

Understanding Assaults on EMS Personnel: City of Austin EMS Department Assault Survey Results

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Background: At least one national research study indicates that approximately 60% of EMS personnel have experienced physical violence in the workplace and somewhere between 21-78% have experienced verbal abuse.¹ Internet searches reveal that communities across the United States are reporting increased violence against EMS providers. Even so, it is likely that assaults on EMS personnel are largely under-reported in the industry as clearinghouses for gathering EMS personnel assault data in the United States are under-used.

Objectives: To improve our understanding of assaults on ATCEMS personnel: Identify the number of personnel experiencing assaults in the workplace; assess the effectiveness of training provided by the department; evaluate reporting practices; assess the support provided to personnel who have been assaulted; and better understand the beliefs, attitudes, perceptions about assaults held by our personnel.

Methods: Two broad surveys were developed using Survey Monkey and distributed to two groups in the department for participation: Field personnel (445) and Communications personnel (50). Each survey was customized for each group; therefore, the surveys were not exact duplicates. Personnel were asked to answer the surveys on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Although some personnel skipped several questions, many answered most of the questions. Microsoft Excel was used to tabulate the results and the results were placed into tables in this report.

Results: Surveys were distributed via email to 445 Field personnel and 50 Comm personnel. The overall response rate was 47.19% (210) of field personnel and 52% (26) of communications personnel. In the field personnel group (Field) 79.52% were male and 19.52% were female while in the communication personnel group (Comm) 37.5% were male and 58.33% were female. In the Field group the largest age group of respondents was 30 to 39 (39.52%) and 40 to 49 (37.5%) in the Comm group. The majority of respondents in the Field

group had 0 to 14 years of tenure (166 or 79.4%). In the Comm group, two tenure groups represented the majority of responses with 41.67% indicating a tenure between 0 to 4 years and 29.17% with tenure from 15 to 20 years. Most of the respondents in both groups were Clinical Specialists with 53.59% in the Field group and 37.50% in the Comm group.

Responses to Multiple Choice Questions:

I have received training at ATCEMS to recognize individuals exhibiting aggressive behavior.		
	Field	Comm
Strongly Agree	8.61% (18)	25.00% (6)
Agree	51.67% (108)	37.50% (9)
Disagree	26.79% (56)	33.33% (8)
Strongly Disagree	12.92% (27)	4.17% (1)

I have received training at ATCEMS to recognize individuals that might exhibit aggressive behavior.		
	Field	Comm
Strongly Agree	7.18% (15)	12.00% (3)
Agree	47.37% (99)	52.00% (13)
Disagree	34.45% (72)	32.00% (8)
Strongly Disagree	11.00% (23)	4.00% (1)

I have received training at ATCEMS to help me initiate escape options when encountering individuals with aggressive behavior.		
	Field	Comm
Strongly Agree	5.29% (11)	NA
Agree	30.29% (63)	NA
Disagree	46.63% (97)	NA
Strongly Disagree	17.79% (37)	NA

I have received training at ATCEMS on how to deescalate a situation with an aggressive individual.		
	Field	Comm
Strongly Agree	3.85% (8)	13.04% (3)
Agree	33.17% (69)	47.83% (11)
Disagree	45.19% (94)	34.78% (8)
Strongly Disagree	17.79% (37)	4.35% (1)

Are you aware that ATCEMS has PEER Support and other counseling services available for employees involved in workplace assault.violence?		
	Field	Comm
Yes	90.95% (191)	100% (24)

No	9.05% (19)	0% (0)
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Provider assaults are an unavoidable risk of working in EMS as an industry.		
	Field	Comm
Strongly Agree	21.05% (44)	NA
Agree	48.80% (102)	NA
Disagree	23.92% (50)	NA
Strongly Disagree	6.22% (13)	NA

Verbal assaults are an unavoidable risk of working in EMS as an industry.		
	Field	Comm
Strongly Agree	NA	47.06% (8)
Agree	NA	47.06% (8)
Disagree	NA	5.88% (1)
Strongly Disagree	NA	0% (0)

Have you ever been assaulted during your EMS career?		
	Field	Comm
Yes	92.38% (194)	70.83% (17)

No	7.62% (16)	29.17% (7)
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Have you ever been verbally assaulted at ATCEMS within the last 2 years?		
	Field	Comm
Once	NA	13.33% (2)
More than once	NA	86.67% (13)

Have you ever been verbally assaulted while on duty with any EMS provider?		
	Field	Comm
Once	NA	6.25% (1)
More than once	NA	93.75% (16)

Have you ever been assaulted while on duty with any EMS provider?		
	Field	Comm
Once	19.34% (35)	NA
More than once	80.66% (146)	NA

How often have you been assaulted at ATCEMS within the last 2 years?		
	Field	Comm

Once	36.87% (66)	NA
More than once	63.13% (113)	NA

If you have been assaulted, did you report the incident to your supervisor?		
	Field	Comm
Yes	54.95% (100)	25.00% (4)
No	45.05% (82)	75.00% (12)

If you have ever reported an assault to your supervisor at ATCEMS, did your supervisor follow up with you?		
	Field	Comm
Yes	56.05% (88)	18.18% (2)
No	43.95% (69)	81.82% (9)

My supervisor encourages me to report assaults if they occur.		
	Field	Comm
Strongly Agree	30.00% (54)	13.33% (2)
Agree	46.11% (83)	26.67% (4)
Disagree	18.89% (34)	46.67% (7)
Strongly Disagree	5.00% (9)	13.33% (2)

My supervisor has discussed with me the importance of reporting assault incidents when they occur.		
	Field	Comm
Yes	41.11% (74)	26.67% (4)
No	58.89% (106)	73.33% (11)

If you have been assaulted at ATCEMS, did you file charges with law enforcement?		
	Field	Comm
Yes	43.59% (78)	NA
No	56.42% (101)	NA

When assaulted, I feel ATCEMS provided adequate support for me		
	Field	Comm
Strongly Agree	8.00% (14)	0% (0)
Agree	43.43% (76)	46.67% (7)
Disagree	35.43% (62)	33.33% (5)
Strongly Disagree	13.14% (23)	20.00% (3)

Other Findings

Most Field personnel said they were providing direct patient care (91.8%) when they were assaulted and that most assaults occurred in the back of the unit (92.9%). The top three conditions that field personnel thought contributed to violence included an attacker showing signs of impairment, exhibiting aggressive behavior, or possibly experiencing a mental or behavioral health condition. In the communications center, personnel identified people exhibiting aggressive behavior, experiencing a highly emotional environment, or possibly experiencing a mental or behavior health condition as contributing factors to verbal assaults.

Conclusions and Discussion

Personnel at ATCEMS are experiencing high numbers of assaults. Over 86% of Communication staff report having been verbally assaulted more than once in the last two years and 63% of Field personnel report being assaulted more than once in the same time period. It is estimated that even these high numbers do not reflect the true magnitude of assaults on ATCEMS personnel because assaults are likely under-reported and only cases involving injuries are reported most commonly.

Although 100% of ATCEMS personnel receive situational awareness and self-defense training, additional training in recognition of the potential for aggressive behavior, escape planning, threat avoidance, and de-escalation may be needed. Collaborative training with law enforcement officers and members of the legal system could improve reporting and prosecution of persons who assault EMS personnel. Equipping EMS Commanders with better training and tools for responding to personnel who report assaults could improve agency responsiveness, follow-up, engagement, and support when assaults happen. Personnel who are assaulted seem to be divided as to whether the department's support mechanisms are adequate and effort needs to be aimed at learning what kind of support is needed, when it should be delivered, and what personnel need and expect.

Finally, an important finding of this survey is how EMS personnel perceive the workplace violence that they are experiencing. More than 69% of Field personnel agreed with a statement that said assaults are an unavoidable risk of an EMS career and 94% of Comm personnel said that verbal assaults while on duty in the communication center are an unavoidable risk. There needs to be further study about this cultural element, its drivers, and how it connects to industry ideals such as the "EMS Culture of Safety" and the EMS Agenda 2050 vision of

being People Centered and its principle of becoming “Inherently Safe and Effective.”^{2,3}
Ultimately, assaults on a public servant should never be tolerated, even by those who believe the risk to be inherent in this industry.

Next Steps

The department recently trained a group of Improvement Leaders in improvement science. The training was based on the Model for Improvement established by the Institute of Healthcare Improvement (IHI). An improvement team will be assembled to continue work to reduce assaults on ATCEMS personnel and to begin to address the findings of this survey report. The team will focus on better reporting, enriched training, and work with law enforcement to learn more about recognition of potentially dangerous situations, de-escalation techniques, and other important strategies. Ultimately the team’s aim will be to reduce the number of assaults on ATCEMS personnel.

References

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