

Search Group

If command is supposed to focus on the entire incident the sector officer should tunnel in on their assigned task/area.

The Main Goal

The main goal of the search group is to locate and save as many savable victims as possible in the shortest timeframe and safest manner possible.

Incident Priorities

Again the incident priorities, life safety, incident stabilization, and property conservation are the starting point for discussion. The search group is working on the first incident priority. As with the discussion of “fire attack” when the search group is assigned they are responsible for conducting the search in the entire structure, unless advised otherwise by command.

The search group leader has three basic responsibilities according to Coleman (see Coleman reference at end of Chapter 1):

- The safety of his group
- Coordinating the primary search
- Keeping command informed

While I know it seems elementary I hasten to add the following: A primary search is a quick, but none the less organized and planned search for viable victims in a given structure. The secondary search comes after the fire is out and the structure has been cleared of smoke.

Search Group Leader Function

Unlike the attack group leader, who should not be operating a hose stream, the search group leader may need to be involved in the actual searching. From what I have seen the first available chief officer is assigned to manage the attack group and unit officers are left to manage the other groups, in most instances for the duration of the incident.

Manpower issues are the driving force behind search officer participation. Given a unit staffed with only three people the search officer will have to participate, at least initially, in the actual search process. The search process requires less coordination than the attack function and typically a unit level officer will be search group leader for the duration of the incident, especially in the residential setting. The search group leader should have no problem accomplishing this mission.

Types of Searches

This is not a detailed discussion of actual search techniques but I mention some as a matter of record and to highlight some of the decisions that might face the unit officer assigned as search group leader.

Standard search-usually with a two-person search crew, they enter the room and one heads left, the other heads right, and then they meet in the middle, clearing the room.

Oriented search – one searcher stands by at the entranceway, monitoring conditions, and providing an orientation point for the active searcher. (I think this way works better, safer, and faster. We'll talk about it another day.)

Wide Area search- sometimes called a team search or any number of other names. This search is used in large or complexly configured areas and requires each member to be tied off in some way to a mother line. (This is not used often and requires a great deal of training and practice to be good at.)

Which of the two primary methods you use, the standard search or the oriented search is a function of a few different things:

- Area to be search
- Fire conditions
- Experience of crew members
- Training of crew members

Assumptions about the Search Group

Coleman stresses that there are some assumptions that command “must make” with regards to the search group. They are as follows:

- The search officer is actually coordinating a search
- The search officer has a plan
- The search officer will monitor the welfare of the search group
- The search officer will notify command when moving between floors or other areas
- The search officer will call for help if needed.

While I have never thought of things in terms of these assumption parameters they seem reasonable enough.

Benchmarks

Just as with any other group the search group has a benchmark that should be reported to command and that is usually an “all clear.” In the case where the search group was unable to check each occupancy the search officer should specifically state which occupancies were searched and which were not. When the “all clear” is given it means **all** units are clear unless the statement is qualified.

Conclusion

Searching is one of the “big four” sectors on the fire ground. The unit(s) assigned to that function performs a dangerous but vital task. It is crucial that firefighters learn and practice search techniques. It is not enough to crawl around a room for 10 minutes and declare the search complete.

A few months ago I was able to conduct some search drills along with some other evolutions at an abandoned house. What I found out of the course of 16 or so hours of drilling was that it took crews between 6 and 12 minutes to search one room that was 12' by 15' (a guesstimate). Taking the six-minute marker as the benefit of the doubt it would have taken these crews upwards of 20 minutes just to do a primary search on the second floor of the four-level house we were using. This is too long!

Coleman's book does a great job of explaining the oriented search techniques. Take the time to learn and practice them or whatever system you use. It is rare for the fire department too have a chance to truly save a life, that chance should not be missed because of poor search techniques.

The other thing I noticed over the course of the drills was that crews who did not use an orienter or those who were not used to using an orienter got lost at a much higher frequency than the crews that used one. I watched one crew enter a room, search that room, leave the room, only to get turned around in the hallway. The crew then re-entered the room they just left and searched it a second time. Not only is this a waste of time, it may have cost a viable victim a chance at life.

Another scary vision was watching a crew enter a room, move around the wall together, never reaching the center of the room. They simply moved along the wall. When the crew was told that it was time to exit they had great difficulty finding the door they entered through. Eventually they had to be helped from the room, the room was only a 12' x 15' 4-walled box, with little furniture in it.

The truth is you can't send just any two rookies into a burning house to conduct a search. Our efforts at education and training must improve, and fast.

I don't say these things to pick on the people at the drills only to point out that we all need practice at this search thing.

This paper was about the search group, what it does, who it answers to, and how it should function. The rest of the hands-on how to actually search information will follow on some other day.

