
Response to Suicidal Subject Calls

417.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

These guidelines have been prepared to assist personnel in their assessment to suicidal subject calls.

417.2 SANCTITY OF LIFE

The sanctity of life is central to the Department's calls for service where a person suicidal and/or emotionally distraught. The Department recognizes and respects the value of all human life and dignity without prejudice to anyone.

417.3 DEFINITIONS

Engage/Engagement – To make communications contact with the suicidal subject.

Disengage/Disengagement – To terminate communications and reposition to a reasonably safe location while remaining aware of the developing situation.

Suicidal subject – A person who is threatening by words or actions to terminate his/her own life as reported to law enforcement or observed by a law enforcement officer. In this policy, the term subject is intended to mean the suicidal person.

417.4 SITUATIONAL GUIDELINES

It is not possible to write guidance for every variation of a suicidal call. Each call is different and all facts available to officers and sergeants should be taken into account when addressing the situation. The totality of the circumstances should be considered, and decisions based upon what is known. The following factors should be considered:

1. Has a crime been committed? What is the crime?
2. Is the subject home alone or are others in the house?
3. Is the subject at home or another location? What is the subject's relationship to that other location? (Any outdoor or other public location where a gun is involved should be a setting where the police don't allow the subject to leave).
4. Have suicidal threats been made? Have threats to harm others been made? To whom? Does the subject have the means to carry out the threats?
5. Has a phrase similar to, "if the police come out here, I will kill them and myself" been made?
6. Are weapons involved? What type(s) of weapons?
7. Residence history?
8. Subject history – any previous suicidal threat calls, history of violence, military / law enforcement training?

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9. Are there other extenuating/aggravating circumstances (e.g., was the subject recently fired from a job, did they recently have a relationship end, etc.?).

10. Is the subject intoxicated?

Officers should consider whether or not the subject is attempting to force a confrontation with police which could lead to a significant use of force. The following are actions that may be considered:

- If there is anyone with the subject who may be or become a hostage or victim, law enforcement should attempt to separate the innocents from the subject. If they are unwilling to separate, or the subject is alone, consider disengagement.

- Attempt to determine if the subject is armed in a public place and a risk to innocent by-standers. If the subject is in a public place and is a risk to others, attempt to limit the subject's movements and consider use of a less lethal option. If the subject does not appear to be a risk to others, attempt to contain the subject and negotiate to try to learn his/her willingness to receive help. If the subject is unwilling to receive help, consider disengagement.

- Attempt to determine if the suicidal person is a threat to officers or first responders. Be aware of "suicide by cop." Many times, the mere presence of law enforcement escalates the situation to a use of force scenario. Avoid approaching the suicidal person unnecessarily.

- If the subject is alone and does not appear to be a threat to others, disengagement may be considered as an option. Attempts may be made by a Crisis Intervention Trained (CIT) officer or crisis worker to contact the subject by phone to offer them services. If the subject does not answer, expresses no interest, or clearly tells you, by word or action not to bother him/her, do not force a confrontation.

417.4.1 RESPONSE OPTIONS

Based on the factors and guidelines above, continue to evaluate the need for engagement or disengagement at all option levels:

Option 1: Engage verbally. If possible, safely make contact by phone or other means and talk with the subject, offering crisis resources to assist him/her.

Option 2: Provide surveillance and loose containment of the area to keep innocents safe.

Option 3: Contain the area and consult SWAT and/or HNT. Consider evacuation of others near the scene.

This is not an exhaustive list of possible response options.

417.4.2 DE-ESCALATION

For the purposes of this section violence de-escalation means tactics, actions, and communication methods used by officers to achieve the following objectives:

1. Manage the pace of an interaction;
2. Increase the distance between the officer and person involved;

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3. Create shielding to protect the officer and others from an imminent threat; and
4. Engage in communication to gain cooperation to increase options for resolving the incident and reduce the likelihood of injury to all parties involved.

Once it is determined that a situation is a mental health crisis and immediate safety concerns have been addressed, responding members should be aware of the following considerations and should generally:

- Evaluate safety conditions
- Introduce themselves and attempt to obtain the person's name.
- Be patient, polite, calm, courteous and avoid overreacting.
- Speak and move slowly and in a non-threatening manner.
- Moderate the level of direct eye contact.
- Remove distractions or disruptive people from the area.
- Utilize active listening skills (e.g., summarize the person's verbal communications to build rapport).
- Provide for sufficient avenues of withdrawal or escape, should the situation become volatile.
- Use cover and distance to create time to start a dialogue.

Responding officers generally should not:

- Use stances or tactics that can be interpreted as aggressive.
- Allow others to interrupt or engage the person.
- Corner a person who is not believed to be armed, violent or suicidal.
- Argue, speak with a raised voice or use threats to obtain compliance.
- Rush the situation exclusively for the sake of time.

Do not tell the suicidal person or family members that certain actions will be taken or outcomes obtained. In particular do not say that other persons will do particular things when you do not control those other persons.

417.5 GUIDELINES FOR SUICIDE CALL RESPONSE

417.5.1 NOTIFICATION

Notification of suicidal person and/or threats may occur in several different ways. The suicidal subject could call in themselves, a third party (family/friend/citizen) could call in, or Law Enforcement / Emergency Medical Staff (EMS) could discover the suicidal threat while making contact with the person for other reasons.

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417.5.2 THREAT ASSESSMENT

Whether the call comes in to dispatch (CRESA) or the Crisis Line, an assessment is made to determine routing of the call. If it is a suicide in progress or a suicide just occurred, the call is routed to law enforcement through 911. If the call is a suicidal threats or suicidal referral, the call is routed to or stays with the Crisis Line. For the latter, Crisis Line staff members are trained and have the resources to evaluate the subject over the phone and can either resolve the crisis or let law enforcement know if the threat is imminent.

For example:

1. A call comes in to dispatch from the subject, family member, friend or concerned citizen. The call involves suicidal threats where no criminal activity has occurred, the scene is stable, and the subject does not have a gun or weapon in hand that would cause immediate death or serious injury. The call is transferred to the Crisis Line. The Crisis Line staff will evaluate for an imminent threat or work to resolve the crisis.
2. A suicidal call comes in to the Crisis Line from the subject, family member, friend or concerned citizen. Crisis Line staff will evaluate to determine if the threat is imminent. If the threat is imminent, Crisis Line staff will facilitate contact with dispatch.
3. Law enforcement contacts a suicidal subject in the field while on other business. The officer will attempt to facilitate contact with the Crisis Line for evaluation.

417.5.3 CRISIS RESOLVED

For the CRESA call referred to the Crisis Line or for the call coming directly into the Crisis Line, many times Crisis Line staff will be able to resolve the situation over the phone. They will talk the person through the crisis and schedule follow-up care with the subject, putting a plan in place.

417.5.4 CRISIS NOT RESOLVED

For the imminent threat coming in to 911, law enforcement will be dispatched or if the call transferred to Crisis is not resolved and threat is imminent, Crisis Line staff will contact CRESA for a law enforcement response.

1. The dispatched law enforcement officer, will obtain from CRESA relevant information gathered by the Crisis Line regarding the incident while en route to the scene. Current laws allow the giving of patient information to law enforcement in crisis situations.
2. EMS should not be dispatched until requested by law enforcement. If for some reason they are, they should be directed to a staging area until requested by law enforcement to come in to the scene. (This is done so that if law enforcement makes a decision to disengage, Fire/EMS personnel will not be faced with the decision to abandon their patient at the direction of law enforcement.)

417.5.5 ENGAGE/ENAGEMENT

The determination to engage may be based on the situation (e.g., hostages or innocents in the house or area who need to be protected; contact with the suicidal subject was established and

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they want help getting through the crisis and it has been determined that contact can be made safely for all parties; suicidal subject is unconscious.

The decision to engage may be transitioned to disengagement if needed. For example, if at first there are innocents in the house and they are removed, and the subject is uncooperative, law enforcement may decide to disengage.

When appropriate, the suicidal subject will be taken into custody and transported to the hospital for continued mental evaluation and treatment by medical and mental health personnel, in accordance with RCW 71.05.

417.5.6 DISENGAGE/DISENGAGEMENT

Disengagement could include removing all units from the scene.

Each call is different, and all facts available to officers and sergeants should be taken into account when addressing the situation. The totality of the circumstances should be considered and decisions based upon what is known. Clear and articulable reasons should be present, acted on and documented in a police report.

In all cases of disengagement, law enforcement should attempt to provide the suicidal subject with resources they can call for help (Crisis Line).

417.6 EMERGENT DETENTIONS

In all circumstances where a person is taken into custody or involuntary detention or hold, the officer shall complete a police report. (Refer to **Policy 418 – Emergent Detentions**)