

Respiratory Protection in Law Enforcement

Background

Respiratory protection is commonly used in law enforcement agencies. Some of the most common users are members of a specialized emergency response team, or SERT team.

Air-purifying type respirators are routinely used to protect officers during the use of riot control agents, where the air contaminant is known. Air-purifying respirators remove specific contaminants from the air using a filter.

Atmosphere-supplying respirators are used during operations such as clandestine meth lab investigations and response to terrorism acts involving CBRNE agents (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive) where the contaminant is unknown. Atmosphere-supplying respirators provide the user with breathing air from an independent source that is known to be safe. Examples include self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) and supplied air respirators (SARs).

A third type of respiratory protection is escape-only, which is designed to protect the user long enough for escape out of a hazardous atmosphere.

Safe Work Practices

If respiratory protection is issued to employees, the employer is responsible for addressing hazards associated with their use. This must be done through a worksite-specific, written respiratory protection program. An effective program must address, at minimum, the following elements:

- Selection of proper respirator
- Periodic medical evaluation and annual fit testing

- Annual training on proper use, maintenance, inspection, cleaning and storage using the manufacturer's instructions
- Annual review and update
- Recordkeeping

The respiratory protection program must be overseen by an appropriately trained and/or experienced administrator to ensure effectiveness.

Hazards

- Donning respiratory protection while conducting unplanned, physically demanding, high stress job operations, without being periodically evaluated by a physician or other licensed health care provider.
- Entering a hazardous atmosphere while wearing respiratory protection that has not been verified to correctly fit the user within the last year.
- Donning an air-purifying respirator to enter an unknown or oxygen deficient atmosphere.
- Using an air-purifying respirator with filtering cartridges not appropriate for the air contaminants.
- Improperly using an escape-only respirator to respond to a hazardous atmosphere.
- Storage of respirators in "go bags" and/or patrol vehicles where environmental conditions can vary widely, possibly resulting in degradation of the respirator.



- Long periods of respirator storage without inspection resulting in expired and/or damaged components.
- Using respiratory protection which has not been approved by the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH), such as military surplus gas masks.
- Lack of proper respirator decontamination after use.

Free & confidential assistance is available to public employers through the New York State Department of Labor Bureau of Public Employee Safety & Health (PESH) Consultation Program. To take advantage of these services, contact the nearest PESH office. A list can be found at: www.labor.state.ny.us/workerprotection/safetyhealth/DOSH_PESH.shtm

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Binghamton District Office

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