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**Best Practice Recommendation for Initial Response at
Scenes by Law Enforcement Officers**

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Best Practice Recommendation for Initial Response at Scenes by Law Enforcement Officers

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Foreword

This document is intended to provide guidance in recommending best practices to be employed by law enforcement officers (LEO) when they arrive at an incident which could be expected to become the subject of criminal or civil litigation and is not intended to dictate agency-specific protocols. This document applies to instances where the responding person's primary responsibility is initial response and securing the scene and not scene examination and evidence collection. This document recommends generally accepted professional principles and practices. The circumstances and issues of each situation and scene require consideration and will dictate the course of actions to be undertaken by the LEO.

This document was revised, prepared, and finalized as a Best Practice Recommendation by the *Crime Scene Investigation* Consensus Body of the AAFS Standards Board. The draft of this document was developed by the *Crime Scene Investigation & Reconstruction* Subcommittee of the Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science.

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All hyperlinks and web addresses shown in this document are current as of the publication date of this standard.

Keywords: *first responder, evidence, crime scene, examination, law enforcement officer, investigation.*

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Best Practice Recommendation for Initial Response at Scenes by Law Enforcement Officers

1 Scope

This best practice recommendation provides guidance for the initial response by law enforcement officers (LEOs) to scenes. The guidance includes: arrival procedure, safety considerations, medical intervention, assessing the scene, preventing scene contamination, scene containment and control, evidence identification and preservation, turning the scene over to investigators, and documenting actions and observations. It does not include guidance for a complete scene investigation.

2 Normative References

There are no normative reference documents. Annex A, Bibliography, contains informative references.

3 Terms and Definitions

For purposes of this document, the following definitions and acronyms apply.

NOTE In a situation that involves a potential criminal act definitions in section 3.1 through 3.5 would be preceded by “crime” (e.g., crime scene investigator).

3.1 alteration

The result of changing something.

3.2 contamination

The intended or unintended introduction or removal of an object and/or substance at any point during a scene investigation.

NOTE This includes undesirable transfer of a substance within an item or between items, also referred to as cross-contamination. (ISO 21043-1)

3.3 evidence

A body of facts, information, or material objects indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.

3.4 law enforcement officer LEO

Any public employee whose duties primarily involve enforcement or investigation of laws.

3.5 personal protection equipment PPE

Equipment worn to minimize exposure to a variety of hazards such as body-fluids, irritants, or contaminants. Examples of PPE: gloves, foot and eye protection, respirators, and full body suits.

3.6 preservation

The intentional act to prevent damage, contamination, change or alteration, or deterioration of anything contained within a scene.

3.7 scene

A place, an object, a person, or an animal that is subject to and/or requires forensic examination.

NOTE A crime scene is a common description of a scene where a presumed crime has been committed. The scene can be a person or an animal. (ISO 21043-1:2018[E])

3.8 scene investigation

Application of scientific methods to the examination of a scene to locate, document, collect, and preserve items of potential evidentiary value.

3.9 scene investigator

An individual, however named, who is responsible for performing elements of scene investigation.

4 Recommendations

4.1 Overview

4.1.1 Every scene has the potential to yield evidence that may aid in an investigation. As such, the first responding LEO to a scene should take all reasonable actions to preserve the scene in order to maintain evidence integrity until a designated person or scene investigator is able to respond.

4.1.2 Scene investigation is the responsibility of the responding officer in some jurisdictions while in others a dedicated unit(s) may be deployed to a scene and the responding officer relinquishes the scene to a designated person or scene investigator upon their arrival. In such instances, an exchange of information should take place between the officer and the scene investigator or designated person.

4.1.3 There are some instances where alteration or contamination to the scene prior to scene investigator response cannot be avoided, including actions for safety and security, or during medical intervention. Any actions taken and any known changes to the scene should be documented and shall be relayed during the course of the scene investigation to those responsible for the investigation.

4.2 Arrival Procedure

Upon arrival of the first responding LEO(s) to a scene, after reasonably assessing and addressing any threats or risks of harm to prevent additional injuries or loss of life to self, the public, and other responders, they:

- a) shall preserve the scene until relinquished to a designated person or scene investigator upon their arrival;
- b) should document initial observations as is practical;

- c) should document the identity and contact information of any person(s) and/or vehicles at or leaving the scene as is practical.

4.3 Safety Considerations

LEO(s) shall take reasonable precautions to ensure the safety of all parties (including self), while minimizing contaminating the scene. Mitigating actions should include, but are not limited to:

- a) leaving adequate space for ingress/egress for emergency response;
- b) contacting appropriate personnel/agencies if hazards such as chemical, radiological, gas, biological, animal, physical, or electrical are suspected or discovered;
- c) directing additional responding units and personnel to minimize any impact to the scene;
- d) wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) as is practical;
- e) moving evidence only when necessary to eliminate the threat of harm or loss due to exigent circumstances (e.g., weapon).

4.4 Medical Intervention

The initial responding officer(s) should ensure that medical attention is provided with minimal contamination of the scene. Assisting, guiding, and instructing emergency medical services (EMS) personnel during the care and removal of injured persons may diminish the risk of contamination and loss of evidence.

4.5 Assessing the Scene

4.5.1 Upon receiving a request for services and while responding to a scene, LEO should assess available information and the need for additional resources.

4.5.2 Upon arrival at the scene, an assessment shall be made to determine the nature of and extent of the scene(s), including but not limited to, personal safety, the approximate number of victims/decedents and apparent injuries, and the need for additional resources. This assessment is a continuous process until the scene is transferred to scene personnel.

4.5.3 The responding LEO is responsible for requesting additional resources identified during the assessment. This may include supervisors and supporting units.

4.6 Scene Containment and Control

Once an assessment of the scene has been made, responding LEO(s) should establish perimeters in order to control crowds and to restrict access into areas, which may pose safety hazards and/or have the potential of altering a scene. Movement throughout the scene should be limited to only necessary actions by authorized personnel only.

The initial responding LEO(s) should make a reasonable effort to:

- a) Control individuals at the scene to prevent altering/destroying the scene and any physical evidence within it, while ensuring and maintaining safety at the scene.

- b) Identify individuals at the scene, such as suspects, witnesses, bystanders, victims/family/friends, law enforcement, medical and other assisting personnel.
- c) Control the flow of persons, animals, etc. entering and leaving the scene to maintain integrity of the scene.
- d) Document the entry/exit of all people entering and leaving the scene, once boundaries have been established.
- e) Request appropriate resources when necessary (e.g., animal control, traffic control department).
- f) Institute measures to preserve the scene and protect evidence that may be lost or compromised [e.g., protect footwear impressions and tire tracks from the elements (rain, snow, wind), and other potentially destructive threats (sprinklers, etc.)].
- g) Consider search and seizure issues to determine the necessity of obtaining consent to search, seizing evidence under exigent circumstances, and/or obtaining a search warrant.

4.7 Evidence Preservation

4.7.1 Every item located within the scene should be considered evidentiary in nature.

4.7.2 Physical evidence and scene conditions should be preserved and left undisturbed to allow a thorough investigation by scene investigators. Items should not be moved, added (e.g., disposable gloves, food or drink, cigarette butts) or removed from the scene (e.g., weapons or drugs). Exigent circumstances (e.g., weather, perishable evidence) may necessitate early collection or additional preservation steps.

4.8 Relinquishing Control of the Scene

The initial responding LEO(s) at the scene should provide a detailed scene briefing to the investigator(s) assuming control of the scene. Once a determination has been made to relinquish control of the scene over to investigators, the initial responding LEO(s) should record the date, time, and to whom control of the scene was given. Responding LEO(s) should return to their respective duties, if requested to remain on scene and assist in various capacities, or return to headquarters to transcribe their respective report(s).

4.9 Document Actions and Observations

All activities conducted, and observations made at the scene should be documented as soon as possible after the event to preserve information. The initial responding LEO(s) at the scene should record clear and concise information. The following should be documented.

- a) Date and time of arrival.
- b) Observations of the scene, including the location of persons and items within the scene and the appearance and condition of the scene upon arrival.

- c) If practical, conditions upon arrival (e.g., lights on/off; shades up/down, open/closed; doors and windows open/closed; smells; ice, liquids; movable furniture; weather; temperature; and personal items.)
- d) Personal information from witnesses, victims, suspects, and any statements or comments made.
- e) The LEO(s) actions and actions of others that may have altered the scene. If it is essential to move items, the original location and state of the item should be recorded prior to movement as well as who moved the item, why, and to where.
- f) The recovery and/or transference of evidence, through departmental mechanisms for chain of custody.

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Annex A **(informative)**

Bibliography

The following bibliography is not intended to be an all-inclusive list, review, or endorsement of literature on this topic. The goal of the bibliography is to provide examples of publications addressed in the standard.

- 1] National Forensic Science Technology Center. *Crime Scene Investigation: A Guide for Law Enforcement* [supported under cooperative agreements by BJA, NIJ, and NIST]. NFSTC, 2013¹.
- 2] ISO 21043-1:2018(E) Forensic sciences - Part 1: *Terms and definitions*².
- 3] ISO/FDIS 21043-2:2018(E) Forensic sciences - Part 2: *Recognition, recording, recovery, transport and storage of material*².

¹ Available from: <https://www.nist.gov/sites/default/files/documents/forensics/Crime-Scene-Investigation.pdf>

² Available from: <https://www.iso.org/committee/4395817/x/catalogue/p/1/u/0/w/0/d/0>

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