

Firefighters guidance note #5-02: Considerations for working alone

Keeping fire personnel safe when they are working alone during enforcement activities or other field work.

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On this page

1. Background
2. Concerns/hazards
3. Actions for employers
4. Working alone procedures
5. Safe practices for field activities
6. Safe practices for fire investigation activities
7. High risk activities to avoid when working alone
8. Applicable regulations, acts and standards
9. Related

Background

Firefighters may work alone during non-emergency response work.

Concerns/hazards

Firefighters may require medical, police or employer assistance, due to injury, accident or assault, for example.

Actions for employers

Employers should:

- develop and implement procedures for working alone, including procedures as part of their workplace violence program (see guidance note 6-13 Violence and harassment)
- consider alternatives to workers working alone, such as allowing use of the 'buddy system' in potentially high risk situations

Working alone procedures

Employers should consider the following in their procedures:

- determining situations in which workers must not work alone
- a reliable method for knowing the location of their workers at all times, for example, a check-in/check-out procedure for workers, by cell phone or radio, to a supervisor or dispatch centre, and preparing a daily work plan
- a predetermined response to distress calls from workers
- training for workers on how to recognize and avoid potentially violent situations
- training for workers on conflict resolution and mediation
- procedures to follow if an assault takes place
- providing information on high risk geographical areas to workers
- limiting the time of day visits can be made to high risk areas/clients
- keeping client records and informing workers of clients known to be aggressive, hostile or potentially violent

Safe practices for field activities

When you are carrying out field calls, such as serving official documents or conducting enforcement activities, you should:

- access all available information about a client before meeting with them
- arrange to meet clients in a 'safe' environment where other people are around, such as a restaurant, hotel lobby, or their office/workplace if at all possible

- wear comfortable, professional clothing and practical shoes which will enable a quick exit, if necessary
- wear or carry your identification badge, to show that you are acting in an official capacity and doing your job
- carry only what is necessary, avoiding large or numerous bags or cases
- always take a cell phone or radio, if provided, and keep it in an accessible location
- be alert and make mental notes of the surroundings when arriving at a new place
- know where the exits are at all times
- direct the client's movements, if necessary, to avoid allowing the client to come between you and the exit
- maintain a 'reactionary gap' between yourself and the client, out of reach of the average person's kicking distance
- sit across the table from the client to increase the gap, if possible.
- bring two copies of any written material, so that you can sit across from the client and avoid sitting beside them
- ask a colleague to come with you if something makes you feel uneasy
- discuss any feelings of discomfort or apprehension about an up-coming meeting with your supervisor
- keep records and indicate if the client is known to be aggressive, hostile or potentially violent, and include incidents that made you feel apprehensive

You should **not**:

- enter any situation or location where you feel threatened or unsafe
- remain in any situation or location that you feel has become or has the potential to become threatening or unsafe
- carry weapons of any type, including pepper spray, as weapons are dangerous and can be easily used against you
- post or announce your official schedule on social media
- hesitate to call for police assistance

Safe practices for fire investigation activities

When you are conducting fire investigation activities you should:

- follow all safety procedures established by the employer, such as wearing of personal protective equipment, accountability and electrical safety

High risk activities to avoid when working alone

You should avoid these high risk activities when working alone:

- working at heights or in elevator shafts
- working with electricity or with de-energized or locked out/tagged out equipment
- hazardous substances or materials
- hazardous equipment such as chainsaws
- materials at great pressure
- working with the public, where there is a potential for violence

Applicable regulations, acts and standards

Read:

- [Occupational Health and Safety Act](#)
 - clause 25(2)(a) for providing information and instruction to a worker
 - clause 25(2)(h) for taking every precaution reasonable to protect workers
 - sections 32.01 to 32.08 for protecting workers from violence and harassment
 - subsection 51(1) for reporting requirements if a worker is critically injured or killed
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Related

Ministry of Labour's [Workplace Violence and Workplace Harassment](#) for resources on workplace violence prevention

[Canadian Center for Occupational Safety and Health - Working Alone](#) for a fact sheet on working alone

Guidance note 2-2 The buddy system

Guidance note 6-13 Violence and harassment

This resource does not replace the *Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA)* and its regulations, and should not be used as or considered legal advice. Health and safety inspectors apply the law based on the facts in the workplace.