

# **“The Incident Scene will speak to you, you must listen for the sake of prevention”**

**By Rod Slings  
Iowa Department of Natural Resources  
Des Moines, Iowa United States of America**

International Hunter Education Association’s definition of a Hunting Incident:

*An occurrence or an event that results in the physical injury of death of a person or persons which involves the discharge or use of hunting implement while engaged in hunting activity.*

As hunting becomes more scrutinized, the focus of the safe use of firearms becomes more of an issue. The skill and knowledge of safe firearm handling is the foundation of keeping hunting the safe activity it has become. Research indicates there are 5.4 hunting incidents per 100,000 hunters per year reported to the International Hunter Education Association (IHEA) in the United States.

If we don’t know how hunting related firearm incidents occur, we can’t prevent them from happening. A good investigation of a hunting incident will result in a fact-finding mission of data collection, information recorded, a conclusion reached based on facts and the lesson in prevention learned. The information gathered detailing the incident is then provided to Hunter Education Program for curriculum focus to create awareness to hunters to the importance of responsible firearms safety and considerations of legislative change.

Planning for Data Collection:

Research or in other words, the gathering the factors of hunting related incidents are the key to prevention. There are a number of issues that must be considered. What are the rules or mandates set by the governmental agency overseeing this effort or are there any? Policy, past practice, reporting procedure as to who, what, when, where and how? Who will respond to the incident when it is reported? Is it law enforcement, emergency medical staff? What is the background and training of the investigator that is called to the incident? Sometimes it gets down to the interest or commitment of the investigator. With a multi-agency investigation, what is the past level of cooperation between these groups? Are the “skids greased” to make the investigation run smoothly? These are all legitimate questions in the search for facts.

It is said, “your investigators are only as good as their training.” Administrations of firearms safety or hunting safety programs must be prepared to budget and commit to make all investigators knowledgeable and prepared with the most up to date information and available.

Are the investigators selected to collect the facts mentally and physically prepared to meet the stress and demands of an investigation? Incident scenes can be very

overwhelming. The environment can be harsh based on temperature, terrain and what the human eye and mind can digest at the sight and condition of the victim involved.

Equipment will sometimes be the ultimate test to administrations commitment to the task of good investigations. Does each investigator have the necessary tools in each district or region to locate, protect, record, measure recover, analyze and preserve the facts, when the call comes in. Is the investigator proficient in the operation of these tools; are all tools in good working condition? Are backup tools available if needed in the case of equipment failure? Will these tools work properly in all types of environmental conditions? Not only does the investigator need tools, they need the tools readily available with in a moments notice. This can mean transporting them to remote incident locations.

Facts collected at an incident scene can be considered evidence. The proper care, recovery and preservation of evidence must be followed. Certain evidence may need to be submitted for analysis or evaluation to a laboratory. Following the chain of custody of this evidence to and from the lab is also very important. Photographs and other documents generated in the investigation will help tell the story of the incident. This information becomes the pieces of the puzzle that create the picture of the incident. This picture will create a clear view of what occurred.

The media always has a very strong interest in firearm related incidents. The spin in which a particular reporter or news agency puts on an incident may vary. When it comes to hunting the story should be: "It is not news because there are so many, it should be looked upon because there are so few." It is important to provide credit to all agencies when providing information to the media. In some cases, hunting incidents may be an attempt to cover something else. Do you have more than a hunting incident? A term used today, is "recreational homicide." This term is when someone uses mask the premeditated intent by saying "it was just an accident." What a great way to get rid of my wife's boy friend... take him hunting. These types of actions have no place being blamed on "it was just an accident." Good investigations must keep suicides and homicides from being added to the statistical data of hunting incidents.

As a result of facts gathered, legislation may "fix" a problem that has been identified. When it comes to hunting related incidents, blaze orange has had a major impact. Being scene can make a difference. When not wearing the required blaze orange, then law enforcement can step in to ensure compliance.

The final report should be a recipe guide of the facts that can be called upon later that will aide in the future prevention of incidents. Data exported from reports should be collected into an annual report and funneled into the hands of hunter education instructors. This recap of events should allow anyone to understand the sequence of events and the lessons learned from the incident. A key thing to remember is the report is only as good as the investigators signature at the bottom of the report. Remember, "The Incident Scene will speak to you, you must listen for the sake of prevention"