Critical Incident Review Protocol Framework

Background: Advance planning for responding to the occurrence of unexpected and even tragic events equips decision makers to manage the consequences of such events and to learn from them. Developing this protocol encourages discussion and consensus among stakeholders and builds confidence in the team's ability to respond to critical incidents should they occur.

Protocol Content: Policy teams are encouraged to develop a written protocol document that is signed by all team members and includes the following minimum provisions:

1. Team Composition-

    a. Who is on the Critical Incident Review Team?
    b. When is the team established? Is the team established when a critical incident occurs or is a set membership prescribed annually?
    c. Who will "manage" or chair the team?
    d. Are there situations when ad hoc members might be included?

2. Definition of a "critical incident"-
    a. Who determines an incident to be a critical one?
    b. What is the expected or required timing of the critical incident review?
    c. Who can call for a critical incident review?

3. Purposes of the critical incident review-
    a. What is the purpose and content of a review? T
    b. To identify the facts and outcomes of the event?
    c. To determine what should be done the same or differently during such an event?

4. Communication of findings –
    a. Are the meetings open or closed?
    b. How will findings be communicated and by whom?
    c. Will there be a written report released to the public?

5. Principles and ground rules –
    a. Is confidentiality expected?
    b. Are there prohibitions against finger pointing/blaming?
    c. Should an MOU (or similar document) be developed to codify the purposes and processes of the group?

d. Debrief the event: First discuss what went right. Be specific. Next discuss what went wrong. Be specific (and be mindful of the ground rules). Identify any signs that were missed that might have helped to anticipate the incident and its outcome. Consider whether established systems failed or are lacking and, if so, in what ways.

e. Improve processes: Discuss specific strategies to prevent or ameliorate similar incidents in the future. What needs to be put into place? Who is responsible for leading the effort and what is the expected timeline? Develop a specific action plan.

f. Managing 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 and what is the expected timeline? Develop a specific action plan.

g. Communication: 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 which agencies in particular; (3) the broader professional community; (4) the media; and (5) the broader public. Develop a specific action plan that identifies the goal of the communication with each group; the information or messages to be communicated, which should be consistent with the team's local message triangle and broader communication strategy; who will lead the effort; and the expected timeline.

6. How will review team decisions be documented? Possible discussion items:
   a. Create a template for the critical incident report that will be routinely followed. Describe the problem; record in objective terms what worked and what didn't. Include an action plan template that is routinely used to record planned next steps.
   b. Consider who will receive copies of the report, or parts of it.