EMS Agency Health & Safety Officer (HSO)

This policy is designed to provide a framework for EMS agencies to assist in designating a Health & Safety Officer (HSO) position to develop, implement and maintain a culture of safety in firehouses, ambulance garages, and on the scene. This policy is intended to promote health and safety practices for providers, patients and the general public, applicable to both emergency operations and live training evolutions. Establishing and maintaining HSOs and Safety Committees in ambulance services will improve awareness to health and safety risks, ensure regulatory compliance, promote a strong organizational culture of safety, and foster a cooperative working relationship between ambulance services and fire departments for safety support and emergency incident rehabilitation.

Background

EMS works in a very challenging and dangerous environment, in which providers face a multitude of inherent risks to themselves, their patients, their families and the general public. The risk of injury, infection, vehicle crashes, emotional stress, physical violence, medical error, serious harm or even death is real. EMS also has significant responsibilities in supporting fire ground operations, technical rescues, hazardous materials responses, and responses in other austere environments. Safety standards and procedures are learned and reinforced through education & training, lessons learned, near-misses, and emergency response experience. EMS providers understand the risks and how to reduce them, but preventable incidents causing injury and death still occur.

EMS agencies are also required to comply with a myriad of work safety-oriented policies, rules and regulations that require annual training and recordkeeping, as well as a variety of agency specific standard operating procedures (SOPs). Establishing and maintaining HSOs and Safety Committees in ambulance services will improve compliance with this requirement.

Policy

An EMS agency should promote a Health & Safety Officer (HSO) to initiate and maintain a strong, positive safety culture within their EMS organization. An EMS agency manager/administrator can designate an HSO or a safety committee of providers to be responsible to oversee the development and sustainment of a health and safety program. The HSO should hold, at a minimum, current NYS EMT-Basic certification, and be familiar with OSHA/PESH requirements for health & safety requirements.
Roles and Responsibilities

- The HSO should be an advocate for safe practices and procedures to better protect providers, the patient and the public. The HSO will be accountable to continual attention to safety issues and trends involving safety and wellness.

- The HSO Chairs the Department Health & Safety Committee.

- The HSO should be familiar with regulatory standards that apply to EMS. The HSO should be well versed with infection control practices and knowledgeable to the hazards of diseases and illness. An HSO can provide information about workplace hazards and what protective practices and equipment are available to reduce preventable incidents from occurring. The HSO can assist in sponsoring health and wellness programs to address issues related to weight, diet, fitness and psychological stress.

- The HSO should liaison with fire department, technical rescue, and hazardous materials response teams to ensure seamless integration of EMS assets in the safety sector of scene operations.

- The HSO’s role includes tracking safety organizations’ principles and be aware of current safety products that reduce unsafe practices. The HSO investigate accidents, injuries and near misses. The HSO should have the authority to track and monitor workplace safety, identify hazards as well as to correct them.

- The HSO has the responsibility of ensuring that all incidents i.e. near misses, medical equipment malfunctions, on-the-job injuries, and vehicle crash with serious injury are reported to the appropriate authorities. This reported data is important to identifying safety issues within the EMS system. This will allow the state to compile measurements on EMS related injuries, illnesses, medical adverse events and fatalities. This data driven information will promote procedures and initiatives to improve our EMS system. Investigations are also necessary to identify contributing factors and take appropriate remedial actions to minimize or eliminate future risks.

Conclusion

EMS agencies must consciously understand the risks involved that are related to its responders and patient safety because the public has an expectation of high performance. The objective is to lower unfortunate, preventable incidents and to ensure our providers, patients and the public have a safe outcome. A designated HSO can greatly assist with promoting a healthy and safe work environment within an EMS organization. An HSO contributes to a positive safety culture that will improve the health and safety awareness of EMS providers.