

Forcible Entry Considerations

Gaining access to a structure during an emergency response creates concerns for safety of personnel as well as liability for resulting property damage or injury. While many of these operations are conducted in a safe and efficient manner, standardizing your policy and procedures can help to assure this operation remains safe for your personnel and protects your Emergency Service Organization (ESO) from associated liabilities.

Consider the following example where emergency responders failed to take action, resulting in a large loss for the ESO.

Case Study: A 9-1-1 caller for EMS was very short of breath and could only speak one- to two-word sentences. EMS was dispatched and all doors were locked. The caller became unresponsive and fell to the bedroom floor with all doors and windows locked. EMS did not force entry and cleared the call as “no patient found.” Approximately 30 minutes later, the caller’s husband arrived home to find his wife on the floor and called EMS back to the home. She was DOA and suit was filed for failing to force entry during the first response and treat the rapidly declining condition of the caller.

It is important for ESOs to routinely review and train personnel regarding what they should consider to determine if and how forcible entry operations will be completed. Consider the following information when reviewing and formalizing your established Forcible Entry Guideline:

Type of occupancy: The type of structure and occupancy will play a role in accessing the building. An apartment building may have maintenance personnel or key holders to assist with access. Established Pre-plans for the building should identify entry locations, key pads with entry codes, availability of Knox Box type key securement, or access to an exterior key all of which can provide quick and efficient access. A single family home may have a fire alarm or security system with emergency contacts. Having responders familiar with the building construction and occupancy will also influence the methods, personnel, and equipment utilized to gain access.

Verification of address: Not all incidents are obvious upon arrival. If forced entry becomes necessary, it is good practice to verify the address not only through dispatch but also by visually verifying the number on the building or some other identifying details. A callback number or communication with the caller may provide additional information to aid in this confirmation process.

Reason for entry/ dispatch information: Many incidents will dictate the necessity or emergent need to gain access into a structure. It is not uncommon for the additional dispatch information provided to not match the conditions upon your arrival. For example, a smoke detector actively sounding in a structure is much different than a low battery alarm “chirp” from a smoke detector.

Law Enforcement on scene prior to entry: In the not so obvious situations where entry may be necessary to verify the original dispatch concern, request law enforcement to the scene to help facilitate emergency responder's entry into the structure. They are an excellent resource for safe entry, call history to a particular location, and potential hidden dangers.

“Try before you pry”: This simple phrase rings true in many situations. Forced entry should be undertaken in the safest and most efficient manner. An unlocked door or window makes for easier access into a structure and alleviates the need to cause unnecessary damage. Forcing entry on a front door when a rear door is unlocked can present a liability and public relations concern. Be sure to take the time to perform a 360-degree walk around a structure before selecting a point of entry. Remember to announce your entry.

Other items to consider:

Who should force entry? Will additional resources be required to complete the operation safely and efficiently?

Who will secure the scene after forced entry? Establish responsibility or a contract for someone to board up the property to secure it.

Did we educate the public? Utilize publications such as municipal newsletters, fund drives or websites to better educate residents about the need to update best access points, key holder information or to advise the types of situations when forced entry may be necessary and the unusual dangers which may exist if forcible entry is attempted.

Did we document the entry? This case is no exception for documentation. Document how access was gained and any damage caused by the ESO as well as the final securement of the property.

Summary

Emergent forced entry may be a necessity in many response situations; however, this can lead to negative outcomes, including responsive violence. It is crucial for ESOs to follow established guidelines and procedures while trying to serve the public during these types of situations. A formal policy related to forcible entry will help minimize property damage and help assure a safe emergency response for the ESO and the civilians they serve to protect.