



Tennessee Department of Children's Services

## Protocol for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Program

Supplemental to DCS Policy: [20.28, Child Death Near-Death Response and Review](#)

### A. Introduction

The Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) program was developed by the Tennessee Public Safety Network (TPSN) to respond to the increasing stress and trauma experienced by law enforcement officers, other first responders, and their families. DCS staff are often first to respond to critical incidents related to child safety. Therefore, The Department of Children's Services (DCS) has partnered with the TN Public Safety Network to bring the model to DCS. Peer debriefings are found to be an effective and approachable way to support staff who face these adverse experiences at work. The personal cost of unrecognized and untreated stress, faced daily by DCS staff has a profound negative impact on their physical and emotional well-being. The Department is committed to addressing work related trauma and providing mental health recovery methods to strengthen the DCS workforce.

### B. Definitions

Critical Incident: Any incident or situation that is beyond the realm of a person's usual experiences, which causes the person to experience unusually strong emotions and has the potential to interfere with their ability to function immediately and in the future.

Peer Support Team: A specialized team of individuals trained in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing.

Peer Support Team Member: Any participant in the Critical Incident Stress Debrief process.

Defusing: A one-on-one or small group meeting between staff involved in the critical incident and Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. A Defusing typically occurs within hours of the incident and can be facilitated by a CISD within the same region. During the Defusing, a trained debriefer will speak to the staff involved and provide them with information about identifying symptoms of a stress reaction, management of those symptoms, and explain the process of the upcoming Debriefing.

Debriefing: A closed, confidential, discussion of a critical incident related to the feelings and perceptions of those directly involved in the event. It is intended to provide support, education, and an outlet for feelings and emotions associated with the event. Debriefings are not counseling sessions or a critique of the incident. The Debriefing should occur within 48-72 hours after the Defusing and must be conducted by CISDs outside of the debriefee's region.

Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD): An DCS staff person who has been trained by the TPSN in CISD. Members recognize and understand stress reactions during and after critical incidents.

**C. Confidentiality Statement**

1. Peer Support Team Members will maintain strict confidentiality, as per [Tenn. Code Ann. § 24-1-204](#), regarding matters discussed in debriefings. Everything that is discussed with Team Members while acting in his/her peer support role shall remain confidential. The only exceptions to the confidentiality rule are as follows:
  - a) There is reason to believe that a person presents a danger to him/herself or others. (E.g. threats or actions toward suicide, homicide, etc.).
  - b) There is a strong belief that a person has committed a criminal act.
  - c) There is a concern that child abuse/neglect has occurred. All concerns for child abuse/neglect are required to be reported to the Child Abuse Hotline, as per [Tenn. Code Ann. § 37-1-403](#).
2. Debriefing participants will be advised of the confidential nature of the meeting and the exceptions to the confidentiality rule at the beginning of each meeting and debriefing. Peer Support Team Members that become aware of any exceptions will discuss the exception ONLY with the proper authority in accordance with the circumstances. Any breach of confidentiality will result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

**D. Requesting a Critical Incident Debrief:**

1. Who makes the request?
  - a) Any DCS staff who is experiencing emotional stress resulting from a critical incident may submit a request for an in-person debriefing.
  - b) Any DCS Supervisor can request a debriefing.
  - c) To request a debriefing use the following link:  
[https://stateoftennessee.formstack.com/forms/critical\\_incident\\_debriefing\\_request](https://stateoftennessee.formstack.com/forms/critical_incident_debriefing_request).
2. The debriefing process may be requested when the following types of incidents occur:
  - a) Child Death/Near Death investigation.
  - b) Severe Physical Abuse investigation.
  - c) Situations where one's physical safety was threatened.
  - d) Sex trafficking investigation.
  - e) A child/youth on a staff member's immediate caseload died.
  - f) A parent on a staff member's immediate caseload died.

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- g) Extreme neglect cases.
  - h) Other incidents as identified by the appropriate Regional Operations and Statewide Services Regional Directors.
3. The request will include:
- a) Name of the requestor, email, and phone number.
  - b) Brief description of what type of incident occurred (can include the referral number and/or case recordings).
  - c) Who should be invited to attend (who else was involved in the incident and could benefit from the debriefing, e.g. Law Enforcement, Child Advocacy Center staff).
  - d) If you are requesting a one-on-one session or if there is someone who was involved in the incident that you would not want to attend a group debriefing with you.
  - e) A requested date and time for the debriefing, along with some secondary dates/times.

### **E. Processing a Critical Incident Debrief:**

1. Upon receipt of the Critical Incident Debrief request, the Program Manager or Designee will contact a CISD to conduct a Defusing with staff involved in the incident, typically within 24 (twenty-four) hours.
2. The Program Manager will contact CISDs from outside of the requestor's region, put together the team who will conduct the debriefing, and identify the group's leader.
3. The Program Manager will secure a location for the debriefing and then send a confirmation email/calendar appointment to the attendees.
4. The requestor will receive a response from the Program Manager within 24 (twenty-four) hours confirming the date, time, and location.
5. The Program Manager or Designee is responsible for notifying the TPSN of all reported incidents for which a debrief is requested.

### **F. Completing a Critical Incident Debrief:**

1. Upon arriving at the identified debriefing location, CISD Members will meet to discuss the critical incident details and identify the "Doorman." There is one "Doorman" identified for each debriefee present.
2. Immediately following that meeting, all of the attendees will gather, and the process begins.
3. The meeting will begin with Peer Support Team Member introductions, including name, county/region, and the types of critical incidents in which he/she has been involved.

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4. The debriefing will begin, and no breaks will be taken until the process is complete.
5. No recordings or written notes will be taken. Names of attendees will not be recorded anywhere, and everyone in attendance will be instructed to turn off cell phones or leave them outside the meeting.
6. At the conclusion of the debriefing, CISDs will remain on site to “debrief the debriefers”, ensuring that they are provided the opportunity to express any emotions experienced during the debriefing process. This also provides an opportunity for Debriefers to express concern for any of those who were debriefed. Concerns are directed to the group’s leader.
7. The group will identify the person(s) responsible for making follow-up phone calls with those debriefed.

### **G. Debriefers Training:**

The Program Manager will see that proper training, provided by the Tennessee Public Safety Network, is provided for all staff approved to become debriefers in order to maintain the integrity of the Critical Incident Stress Debriefing program.