

## **First Responding Officer Gives Direction to Crime Scene**

Arguably, the most important person at a crime scene is the first officer to arrive. The first responding officer often makes or breaks a crime scene. The manner in which he initially handles a crime scene can dictate how things go in the overall investigation. The journey from crime to conviction begins when the first officer arrives. Let's take a look at some issues an officer can face if he's first at the scene.

When encountering a crime scene, the first responding officer needs to quickly do several things. Initially, the safety and well being of any individuals present is paramount. Removal of potential threats to self and others takes precedence over first aid to those already on the crime scene. This involves self protection for the officer, ensuring that he is safe and that the threat of additional victims is minimized. Next, the officer needs to care for the injured. If the victim is still alive, an attempt should be made to take a dying declaration. While it is possible that emergency medical personnel have been called to the scene, it may be necessary to administer first aid to any victims.

Once people at the scene have been attended to, the important work of crime scene investigation begins. Step one involves dealing with the evidence. First, make sure that all potential evidence is preserved. The first officer should try to find the entry and exit of the suspects and victims, and direct the emergency personnel to enter at another point or via a pathway that the officer has already established as a safe pathway. This is where the least evidence is disturbed. Remember, at this point, anything may be evidence and scrutinized in court. Before a crime scene is secured, it is easy to destroy evidence; the presence of relatives of victims or the officer himself can easily affect the state of the evidence. Be aware that suspects' friends or families of the victims may try to remove or alter important evidence from the crime scene. For example, family may attempt to make a suicide look like an accident in order to collect insurance money.

The scene may be chaotic with injuries, loss of life, and a host of witnesses and other people present but it is important that the first responding officer records as much information as possible. It may be too difficult to painstakingly write everything down, but a record (even just notes jotted in a notebook) will help to serve as a definitive chronicle of what happened. It may be used by investigators to decide how to proceed; by prosecutors to decide how to try the case; and by defense attorneys to question the police action. Everything from treatment of the injured to the apparent nature of the crime should be noted. Document what was seen, what was done, and who was there. In addition to the written notes, the officer should be making mental notes as he makes a visual inspection of the scene. If possible, the first officer can take unobtrusive photos of any crowds or people.

Again, the first officer to respond dictates the overall direction of the ensuing investigation. Remember: if the actions of the first responding officer are undocumented and poorly organized, then all the following events in the crime scene search may lack direction.

The first responding officer should secure and protect the scene focusing on the immediate area. By not attempting to go beyond human capacity, the officer should do whatever he can to gain control. As more officers arrive, the scene can be expanded and duties can be parceled out.

Dealing with victims is first priority, but dealing with witnesses is a close second. As quickly as possible, identify witnesses and keep them at the scene. Witnesses often have second thoughts, so opt for a thorough questioning at the scene. Keep witnesses separate to avoid collaboration of testimony. Memories fade and other issues may influence the decision of witnesses to cooperate later.

The first responding officer is tasked with getting the ball rolling, so to speak. He contacts the department with details of what he has and what he needs. Maybe he doesn't need more help; maybe he does. His estimation of manpower and expertise to properly process the scene is key to investigating the crime and prosecuting the perpetrator. Once additional crime scene officers arrive, the first responding officer should explain everything he saw and everything he did.

Of utmost importance is any actions taken by the first responding officer regarding weapons. A weapon may have been moved in order to make the scene more safe and secure or to allow the EMS to perform care for the victim. If that's the case, the officer needs to document what he moved and where.

The first responding officer holds a tremendous amount of responsibility not only for the crime scene but also for the overall investigation and ultimately the prosecution of the case. It is easy to tell a first responding officer what to do if he is part of a large department with dedicated crime scene officers and detectives to turn the crime scene over to. In smaller agencies, however, the first officer at the scene may end up taking on all those roles himself. He needs to know his limits and capabilities – and when to call other agencies with the right expertise.