S.O.P. #: TACTICAL OPERATIONS #32
SUBJECT: SIGNAL 13 PROCEDURES
DIVISION: EMERGENCY OPERATIONS
7/1/23

Objective: To provide a standardized means of notifying, responding to, and mitigating incidents where a crew has found themselves in a volatile or life-threatening environment. This policy is separate from the Mayday procedure (see Tactical 09) which is utilized during incidents involving fire units in an IDLH environment.

Section 1: Purpose

A. To improve the safety of Fire and Police Department personnel on Signal 13 Incidents.

B. To define activation, dispatch, and response procedures for Signal 13 incidents.

C. To outline how to cancel a Signal 13 activation and the review process that follows each incident.

Section 2: Definitions

A. **Emergency Activation Button (EAB)** - The orange-colored button located on the top of all portable radios, the top of the portable radio remote-speaker microphone, and the face of mobile radios.

B. **Restricted Talkgroup** – A mechanism to quickly and efficiently limit and control radio transmissions. When initiated as part of this policy, *all radio transmissions* on a Restricted Talkgroup will be limited to the crew(s) in distress, Dispatch, and the Incident Commander (or responding Chief Officer). All other radio transmissions will be prohibited.

C. **Ruthless Pre-Emption** - Provides a radio with priority radio usage over all other portable and mobile radios on the entire county radio system except for Dispatch. This also allows the user to cut-off another user transmitting on the same channel and immediately transmit.

D. **"Signal 13"** - A special term that indicates a situation when the lives of Fire or Police personnel are in peril.

E. **"Squad Ninety-Nine"** – A fictitious unit designation that carries the same meaning and response as "Signal 13" but has a less likely chance of alerting an attentive aggressor. This phrase should only be used as an alternative to the primary phrase of "Signal 13" in the attentive aggressor situation.

Section 3: Radio Emergency Mode

    A. Pressing the EAB for *one second* will cause the radio to emit a medium-pitch tone four times and display ***Emergency*** to indicate that it has entered this mode. The display screen(s) will

    B. also change to orange and the LED lights will flash. This mode activates an audible and visual alarm on all Dispatch consoles.

    C. Pressing the EAB enables ***Ruthless Pre-Emption***.

    D. Pressing the EAB increases the push-to-talk (PTT) transmission time-out from 30 to 60 seconds.

    E. If a radio is changed to a different talkgroup while in Emergency mode, the Emergency mode will follow the change and create a new activation on the new talkgroup.

    F. The *Emergency Keep-Alive* feature ***prevents the radio from being turned off*** when it is in Emergency mode. The user must exit Emergency mode by depressing the EAB for two (2) seconds before turning off the radio.

    G. Pressing the EAB while on an out-of-county talkgroup that has Emergency capability will result in the same notification on that jurisdiction's Dispatch consoles. However, the out-of-county Dispatch Center will only be able to see that a Baltimore County unit is in Emergency mode (but not which specific unit). Baltimore County Dispatch will not receive any notification. The reverse applies when another jurisdiction's unit presses the EAB while on a Baltimore County talkgroup. ***It is especially important that mutual aid units operating in Baltimore County (or Baltimore County units in another jurisdiction) transmit their unit identity after activating Emergency mode***.

    H. If a radio has the *SCAN* feature enabled when the EAB is pressed, the *SCAN* feature will turn off.

    I. There are some situations where the EAB will not function:

        1. Pressing the EAB while on a talkgroup with no Emergency capability (talk-around channels, certain mutual aid channels, etc.) results in a low-pitched tone from the radio.

        2. Changing to a talkgroup with no Emergency capability while in Emergency mode will cause the radio display to show *No Emergency* and there will be a continuous

low-pitched tone until a capable talkgroup is selected or until the Emergency mode is disabled.

3. If the radio is out-of-range of the system or the emergency alarm is not acknowledged, a tone will sound, and the display will show *No Acknowledge*.

4. The EAB does not function if the radio is off.

J. To remove the radio from emergency mode, the EAB must be depressed for *two (2) seconds*.

Section 4: Declaration of a "Signal 13" by Fire Department Members

A. A Signal 13 activation is defined as (in order of preference) the following actions being taken by a member. ***Pressing the EAB before transmitting will gain priority on the radio system and should take place with all activations unless the audible/visual signals could alert an attentive aggressor***.

1. Verbalizing the phrase ***"Signal 13"*** over any radio talkgroup.

    a. ADVANTAGE: This method leaves no doubt in the dispatcher's mind that the Signal 13 is genuine, and the dispatcher will not waste time by challenging you (see C/D below). This method also leaves no doubt as to which unit is calling the Signal 13. This method is the quickest way of getting help.

    b. DISADVANTAGE: This method may make it apparent to an aggressor that you are calling for help.

2. Verbalizing the phrase ***"Squad Ninety-Nine"*** over any radio talkgroup. This phrase could be used as a response back to Dispatch, a request for a unit, etc. For example, even though you are on Engine 461, you would respond back to Dispatch after an EAB activation, *"Squad 99 is OK"* when prompted. You could also transmit *"Dispatch from Truck 8, start me Squad 99."*

    a. ADVANTAGE: This method provides the ability to activate the Signal 13 policy without alerting an attentive aggressor (with a commonly used phrase) that you are calling for help.

    b. DISADVANTAGE: This phrase is less commonly used and should only be used as an alternative to the phrase "Signal 13" in a scenario with an attentive aggressor.

3. Any other transmission or tone of voice that suggests the crew is in a life-threatening situation/environment. For example, keying up an open microphone with a crew member

saying/yelling, *"drop the knife," "put down the gun"*, or similar.

    a. ADVANTAGE: If you can discretely key up and keep an open mic while making these types of transmissions, the request for help may not be noticed by an attacker. The dispatcher will not waste time by challenging you (see Section C/D below).

    b. DISADVANTAGE: This method can leave the declaration to the dispatcher's discretion.

4. Activation via the EAB on a portable or mobile radio followed by a lack of an answer when prompted by Dispatch ***two (2) times over a thirty (30) second period***.

    a. ADVANTAGE: The aggressor may not realize that you have called for help. You can explain the four beeps by saying that the dispatcher is trying to call you. This method does not require you to speak. This method provides for ruthless pre-emption and increased transmission power from the radio.

    b. DISADVANTAGE: This method takes longer than the previous methods (due to the response needed back to the dispatcher). The audible/visual indicators on the radio could make the declaration known to an attacker which could escalate the situation. This method may be mistaken for a non-genuine Signal 13 if the EAB is pressed accidentally.

5. Activation of F11/Emergency button on the MDT followed by a lack of an answer when prompted by Dispatch ***two (2) times over a thirty (30) second period***.

    a. ADVANTAGE: This method can be used when radios are either not accessible or have been taken by an attacker and provides a last means of getting out a message.

    b. DISADVANTAGE: This method requires personnel to be in the unit itself and only applies to units equipped with an MDT. This method is also not as obvious at the Dispatch console and could also be confused for a non-genuine Signal 13 if pressed accidentally.

B. Personnel should attempt to escape threatening/dangerous situations and should position themselves between an aggressor and the exit prior to declaring a Signal 13 if possible.

C. It is preferable to use more than one of these methods simultaneously if possible (e.g., If you can retreat to the unit and can press the EAB, transmit on the radio, and press the MDT).

D. If necessary, units should consider turning the volume down (not off) on all nearby radios as subsequent transmissions will likely alert an attentive aggressor that something is happening.

E. Once a Signal 13 is declared by a Fire Department member, no other reason or transmissions are needed for initiation of dispatch (i.e., A member **does not need to state a reason** for the Signal 13).

F. If possible, all activations should include a **WWW (Who, What, Where)** transmission. It should include the specific address if not on the scene of a call.

G. The term Signal 13 is also used by Baltimore County Police units to indicate an officer in distress. A Police declaration of a Signal 13 will follow their activation procedures but will carry the same Fire Department response profile listed in Section 6.

Section 5: Dispatch Procedures

A. In the case of an EAB or MDT activation without a verbal declaration, Dispatch shall authenticate the activation by trying to raise the unit via the *Alert 3 (Informational) Tone* and a prompt of **"(Unit #) check your display and advise"**. This tone and phrase will be repeated two (2) times over 30 seconds (with no response) before the activation will be considered a genuine Signal 13.

B. Once a Fire Department Signal 13 has been declared or authenticated, the dispatcher will immediately initiate the *Alert 2 (Pulsating / Warble) Tone* on the talkgroup followed by the announcement *"**This talkgroup is restricted for (Box #)**"*.

   1. If a Signal 13 is declared on the Main talkgroup, the unit in distress will first be prompted to change to their Divisional talkgroup (and that talkgroup will be restricted). If that is not possible or the unit does not respond, the Main talkgroup will become restricted. During that time, dispatching of calls will continue with minimal verbal transmissions (box area and call type only) to allow airtime to the unit in distress. All other transmissions (such as units going available or calling in station) should be done on a Divisional talkgroup.

   2. If a Signal 13 is declared while units are already operating on a tactical talkgroup (fire, rescue, hazmat, etc.), the talkgroup will be restricted, the Signal 13 assignment will be dispatched, and the Incident Commander (or responding Chief Officer if Incident Command has not been established) will be notified. They will determine whether units will re-locate to another talkgroup.

C. Dispatch will update the call type and send it to both police and fire dispatch to send additional resources to the last known location of the unit in distress. The Administrative Duty Officer (ADO) and Fire Department Dispatch Supervisor (FDX) will also be notified.

D. Fire department units enroute to the Signal 13 will be directed to respond on a separate monitored Tactical Talkgroup while also monitoring the Signal 13 talkgroup on another radio. For example, **"Respond on Tac 1-2, monitor Central"**.

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E. A notification will also be made on the Main talkgroup using the *Alert 3 (Informational) Tone* and the announcement *"**Talkgroup _____ is restricted for a Signal 13**"*.

F. Future calls dispatched to an alternate talkgroup will include a message at the end (e.g, "**Respond on Central, the East talkgroup is restricted**").

G. A message will be sent to all fire department MDT units indicating **"Signal 13 by (Unit #). Talkgroup _____ is restricted"**.

H. The dispatcher on the Divisional Talkgroup will then initiate "channel markers" which consist of a low-pitched "beep" every 10 seconds to indicate the talkgroup is restricted.

   1. All other units on the talkgroup shall switch over to the ***geographically counterclockwise*** talkgroup (i.e., East to Central, Central to West, West to East) for transmissions without any further announcement being needed (to allow maximum airtime to the unit in distress). Once units make this switch, the Dispatcher on the alternate talkgroup can direct units to another talkgroup if needed.

   2. If absolute silence is needed, a request can be made to turn off the channel markers.

I. When appropriate, the dispatcher should check on units initially and at 5-minute intervals to obtain additional information for responding fire and police units and to verify personnel safety.

J. Once the situation is under control, confirmed by either police or fire units:

   1. Dispatch will broadcast the *Alert 3 (Informational) Tone* followed by the announcement "**Dispatch to all units, the Signal 13 has been cleared and talkgroup _____ is no longer restricted**" and turn off the channel markers. The same announcement will be made on the Main talkgroup.

   2. An announcement will also be made on the alternate talkgroups to indicate that units can resume operating on their regular divisional talk groups.

   3. A message will be sent to all fire department MDT units indicating a **"Signal 13 by (Unit #) has been resolved."**

Section 6: Fire Department Response Profile and Procedures
A. During a Signal 13, responding units to the Signal 13 incident should not use the same radio talkgroup as the unit in distress in order to keep the radio talkgroup open for the involved crew per the Dispatch procedures above. The response will be made on the appropriate

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tactical talkgroup.

B. In addition to Police Department units, the following fire department units will be dispatched for any Signal 13 declared by a Fire or Police unit.

1. ALS Unit

2. Suppression Unit

3. EMS District Officer

4. EMS Shift Commander (EMS1/EMS7)

5. Battalion/Deputy Chief

C. Responding units can request additional resources as needed based on the possible threat or number of victims. If at any point there is an indication of an active threat, the response will be further upgraded per that SOP.

D. Responding units will need to consider scene safety, the nature of the situation, and the availability of Police when they determine the need to stage away from the incident. A staging area should be identified as soon as possible if one is to be used.

E. Responding units shall establish Unified Command with the Police Department to ensure shared information and use of resources.

F. A paging notification will be made to BCoFD Senior Staff by ADO for all Signal 13 activations by Fire Department units. If an out-of-County unit declares an emergency on a Baltimore County talkgroup, that jurisdiction will also be notified.

Section 7: Cancelling a Signal 13 Activation

A. If accidentally transmitted via the EAB or MDT, the unit should use the phrase ***"accidental"*** when challenged by Dispatch (e.g., ***"Medic 55 accidental")***.

B. When the scene becomes completely safe, a genuine Signal 13 can be cancelled by transmitting the following phrase to the dispatcher: *"**(Unit #) is OK, cancel the Signal 13**".*

C. The radio should also be removed from Emergency mode by depressing EAB for *two (2) seconds*.

Section 8: Review and Disposition

A. All Signal 13 activations by fire department units require completion of a Form 13 by ADO. This form contains a synopsis of the incident that will be forwarded to the responding Chief Officer along with audio recordings. The Chief Officer will review/investigate the incident with all involved crews and forward ideas for

improvement and best practices to the Safety Office.

B. Once reviewed by the Safety Office, a synopsis of each incident will be compiled and placed on BCnet with the circumstances, disposition, and lessons learned.