



# Interagency Critical Incident Peer Support

## Agency Administrator's Briefing

### Critical Incidents

A critical incident is any unexpected, traumatic event that affects an individual's feelings of personal safety, their ability to perform daily activities, and their ability to concentrate on their normal job duties. Simply put, a critical incident is a traumatic event (or perceived life-threatening event) that has sufficient power to overwhelm an individual's ability to cope. A critical incident is **not defined by the incident itself**; it is defined by individuals and/or an organization's **reaction to what occurred**.

### Critical Incidents Can Happen Anywhere

Critical incidents occurring outside of the workplace can impact many employees and organizations. Managers should consider off duty, as well as on duty incidents that have the potential to cause an overwhelming impact on employees and affect their ability to cope and function safely, especially in the fire environment. Addressing the need for crisis intervention services based on the severity of impact to employees affected by a critical incident is required – not when or where the critical incident occurred.



### Benefits of Critical Incident Peer Support

The benefits of early intervention using both professional and specially trained peer support personnel have been shown to promote positive recovery from traumatic stress. This “support group” intervention model includes a Mental Health Care Clinician who specializes in trauma along with the trained peers, was first developed for use with military combat veterans. Over time this model which is referred to as the “International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) model has found its way into civilian first responders (police, fire, ambulance, emergency workers, and disaster rescuers). It is accepted as the most effective standard of care for organizations with cultures having a history of mistrust in outside sources for crisis intervention and support. It is also the model adopted by the interagency wildland fire community.



Experts believe that these techniques and processes, which are used in Critical Incident Peer Support, can help individuals improve their coping abilities and dramatically decrease the occurrence of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), lower tension, and mitigate a group's reaction to a traumatic event.

## Timeline – Why it’s Important

Critical Incident support is not an emergency however assistance should be ordered as soon as possible. CI support intervention processes generally start no sooner than 48–72 hours after an incident. CI support services can also be provided within a few weeks or longer depending on the incident. It is important to allow time for affected individuals to disengage operationally, and re-connect with family or friends. Once this occurs individuals are typically emotionally ready to benefit from peer support.

## What is Critical Incident Peer Support

Critical Incident Peer Support (CIPS) is about peers, or “people of mutual respect” helping each other, i.e., firefighters helping firefighters. In wildland fire, it is the shared culture and experiences which form the foundation of peer support. The same could be applied within law enforcement and other activities within the land management agencies. These shared experiences foster the initial trust and credibility necessary for developing relationships in which individuals are willing to open up and discuss their reactions and concerns after a critical incident. Peer relationships are effective because they are built around this mutual understanding, respect and trust.

Peer Supporters have received training and certification as Critical Incident Peer Supporters through the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF). They are trained to listen, assess and refer, when necessary to a trauma intervention Mental Health Care Professional. Peer Supporters should never be used as a replacement for this professional care and **should never** function independently. This would put them outside of the scope and boundaries of competence they’ve been trained for.



Critical Incident Peer Supporters are trained and certified by the International Critical Incident Foundation



*..I was almost certain the crew felt comfortable with these guys. They looked like hotshots, acted like hotshots because they were hotshots...*

## Who We Are

We are an interagency program established by the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management to provide support to Fire and Aviation personnel as well as other employees of our organization when serious accidents, injuries or death have occurred, most often in the line of duty.

Since its inception in 2001, fire related personnel (including dispatchers, engines, smokejumpers, hotshots, aviation, fire managers, and others) have attended the ICISF classes. They have responded to a variety of fire and aviation line of duty, and off duty, traumatic incidents providing valuable support. The National CIPS Program is committed to peers helping peers and is available upon request.

The National CIPS Program does not maintain “CISM Teams.” CIPS Groups are assembled at the time of request through the appropriate Geographic Area Coordination Center. They will be comprised of trained CIPS personnel selected to match the backgrounds and experience of those involved in the critical incident.

## What We Do

Critical Incident Peer Support Groups (CIPS) provide the following:

- Situational assessment for managers to help determine the timing and type of support needed for each incident. Each process is put in place based on a methodical approach. Tactics are applied at the right time, in the right place and under the right circumstances.
- Commitment to providing services only within our established Boundaries of Competence and Standard of Care based on our education, training and supervised experience.
- Provide a CIPS Group which includes the expertise of a licensed, professional mental health care provider who is experienced in trauma
- Support Incident Management Teams, militia and non-fire personnel affected by an incident.
- Provide peer supporters who can travel to the fire line, spike camp and other remote locations.

### CIPS

**CIPS:** The demographics of employees and their willingness to use an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) are considerably different than wildland fire personal, especially young firefighters most often seen by our current peer support program. While EAP services include response to crisis and trauma, EAP cannot provide peer support which is the foundation of the ICISF intervention models we utilize. Peer support has been the key to success in instilling trust of our employees to participate in crisis intervention services. EAP may be perceived as a “threat” especially if an investigation is involved since EAP is also a management tool used to address performance and behavioral issues in the workplace. Other common challenges with EAP are their lack of available trauma specialists. Many EAP clinicians specialize in substance abuse, domestic problems, and other behavioral issues. In rural areas lack of EAP resources in general is an issue.

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### EAP

**EAP:** Peer Supporters are not grief and loss counselors. Peer Supporters are trained for specific crisis intervention techniques and are not generally considered peers to “the general population.” Death or a personal tragedy experienced by an employee or one of their family members may be devastating and be difficult for many. The death may cause a great sadness but not completely overwhelm co-workers and employees normal coping mechanisms. In this case, providing grief and loss assistance through EAP is appropriate.

Finally, EAP services are almost always recommended by Peer Support Groups for any needed follow-up care. This allows time for individuals to find a suitable clinician who specializes in trauma who they are comfortable in talking to.



## Agency Administrator Roles and Responsibilities

**1. Identification of Event:** The Agency Administrator is responsible for identifying an event as a critical incident. The Agency Administrator is the highest ranking agency line officer with direct responsibility for the location of the incident/personnel involved in the incident. Forest Service and BLM Critical Incident Response Coordinators are available to assist in the formal determination of a critical incident.

**2. Request Critical Incident Stress Management Intervention through the Appropriate Geographic Area Coordination Center (GACC):** When an order is placed a Critical Incident Stress Management Coordinator will be assigned who will work with the Agency Administrator and designated Peer Group Leader to determine the appropriate response protocols, timeframes, and decide the size and make-up of the group.

Often a CIPS group member will arrive before the group leader, peer supports or the clinician. The individual will assist with any immediate needs, meet with the ordering Agency Administrator to gather facts, determine timelines, make an assessment of the impacted individuals and groups, and brief the Agency Administrator on the process. This “liaison” will initiate logistical support, determine meeting times and locations, arrange for facilities etc.

**3. Manage Information about the Critical Incident:** Acknowledge to employees that the critical incident has occurred. By providing factual information to your employees, you can help prevent rumors from spreading. Provide a consistent message to all groups concerning the incident. Address any rumors that may be circulating, or concerns employees may voice.



**4. Support Employees:** Employees who have experienced trauma respond best to information, structure, peer support, and instructions on what to expect next. Find out what employees are planning to do with their time once they leave work and provide accountability partners. Encourage them to spend time with friends or family members. Coordinate with staff to identify the employees most affected by the traumatic event and offer them a quiet place to be, but don't force them to be isolated if they'd prefer to stay with their co-workers.

**5. Provide Information to the CIPS Group:** The Agency Administrator or designee is responsible for providing the Critical Incident Support Coordinator with information about the incident. The Agency Administrator is responsible for providing a budget code for expenses associated with CIPS Group response (and Mental Health Professional, if applicable). The Peer Support Group Coordinator will assist in determining a location for facility for CIPS meetings.

The Agency Administrator or designee will make time to receive a briefing from the Critical Incident Support Coordinator or their Point of Contact. The Agency Administrator or designee is also responsible for providing the CIPS Group Leader with contact information for the EAP provider and/or other resources that may be available to provide support within their local area.



## Definitions

**Critical Incident Stress Management:** Commonly referred to as “CISM” is a comprehensive, phase sensitive, integrated, multi-component approach to crisis intervention. CISM is a coordinated program of tactics that are linked and blended together to alleviate the reactions to traumatic experiences.

**Catastrophic Incident:** Catastrophic incidents are those situations which have an extreme impact on numerous individuals or organizations. These incidents may draw significant media attention. The level of trauma to personnel, families and a community is often substantial.

**National Critical Incident Peer Support Program:** The National Critical Incident Peer Support Program establishes and maintains the national framework, recruits peers, coordinates training sessions and workshops, and seeks out new clinicians, stays current with research, technology, and other initiatives in trauma and crisis management to enhance the program.

### **Critical Incident Peer Support Group:**

A group of individuals consisting of fire, aviation, and possibly other related peers which includes a licensed Mental Health Care Professional trained in crisis intervention that specializes in trauma and is familiar with the wildland fire community. The CIPS Group will have a CIPS Group Leader, a mental health care professional and usually three or four peer group members. The actual size of the group depends on the incident, numbers of individuals affected, geographic area distances between affected groups, and the impacts to the event on the local (or other) organizations. The CIPS group is assembled by the CIPS Coordinator.



**Crisis Management Briefing (CMB):** This is a structured meeting designed to provide information about the incident, control rumors, educate about symptoms of distress, inform about basic stress management, and identify resources available for continued support if desired. The goals of a CMB include providing factual information, instill a sense of leadership and reduce chaos. The CMB is designed to assist those involved directly or indirectly with the incident with information and is not intended for the media.

**Defusing:** A three-step crisis intervention tool designed to assist a homogenous group of people after an exposure to the same significant traumatic event. The purpose of a defusing is to mitigate the impact of the event, accelerate the recovery process, and assist the need for additional services. **The defusing was never intended for use on a single primary victim.**

**Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD):** Often provided as a seven-step crisis intervention tool designed to assist a homogenous group of people after an exposure to the same significant traumatic event. It may be used as part of an integrated package of interventions within the Critical Incident Peer Support response. A CISD requires that a licensed Mental Health Care Professional be present when this intervention method is applied.

CISD is the most misunderstood and overused term in Critical Incident Stress Management processes. The term “debriefing” is used loosely and as a “catch all” for a variety of crisis intervention protocols that are substantially different than the CISD application and structure.

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