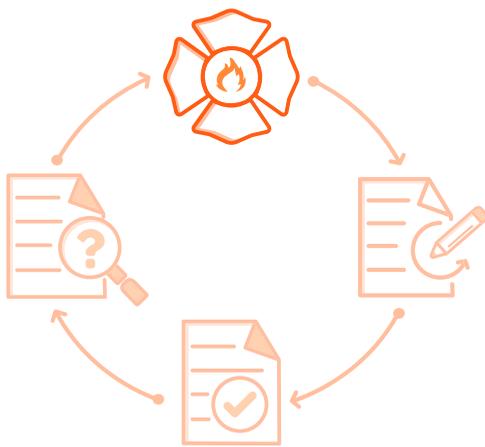
It's impossible to prescribe a cookie-cutter SOP template for all first responders. Every emergency services department has different needs and methods of operating. For example, the needs of a small, rural fire department will look vastly different than those of a large, urban department. The two departments have widely different technologies and capabilities.

They serve different communities, face different scenarios, and may even be governed by different laws. It would be foolish to prescribe the same SOPs to both departments. Standard operating procedures are most effective when they are tailored to fit the specific needs of the department. Department leaders will save time and effort in creating SOPs if they identify their needs before they begin the writing process.

Basically, the assessment should address two questions:

1. Do our current SOPs meet our needs?
2. What needs do we have that aren't addressed in our SOPs?

Regularly reviewing SOPs in light of these questions can prevent them from getting outdated. It can also help leaders address policy problems before an incident occurs.

Follow these six steps to conduct a thorough assessment of your agency's needs:

STEP 1: Gather a review team

There should be one staff member responsible for organizing policy reviews and assessing the needs of your agency. This may be a dedicated position or it may be an added responsibility on an administrator.

In any case, the responsible party should create a plan for how to conduct a needs assessment. They may gather a team of staff members from different parts of the department to brainstorm and share expertise, or interview subject matter experts within or outside of the agency.

STEP 2: Check applicable laws, regulations, and standards

Laws and regulations can be complex and change often. It's essential for organizations to regularly ensure that SOPs comply with federal, state, and local laws. It's also important to keep up with applicable court cases, industry standards, and best practices.

 The policy review team can check against publications like:

- Firehouse Lawyer
- Lexis-Nexis
- Westlaw database

STEP 3: Assess local needs

Certain geographical or community-specific needs may require first responder organizations to rethink or revise SOPs. Departments need to craft SOPs that address common natural disasters in their area.

For example, in September 2017, Hurricane Irma swept through Florida, flooding many areas and leaving more than 60 percent of the state without power. It's essential for first responders in hurricane-prone areas to be prepared for such an event. Good SOPs enable first responders to jump into action, saving lives and minimizing damage.

Local agencies should try to plan ahead for such events and have back-up plans for dispatch, communication, and response when power or cell service is down. In the wake of a bad hurricane season, agencies may need to revise their disaster recovery SOP. This directly relates to STEP 4.

STEP 4: Analyze post-incident reports

First responders shouldn't wait until an incident happens to review SOPs. However, an incident can often prompt a rethinking of SOPs, especially if the incident wasn't properly accounted for or the firefighters weren't prepared to handle it.

Take a few hours to review the past 8 to10 post-incident reports and ask yourself the following questions:

- What are some commonalities among all our incidents?
- Is there some stipulation or guideline we can implement that might prevent this in the future?
- Would further training or education mitigate these incidents going forward?

Take your time on this step. Reviewing and learning from past error is the best way to ensure you don't repeat it.

STEP 5: Conduct surveys and interviews

Usually, the people who best understand where SOPs are lacking are those who use them every day.

Firefighter surveys and interviews can provide insight into how to improve SOPs. A platform like PowerDMS makes it easy to send out surveys and quickly gather feedback from your staff.

STEP 6: Collecting your research

Repeat the previous steps until you feel you have adequate research with which to draw from as you improve or develop your SOPs. Using a physical file folder, a notebook, or a Microsoft Word file to house all of your research notes are a few ways to keep things organized.

For even greater collaboration and control, you can upload your research to PowerDMS and share it with your stakeholders and leadership. They can comment, approve, or even edit the document, filling in any holes or areas you've missed.

Learn more about how PowerDMS helps with policy collaboration and overall document control.

Phase 2: Developing SOPs
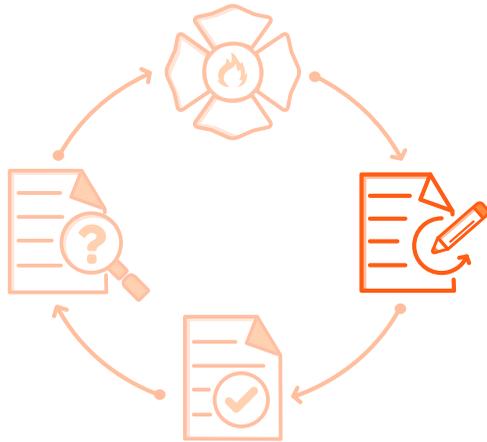
Data gathered from the previous phase is meaningless until it's put into a concrete operating guideline that first responders can understand and follow. That's why developing or improving SOPs based on the data is important.

By the end of this phase, you should have a series of SOPs that are approved by all necessary command staff and ready to be disseminated to employees.

STEP 1: Choose your writer(s)

Emergency response organizations may create a team or committee to write SOPs. The makeup of this team will differ depending on the subject in question.

In any case, feedback should come from all levels of the organization, but special consideration should be taken for the first responders who will actually be carrying out most of the SOPs.

The SOP development group should seek out subject matter experts and gather input from research to inform revisions.

Many PowerDMS customer agencies don't necessarily have a single designated writer, but look to the subject matter expert of whatever topic the policy is addressing.

STEP 2: Write/edit the SOP

Once needs are assessed and a team is assembled, it's time to write or revise the SOPs.

According to FEMA's guide, each SOP should contain at least the following sections:

- Title
- Description of SOP purpose
- Scope
  - Establishes what situations the SOP was created for and its intended audience
- General procedures
  - The "body" of the SOP, sets forth broad procedural guidelines for fire and EMS department operations
- Specific procedures
  - Specific actions necessary under the SOP to safely mitigate a situation
- References
  - Source material (if any) that was referenced in creating the SOP

Here are a few best practices to keep in mind when writing SOPs:

- Use clear, simple language
- Create a consistent layout to use for every SOP
- Be clear which aspects of the SOP are mandatory and which aspects are flexible
- Use a writing tool such as Grammarly to fix grammar and spelling issues

TIP: WHEN YOU'VE COMPLETED YOUR FIRST SOP, PERFORM A "SAVE AS" FUNCTION IN YOUR WORD PROCESSOR AND SAVE A COPY ONTO YOUR HARD DRIVE. USING THIS COPIED FILE AS A TEMPLATE FOR OTHER SOPS HELPS THEM MAINTAIN A UNIFORM AND PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCE.

STEP 3: Test the SOP

Once the team has a working draft, they should submit it to staff on all levels for approval and feedback. In certain cases, they may also wish to consult legal counsel to make sure the SOP complies with laws and regulations.

To avoid a "too many cooks in the kitchen" scenario, choose one or two representatives from each section of your agency to act as ambassadors during these feedback cycles.

PowerDMS makes this simple. With built-in workflows, administrators can easily send the draft up the chain of command, gather all notes and feedback in on place, and track revisions.

STEP 4: Get approval from leadership

The final draft will need approval from department commanders and leaders.

Again, PowerDMS can streamline this process. Administrators can create a concise workflow of who sees and signs off on the policy. This prevents the development team from getting lost in revisions or back-and-forth dialogue.

Phase 3: Implementing SOPs

Once a new (or revised) SOP is developed, written, edited, and approved, it's ready to be disseminated to the organization. Obviously, employees can't be held accountable to SOPs if they're not aware of their existence or that they've been updated.

A policy management software such as PowerDMS makes dissemination easy. Administrators can send new SOPs to all employees with the click of a button. They can track employee engagement and signatures and even assign quizzes to test comprehension.

With PowerDMS, employees can access the SOPs they need on the go. For example, the Greensboro Fire Department recently changed their fire watch procedures for commercial fire alarms. When a firefighter ran a commercial fire alarm, he was able to refer to the correct procedures in PowerDMS from his mobile device.

Todd Tuttle, Greensboro's Battalion Chief, says this is a big change from the past, when firefighters could only access SOPs at the station. "With PowerDMS being a cloud-based software, it opens up the ability to access those documents, not only at the station, but at home on mobile devices," he says. "So that has really opened up a new opportunity for our staff."

Departments can also use PowerDMS to deliver online training courses and track training across the department. They can link to and cross reference SOPs within training content to reinforce policies.

"Disseminating a directive with the old process took weeks. Now, I can have the same amount of work done in PowerDMS before noon."
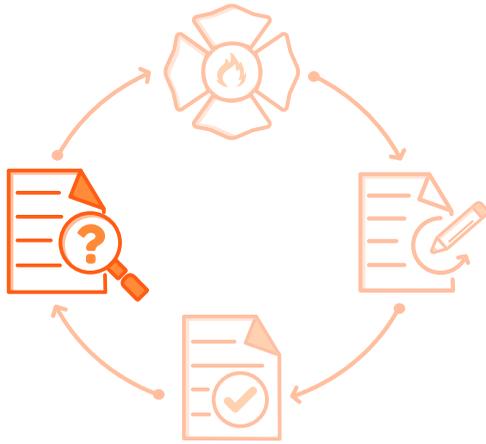
Todd Bowen
FIRE CHIEF
BRIDGETON (NJ) FIRE DEPARTMENT

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Phase 4: Evaluating SOPs

SOPs need to be regularly reviewed and revised so that they change and grow with the organization. This process may include adding new SOPs, eliminating those that have become obsolete or unnecessary, or making changes to existing procedures.

Experts suggest that departments review and evaluate most SOPs at least annually. But some may need more frequent review, especially in the case of an incident, a regulation change, or the adoption of new technology.

"Before PowerDMS, annual review workflows were hard to manage. Now, we set up automatic reminders to review our SOPs inside of PowerDMS."

Todd Tuttle
**FBATTALION CHIEF**
GREENSBORO (NC) FIRE DEPARTMENT

LEARN MORE *ABOUT HOW GREENSBORO FIRE PUT THEIR REVIEW PROCESS ON AUTO-PILOT WITH POWERDMS*

As SOPs are implemented, it will often become clear where there is room for improvement. Department leaders and administrators can evaluate SOPs, gather feedback, and then circle back to the needs assessment (Phase 1).

It can be easy for SOP review to take a backseat to other matters that seem more urgent. But having up-to-date SOPs is incredibly important for the safety of first responders and those they serve. Department leaders should schedule regular policy reviews and set aside time to ensure SOPs are effectively meeting the needs of the department.

Well-written, well-managed SOPs help fire and EMS services communicate effectively, respond quickly and effectively to emergency situations, and keep the community safe. **With proper planning, implementation, and reviews, departments can craft SOPs that ensure they operate with excellence.**

ABOUT *POWER***DMS**
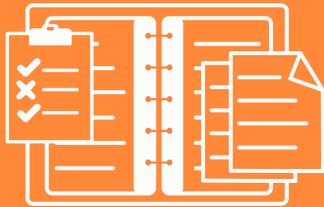
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3. ***SIMPLIFY*** *ACCREDITATION*

5. **COLLABORATE WITH EASE**

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BUCK BUCHANAN
ANDOVER POLICE DEPARTMENT

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