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STANDARD

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Transit Exercises

Abstract: This standard discusses minimum practices for conducting transit exercises.

Keywords: conduct, design, discussion, exercise, evaluation, Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP), improvement planning, operations, preparedness.

Summary: This standard describes a systematic approach to designing and developing, conducting, evaluating, and initiating improvement planning for transit exercises. Exercises allow individuals, organizations and jurisdictions to assess preparedness, determine strengths and identify areas for improvement. Well-designed and well-executed exercises are effective means of assessing and validating policies, plans, procedures, training, equipment, assumptions and interagency agreements; clarifying roles and responsibilities; improving interagency coordination and communications; and identifying gaps in resources, among other benefits.

Scope and purpose: This standard provides general guidance in alignment with the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP). The intent of the document is to guide transit agencies of all sizes through the exercise design and development, conduct, evaluation and improvement planning process, while providing recommendations for the development of broader agency exercise programs.

This document represents a common viewpoint of those parties concerned with its provisions, namely transit operating/planning agencies, manufacturers, consultants, engineers and general interest groups. APTA standards are mandatory to the extent incorporated by an applicable statute or regulation. In some cases, federal and/or state regulations govern portions of a transit system's operations. In cases where there is a conflict or contradiction between an applicable law or regulation and this document, consult with a legal adviser to determine which document takes precedence.

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Introduction

This introduction is not part of APTA SS-SEM-S-004-09, "Transit Exercises."

APTA recommends the use of this document by:

- individuals or organizations that operate rail transit systems;
- individuals or organizations that contract with others for the operation of rail transit systems; and
- individuals or organizations that influence how rail transit systems are operated (including but not limited to consultants, designers and contractors).

Note on alternate practices

Individual rail transit systems may modify the practices in this standard to accommodate their specific equipment and mode of operation. APTA recognizes that some rail transit systems may have unique operating environments that make strict compliance with every provision of this standard impossible. As a result, certain rail transit systems may need to implement the standards and practices herein in ways that are more or less restrictive than this document prescribes. A rail transit system may develop alternates to APTA standards so long as the alternates are based on a safe operating history and are described and documented in the system's safety program plan (or another document that is referenced in the system safety program plan).

Documentation of alternate practices shall:

- identify the specific APTA rail transit safety standard requirements that cannot be met;
- state why each of these requirements cannot be met;
- describe the alternate methods used; and
- describe and substantiate how the alternate methods do not compromise safety and provide a level of safety equivalent to the practices in the APTA safety standard (operating histories or hazard analysis findings may be used to substantiate this claim).

Transit Exercises

1. Exercise overview

Exercises are planned events that provide a low-risk environment for individuals, organizations and jurisdictions to discuss and/or validate plans, policies, procedures and capabilities. For transit agencies, exercises are a critical tool for assessing overall preparedness, determining organizational strengths and identifying areas for improvement. They also provide transit agencies with the opportunity to familiarize personnel with their roles and responsibilities while also encouraging communication and collaboration across the agency and surrounding community.

By executing an exercise program, transit agencies may bolster their ability to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to and recover from all hazards, including security incidents, natural events and other emergencies.

1.1 Methodology

The Federal Emergency Management Agency developed the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program, which establishes fundamental guiding principles for exercises. HSEEP is a capabilities-based methodology that provides a standardized set of guidelines and consistent terminology for designing, developing, conducting and evaluating all types of exercises. Specifically, there are five components to the HSEEP cycle: program management, design and development, exercise conduct, exercise evaluation and improvement planning.

HSEEP doctrine is flexible, scalable and adaptable for use by the whole community, including transit agencies of various sizes, locations and modes. FEMA developed HSEEP content, tools and resources in alignment with the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and National Response Framework (NRF).

1.2 Types

HSEEP identifies two broad categories of exercises: discussion-based and operations-based.

1.2.1 Discussion-based exercises

Discussion-based exercises focus on strategic and policy-oriented issues, such as the development of an emergency communications plan at a specific transit station. These exercises are characterized by their focus on written plans, policies and procedures, and familiarization with codified or expected actions. A facilitator or presenter typically leads these conversations. There are four types of discussion-based exercises:

- **Seminar:** Orients participants to, or provides an overview of, authorities, strategies, plans, policies, procedures, protocols, response resources, or concepts and ideas.
- **Workshop:** Provides participants with a forum to update, develop or present new policies and procedures.

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- **Tabletop exercise (TTX):** Leverages a scenario to promote participant dialogue and understanding around concepts, plans, policies and procedures; to identify strengths and shortfalls; and/or to achieve a change in attitude.
- **Game:** Leverages an evolving and/or competitive scenario to invite participants to make decisions and discuss appropriate action in alignment with decision points in plans, policies and training.

1.2.2 Operations-based exercises

Operations-based exercises focus on validating established plans, roles and resources with real-time physical action, such as the evacuation of a train car for a simulated emergency. As such, operations-based exercises may feature first responders and transit agency personnel operating under the Incident Command System (ICS). Operations-based exercises are characterized by actual response, mobilization of equipment and resources, or commitment of personnel, sometimes over an extended period of time. An exercise director or controller typically leads these events. There are three types of operations-based exercises:

- **Drill:** Provides participants with a coordinated and supervised forum to test a single specific operation or function within an agency.
- **Functional exercise (FE):** Enables participants to evaluate functions and capabilities in a real-world, scenario-driven environment, but with simulated movement of personnel, equipment or other resources.
- **Full-scale exercise (FSE):** Assembles multiple agencies, jurisdictions and organizations to evaluate one or more functions, capabilities or mutual aid agreements in a real-world, scenario-driven environment with mobilized personnel, equipment and other resources.

2. Program management

Exercise program management functions in a cyclical manner, much as exercise planning does. It starts with a plan, a budget or a funding request; transitions to exercise execution; and finally completes a full cycle with improvement planning. Exercise program management involves several elements, including project management, budgeting, grant management, hiring, funding allocation, planning, reporting, improvement tracking and expenditure tracking. Transit agencies should continuously monitor these elements to ensure that exercises and exercise programs apply funding, time and resources effectively.

Additionally, transit agencies may seek to join external exercises hosted by partners such as local, regional, state and federal emergency management agencies. By leveraging external exercises to achieve transit agency objectives, transit agencies can save resources while fostering communication, coordination and other joint capabilities with other organizations.

2.1 Program oversight

Transit agencies should continuously engage executives and other senior leaders in exercise program activities. Senior leaders may provide guidance on the strategic direction of the exercise program as a whole or identify areas of focus and prioritization for specific events. Exercise practitioners should also work with senior leaders to scale their exercise programs and determine the appropriate level of funding, personnel and other resources.

2.2 Program priorities

Transit agencies should collaborate with senior leaders and other key stakeholders to determine exercise program priorities. By identifying priorities, exercise practitioners can ensure that their events discuss and/or validate plans, policies, procedures and capabilities critical to the transit agency and the surrounding

community. Priorities will also guide the development of exercise objectives. Per HSEEP, considerations may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- results of systemwide risk assessments¹
- results of passenger facility risk assessments
- natural hazards based on geographic location/climate
- security trends and other human-made hazards
- areas for improvement from real-world incidents
- areas for improvement from previous exercises
- federal, state and/or local mandates
- industry regulations and recommendations
- grant requirements
- training requirements

Exercise planners may use periodic Integrated Preparedness Planning Workshops as the venue for these discussions.

2.2.1 Integrated Preparedness Plan (IPP)

Transit agencies should develop an Integrated Preparedness Plan (IPP).² The IPP is a living document that records agency-wide threats and hazards and then identifies methods to mitigate or resolve them through exercise engagements or broader preparedness efforts. The IPP should inform exercise priorities. The plan itself should span multiple years and be subject to periodic reevaluation. Transit agencies should leverage the IPP process to develop their planning, training and exercise cycles.

3. Design and development

Individual exercises begin to take shape during the design and development phase. At this stage, transit agencies should begin to identify a planning team; convene planning meetings; and determine the exercise purpose, scope, objectives and scenario.

3.1 Planning team

Transit agencies should assemble an exercise planning team comprised of individuals, organizations and jurisdictions that will direct and manage the exercise. Together, planning team members will develop the foundation upon which the exercise is built and are responsible for exercise design, development, conduct and evaluation. Exercises require significant planning, creativity and preparation, and the planning team must use the hard work, experience and energy of all members to create and conduct an effective exercise. Interest, cooperation and commitment from members is essential for exercise success.

The size and scope of the exercise should determine the size and scope of the planning team. Transit agencies should assemble teams that are a manageable size yet include representation from all applicable stakeholders. Per HSEEP, planning team members may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- transit agency executives and other senior leaders
- individuals with knowledge of priority program areas, such as Operations, Safety, IT, Procurement and Facilities
- federal, state and local organizations identified in exercise plans, policies and procedures
- whole community partners identified in exercise plans, policies and procedures

¹ See APTA's "Security Risk Assessment Methodology for Public Transit."

² The Multi-Year Training and Exercise Plan was replaced by the IPP as of the January 2020 HSEEP revision.

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- law enforcement and emergency medical services
- advocates for individuals with disabilities or access and functional needs

Transit agencies may opt to designate an exercise director or coordinator. This person would be responsible for assigning tasks, tracking progress, guiding the overall planning process and ensuring the successful implementation of the exercise. The exercise director or coordinator may elect to assign additional leads focused on operations, logistics, evaluation or other key areas.

3.2 Planning meetings

Transit agencies should conduct exercise planning meetings. These standing meetings serve as a forum for the planning team to make key decisions and meet major milestones associated with exercise design and development. Planning team members will use this time to collaboratively identify the exercise purpose, determine its scope, develop objectives and other evaluation criteria, craft scenarios, draft documentation, and finalize logistics, among other activities. Per HSEEP, exercise planning meetings may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Concept and Objectives (C&O) Meeting:** Brainstorm exercise purpose, scope and objectives.
- **Initial Planning Meeting (IPM):** Refine and finalize exercise purpose, scope and objectives.
- **Midterm Planning Meeting (MPM):** Develop exercise scenario and timeline.
- **Master Scenario Events List (MSEL) Meeting:** Create detailed actions for operations-based exercises.
- **Final Planning Meeting (FPM):** Finalize exercise documentation and logistics.

Transit agencies may accomplish exercise milestones outside of formal meetings, as appropriate.

3.3 Exercise design components

Transit agencies should develop all exercise design components—including the purpose, scope, objectives and scenario—in alignment with senior leader guidance and program priorities.

3.3.1 Exercise purpose

Transit agencies should have a clear sense of the exercise purpose and should be able to concisely articulate its overall intent to set concrete expectations for participants. Exercise planners may opt to develop an exercise purpose statement to provide clarity on what the agency seeks to achieve.

3.3.2 Exercise scope

The exercise scope sets clear parameters for the exercise. It is the mechanism through which the planning team ensures that the event is sized appropriately. Factors that may influence the exercise scope include agency size, funding, personnel, scheduling and resource/equipment availability. When crafting the exercise scope, transit agencies should determine the exercise type (see Section 1.2), level of participation from internal and external partners, event location, and event duration, among other factors.

3.3.3 Exercise objectives

Exercise objectives describe the specific goals of the exercise. Transit agencies should coordinate with senior leaders to identify one or more program priorities on which to focus. The number of objectives should coincide with the exercise scope. Objectives will guide scenario design, conduct and evaluation.

Objectives should be sufficiently detailed; tailored to the audience; and specify any exercise plans, policies, procedures and proficiencies, as appropriate. Exercise objectives may occasionally differ by audience. For example, objectives for first responders may not be the same as objectives for transit operators or supervisors.

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HSEEP recommends that exercise objectives align to a common set of capabilities, such as the National Preparedness Goal’s five mission areas and 32 core capabilities, many of which apply to transit agencies.

Table 1 details the alignment of the 32 core capabilities within the five mission areas.

TABLE 1
National Preparedness Goal’s Mission Areas and Core Capabilities

Prevention	Protection	Mitigation	Response	Recovery
Planning				
Public Information and Warning				
Operational Coordination				
Intelligence and Information Sharing		Community Resilience Long-term Vulnerability Reduction Risk and Disaster Resilience Assessment Threats and Hazards Identification	Infrastructure Systems	
Interdiction and Disruption			Critical Transportation	Economic Recovery
Screening, Search, and Detection			Environmental Response/Health and Safety	Health and Social Services
Forensics and Attribution	Access Control and Identity Verification Cybersecurity Physical Protective Measures Risk Management Protection Programs and Activities Supply Chain Integrity and Security		Fatality Management Services	Housing National and Cultural Resources
			Fire Management and Suppression	
			Logistics and Supply Chain Management	
			Mass Care Services	
			Mass Search and Rescue Operations	
			On-scene Security, Protection, and Law Enforcement	
			Operational Communications	
			Public Health, Healthcare, and Emergency Medical Services	
			Situational Assessment	

HSEEP also recommends that transit agencies apply SMART principles when drafting exercise objectives:

- **Specific:** Defines the action(s) to be accomplished.
- **Measurable:** Includes a quantitative or qualitative benchmark for success.
- **Achievable:** Reflects a challenging but not impossible task.
- **Relevant:** Links directly to the mission of the agency.
- **Time-bound:** Features a time frame for completion.

3.3.4 Exercise scenario

The exercise scenario provides the backdrop that drives exercise discussion and activities. Transit agencies should develop scenarios that are risk-based and realistic to the organization and surrounding community. The scenario should be as realistic as possible, challenging to participants and in alignment with stated objectives. One scenario may address multiple core capabilities and objectives.

Table 2 provides sample language that demonstrates how transit agencies may write and align core capabilities, exercise objectives and exercise scenarios.

TABLE 2
 Example Core Capability, Objective and Scenario Alignment

Core Capability	Sample Objective	Sample Exercise Scenario
Operational Coordination	Demonstrate transit agency, first responder, emergency management and other stakeholder personnel’s ability to coordinate response activities with one another after a significant security incident.	An active assailant assaults and causes multiple casualties among passengers and transit agency staff at a transit facility.
Operational Communication	Assess the interoperability of communication networks used by transit agency and first responder personnel during an emergency.	
Public Information and Warning	Evaluate transit agency public information personnel’s ability to communicate coordinated, prompt, reliable and actionable information to the public.	An unexpected emergency requires a partial suspension of service.
Intelligence and Information Sharing	Assess the ability of transit and security stakeholders to report and share suspicious activity reports in accordance with established timelines and processes.	Frontline transit agency personnel observe an individual engaging in suspicious activity at a transit facility.
Physical Protective Measures	Evaluate how transit agency staff select, resource and implement risk-based physical protective measures within required time frames after a security threat.	The U.S. Department of Homeland Security issues a National Terrorism Advisory System Elevated Alert warning of a credible terrorist threat within the transit agency’s region.
Environmental Response/Health and Safety	Evaluate and implement fuel containment protocols within established time frames to prevent contamination of groundwater at a transit facility.	An accident at a transit yard causes a large fuel spill.

4. Exercise conduct

During exercise conduct, transit agencies will prepare for, manage and conclude exercise play.

4.1 Structure

Prior to conduct, transit agencies should consider the exercise structure. For discussion-based exercises, this may entail the creation of an agenda, the identification of a discussion format/cadence, or the inclusion of a breakout room discussion. For operations-based exercises, this may entail the development of a MSEL or creation of a control structure with associated control room locations, or cells.

4.2 Roles and responsibilities

Depending on the scope and structure of the exercise, transit agencies may assign multiple roles and responsibilities to ensure a successful event. These roles may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **(Lead) Facilitator/Presenter:** Guides the discussion-based exercise, confirms achievement of objectives, and ensures that exercise staff and participants understand and execute their roles and responsibilities.
- **(Lead) Controller:** Conducts the operations-based exercise, confirms achievement of objectives, and ensures that exercise staff and participants understand and execute their roles and responsibilities. Controllers may have specific domains (e.g., Safety Controller).
- **(Lead) Evaluator/Notetaker:** Captures and evaluates activities in relation to exercise objectives, conducts the “hot wash” and/or debrief, and ensures that evaluators and data collectors understand and execute their roles and responsibilities. Evaluators may have specific domains (e.g., Venue Evaluator) and should be familiar with the area of responsibility they are evaluating.
- **Lead:** Oversees specific facets of the exercise. Leads may have specific domains (e.g., Logistics Lead).
- **Players:** Participate in the exercise in accordance with plans, policies, procedures and capabilities.

4.3 Logistics

When conducting discussion- and operations-based exercises, transit agencies should consider coordinating the following logistics:

- meeting rooms, facilities and/or exercise play areas
- audiovisual equipment
- information technology equipment
- documentation, including situation manuals, controller/evaluator handbooks, MSEL, facilitation and evaluation guides, presentations, handouts, organizational plans, safety policies, waivers, and feedback forms, among others
- event registration, including sign-in sheets, name badges and table tents, as needed
- press releases and media policies
- parking and transportation
- refreshments

5. Exercise evaluation

Transit agencies should perform a formal evaluation of exercise conduct in accordance with the HSEEP guidance. During this process, evaluators will assess the agency’s performance in the presented scenario against exercise objectives and existing plans, document perceived strengths, and identify areas for improvement.

5.1 Evaluation methods

Evaluators and notetakers assess exercise conduct via direct observation, interviews, documentation (e.g., exercise evaluation guides or feedback forms), and hotwashes. Hotwashes are meetings that take place immediately after exercise conduct that provide players and other key stakeholders with the opportunity to self-identify strengths and areas for improvement. Exercise controllers, evaluators and other support staff may also conduct a separate debrief without players after exercise conduct.

Once collection is complete, evaluators will synthesize and examine the information. Depending on the results, they may opt to leverage various data analysis techniques, such as trend analyses and root cause analyses.

5.2 Evaluation documentation

Transit agencies should follow-up exercise conduct with the development of an after-action report/improvement plan (AAR/IP). An AAR/IP captures exercise observations and makes recommendations for post-exercise improvements.

Agencies should host an After Action Meeting (AAM) to share the draft AAR/IP with planning team members and key participants. The AAM should culminate with consensus on strengths, areas for improvement and corrective actions. The final AAR/IP should be submitted to exercise planners, participants and those with the authority to implement improvement plans.

5.2.1 After-Action Report (AAR)

An AAR includes a summary of exercise events, a performance analysis, and documentation of identified strengths and areas for improvement. The AAR format and length can differ by agency and will depend on exercise scope. The AAR should feature an accurate account of exercise performance in relation to stated objectives. It will also provide participants with the information needed to assess their agency's preparedness and to support their identification of needed resources and support.

5.2.2 Improvement Plan (IP)

An IP³ is a corrective actions road map, identifying and consolidating specific corrective actions, assigning those actions to responsible parties, and establishing target dates for action completion. HSEEP recommends developing corrective actions using SMART guidelines.

Transit agencies should develop mechanisms for following up with responsible parties on corrective action completion (e.g., scheduling a standing meeting six weeks after issuing the IP to track and confirm progress).

6. Improvement planning

Exercise evaluation is fundamentally linked to improvement planning. Evaluation identifies improvement opportunities, and improvement planning provides a disciplined process for implementing corrective actions. Specifically, improvement planning encourages agencies to take quick and decisive action on areas for improvement, thereby enhancing plans, policies, procedures and capabilities, as well as the agency's overall preparedness.

Transit agencies should continuously track the status of corrective actions documented in the IP and report to the appropriate agency authorities once complete.

7. Exercise considerations

7.1 Program requirements

Transit agencies must conduct exercises in accordance with all federal, state and/or local mandates. These mandates may come from organizations such as the Transportation Security Administration, Federal Transit Administration, Federal Railroad Administration or other government bodies. Transit agencies must also conduct exercises in accordance with any applicable industry, grant or agency-specific requirements. These requirements may differ by administering body, but may dictate the frequency, type and topic of exercises.

Agencies should consult with legal counsel to determine the exercise requirements that apply to them.

³ The Corrective Action Plan was replaced by the IP as of the January 2020 HSEEP revision.

7.2 “Building-block” approach

An effective exercise program uses a combination of exercise types to accomplish objectives and program priorities. Although each exercise type can be executed as a single activity, agencies may achieve greater results by adopting a “building-block” approach. In the progressive, “building-block” approach, exercises build on one another and expose participants to gradually increasing levels of exercise complexity.

This approach can occur within and across exercise types. For example, an agency can progress from a workshop to a TTX on a particular topic, or an operations-based exercise can build upon outcomes from a previously completed discussion-based exercise. For example, an FSE may focus on implementing and executing the plans, policies and procedures developed in a workshop and refined in a previous drill.

8. Resources

Transit agencies may pursue exercise support from one or more of the resources below:

- FEMA training, tools and resources include, but are not limited to:
 - [National Exercise Program \(NEP\)](#): Experienced exercise specialists in the FEMA National Exercise Division that offer no-cost support and technical assistance for exercises.
 - [HSEEP Preparedness Toolkit](#): Consolidated resource library for HSEEP doctrine, guides, tools, resources, training and templates.
 - [HSEEP Training Videos](#): YouTube videos providing an overview of key HSEEP topics.
 - [HSEEP webinars](#): FEMA-hosted online training events focused on the execution of and feedback for HSEEP doctrine.
 - [HSEEP E/L/K0146](#): Course taught by a certified instructor at the Emergency Management Institute (EMI) about exercise design and development, conduct, execution, and improvement planning.
 - [Master Exercise Practitioner Program \(MEPP\)](#): Series of classroom courses taught by certified instructors at EMI focused on advanced HSEEP principles.
- TSA training, tools and resources include, but are not limited to:
 - [Intermodal Security Training and Exercise Program \(I-STEP\)](#): Federal exercise program led by TSA that provides exercise, training and security planning tools and services to the transportation community.
 - [Exercise Information System \(EXIS\)](#): Online exercise tool developed by TSA that guides users through the exercise planning process and includes resources to design, document and evaluate transportation-focused exercises.

Transit agencies may modify or adapt these resources to meet their needs.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AAM	After-Action Meeting
AAR	After-Action Report
C&O	Concepts and Objectives
EMI	Emergency Management Institute
FE	functional exercise
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FPM	Final Planning Meeting
FSE	full-scale exercise
HSEEP	Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program
ICS	Incident Command System
IP	improvement plan
IPM	Initial Planning Meeting
IPP	Integrated Preparedness Plan
MEPP	Master Exercise Practitioner Program
MPM	Midterm Planning Meeting
MSEL	Master Scenario Events List
NIMS	National Incident Management System
NRF	National Response Framework
SMART	specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound
TSA	Transportation Security Administration
TTX	tabletop exercise

Document history

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