

# De-escalation



De-escalation uses techniques designed to safely stabilize a situation, reduce the immediacy of a threat, and resolve an incident with the least amount of force necessary.<sup>60</sup> The main goals of de-escalation are to:

- Defuse tense situations or conflicts
- Obtain voluntary compliance
- Prevent unnecessary use of force
- Use the least amount of force if force is required<sup>61</sup>

Campaign Zero's 8 Can't Wait initiative recommends that, before using force, officers be required to "use proper de-escalation techniques to decrease the likelihood that law enforcement officers will resort to force and to increase the likelihood of cooperation between law enforcement officers and members of the public."<sup>62</sup> Campaign Zero also recommends that officers determine whether an individual's lack of compliance results from factors like a medical condition, physical limitation, language barrier, etc.<sup>63</sup>

In Resolution 95, the Austin City Council said it was the City's official policy that "[u]se of force shall incorporate de-escalation tactics in all circumstances, and the response shall be proportionate to the seriousness of the offense and the threat of harm presented."<sup>64</sup>

APD's current policy lacks specificity and does not adequately address real-world situations that may lead to someone's inability to comply with officer instructions.

[Click here](#) for OPO's Phase I analysis of this policy topic.

## Analysis of community feedback on de-escalation

### Quantitative Data

- 49% of respondents said that APD's current de-escalation policy did not make them feel safe
- 66% of respondents said they believed that APD should add to the list of de-escalation techniques that officers can use
- 61% of respondents said that policies should acknowledge or address factors that affect someone's ability to follow an officer's orders, such as disability, a mental health condition, or fear

# De-escalation



## Qualitative Data

In this policy area, there was a split between respondents who felt that violence is integral to policing and those who thought it is not integral and should be de-emphasized. Despite this divide, the majority of respondents did express a desire for a robust list of techniques, and consideration of community members.

Those in favor of a change in APD policy reasoned that de-escalation could significantly benefit people living with mental health conditions, could improve community relations, and could increase safety for community members and officers. These respondents expressed support for de-emphasizing violence in policing and reducing the likelihood of an overreaction by an officer, which they believed would be furthered with a change in APD policy. Additionally, they expressed an interest in seeing more clarity and definition in policy regarding the tools and resources available to officers to allow de-escalation of a situation.

Those who responded that no change to APD policy was needed reasoned that situations in the field happen too quickly to follow rigid guidelines, that all tools and uses of force should be available to officers, and that people outside the police force should not set guidelines for officers. Further, respondents not in support of OPO's proposed policies expressed that officers' current training is adequate, that de-escalation creates an unsafe environment for police, and that officers need all options available to them.

## Below are selected comments from community feedback:

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“No, APD's current policies on use of force do not align with my ideas of a safe community. Our Austin community deserves more respect and consideration of preserving life at all costs. APD should not be using displaying such reckless behavior, especially when it comes to those in our community who battle mental health and drug problems. I would vote to completely reallocate all funds to APD to other community groups and practices that focus more on de-escalation, counseling, and refraining from shooting first if at all. I would also, if fund reallocation were not an available option, vote for APD to drastically change their current policies, as I have marked here today. There are too many police-involved shootings in our Austin community. Let's stop the violence.”

“APD's currently policies do not align with my idea of community safety. They leave officers under trained in de-escalation, mental health and alternatives to force tactics. Officers who are not trained in de-escalation techniques are at risk of escalating circumstances to the point of using deadly force on the citizens their apprehending. This puts the officers at risk as well as the citizens they are meant to be protecting.”

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# De-escalation



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“No, it does not. While it is not possible to lay out how officers should act in every possible interaction, more explicit guidance with clear examples would certainly provide more options for them, especially de-escalation techniques.”

“No. There are many factors that go into why a person may be acting a certain way. De-escalation techniques should always be used is the primary way of handling situations. Plenty of people use them successfully on a regular basis. Nurses use them, social workers use them, I use them. More training in this area could go a long way.”

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## Recommendations from community feedback

### Adopt OPO's amended recommendations.

OPO's preliminary review of APD's de-escalation policy highlighted five concerns:

- Under current policy, definitions for "de-escalation" and "de-escalation techniques" provide little detail and no examples.
- The term "potential force encounters" is not defined
- Current policy does not adequately acknowledge or address factors outside of deliberate noncompliance that may affect someone's ability to comply with officer commands
- The policy presents the potential for de-escalation efforts to fail but does not explain the reasons that may happen
- The current policy makes treating people with dignity optional

In its Phase I report, OPO made a series of recommendations to improve APD's policies. The table below compares APD's current policies and OPO's proposed recommendations with Austin City Council Resolution 95, 8 Can't Wait, and best practices from leading police organizations.

# De-escalation



**Table 5. Comparing OPO's Proposed Recommendations and APD's Current Policy on De-Escalation**

OPO's Proposed Recommendations	APD's Current Policy
<p>Aligns with information from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> <b>YES</b> Police Executive Research Forum <sup>65</sup></li> <li> <b>YES</b> International Association of Chiefs of Police <sup>66</sup></li> <li> <b>YES</b> 8 Can't Wait <sup>67</sup></li> <li> <b>YES</b> Austin City Council Resolution 95 <sup>68</sup></li> </ul>	<p>Aligns with information from:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Police Executive Research Forum* <sup>69</sup></li> <li> International Association of Chiefs of Police <sup>70</sup></li> <li> <b>NO</b> 8 Can't Wait <sup>71</sup></li> <li> <b>NO</b> Austin City Council Resolution 95 <sup>72</sup></li> </ul>

*\* Some parts of APD's current de-escalation policy align with information from the Police Executive Research Forum and the International Association of Chiefs of Police while others do not.<sup>73</sup> Particular issues include the following: (1) the tone of the policy does not adequately reinforce a commitment to de-escalation; (2) the policy does not follow a linear structure, which negatively impacts readability; (3) the policy needs to be updated to reflect current de-escalation training and model policies from THE International Association of Chiefs of Police and the Police Executive Research Forum (e.g., acknowledging that noncompliance may not be deliberate, but rather based on inability to comprehend, fear, etc).*

Since OPO made preliminary recommendations in January 2021, there have not been any updated best practices contradicting this information. Rather, in April 2021, the Police Executive Research Forum announced that it would be updating its de-escalation training program to incorporate the "Step Up and Step In" concept.<sup>74</sup> This concept challenges traditional policing by acknowledging and training for the reality that "[i]t's not just the culture of policing that sometimes gets in the way of good decision-making. It can also be the structure of police agencies themselves."<sup>75</sup>

Importantly, there is a broad range of de-escalation tactics and techniques, none of which eliminate an officer's ability to use physical force when necessary. Additionally, in 2020, the International Association of Chiefs of Police partnered with the University of Cincinnati Center for Police Research and Policy to conduct a study on the impact of de-escalation training developed by the Police Executive Research Forum.<sup>76</sup> The study revealed that the implementation of this training led to a decrease in citizen and officer injuries.<sup>77</sup>

# De-escalation



OPO has analyzed the community’s feedback. OPO has also considered current best practices, including the consensus among experts that incorporating de-escalation tactics into police-community encounters is safe and effective. After examining all of this information, OPO recommends that APD adopt OPO’s preliminary recommendations with the following amendments:

**Table 6. OPO’s Preliminary and Amended Recommendation to APD’s Policy on De-Escalation**

OPO’s Preliminary Recommendation GO 200.1.2 and GO 200.2	OPO’s Amended Recommendation GO 200.1.2 and GO 200.2
<p>200.1.2 DEFINITIONS</p> <p><i>De-escalation</i> – (1) The use of a range of techniques (e.g. communication, time, distance, cover, concealment, etc.) designed to create conditions that safely stabilize a situation and reduce the immediacy of a threat so that more time, options, and resources are available to resolve the situation using the least amount of force necessary. (2) Reducing or ending the use of force once a threat has diminished.</p> <p><i>De-escalation Techniques</i> – Tactics used by officers that are designed to increase the likelihood of gaining voluntary compliance and reduce the likelihood of using force during an encounter. Tactics may include, but are not limited to, the following: maintaining safe distance, active listening, clear communication, explaining what actions need to be taken and any alternatives, explaining the consequences of taking particular actions, and securing additional resources.</p>	<p>200.1.2 DEFINITIONS</p> <p><i>De-escalation</i> – (1) The use of a range of techniques (e.g. communication, time, distance, cover, concealment, etc.) designed to create conditions that safely stabilize a situation and reduce the immediacy of a threat so that more time, options, and resources are available to resolve the situation using the least amount of force necessary. (2) Reducing or ending the use of force once a threat has diminished.</p> <p><i>De-escalation Techniques</i> – Tactics used by officers that are designed to increase the likelihood of gaining voluntary compliance and reduce the likelihood of using force during an encounter. Tactics may include, but are not limited to, the following: maintaining safe distance, active listening, clear communication, explaining what actions need to be taken and any alternatives, explaining the consequences of taking particular actions, and securing additional resources.</p> <p><b><u>Critical Decision-Making Model (CDM) - The CDM is a five-step critical thinking process. The five steps are built around the core values of the department and the policing profession. The CDM guides officers through a process of collecting information; assessing the situation, threats, and risks; considering police powers and agency policy; identify options and determining the best course of action; and acting, reviewing and reassessing the situation.</u></b></p>

# De-escalation



Table 6. OPO's Preliminary and Amended Recommendation to APD's Policy on De-Escalation (Continued)

OPO's Preliminary Recommendation GO 200.1.2 and GO 200.2	OPO's Amended Recommendation GO 200.1.2 and GO 200.2
<p>200.2 DE-ESCALATION</p> <p>Officers shall safely incorporate appropriate de-escalation techniques in all circumstances, and shall approach all encounters with the goal of preventing or minimizing uses of force and, in situations where compliance is needed, gaining voluntary compliance.</p>	<p>200.2 DE-ESCALATION</p> <p>Officers shall safely incorporate appropriate de-escalation techniques in all circumstances, <b><u>particularly those that are part of the Critical Decision-Making Model</u></b>, and shall approach all encounters with the goal of preventing or minimizing uses of force and, in situations where compliance is needed, gaining voluntary compliance</p>

NOTE: New OPO recommendations are shown in **bold, underlined** text.  
[Click here](#) for more information about OPO's preliminary recommendation.

OPO's recommendations incorporate community feedback and/or the City of Austin's official position by:

- Acknowledging that noncompliance may not be deliberate or a threat, but instead related to the inability to hear, the inability to comprehend, fear, etc.
- Providing additional guidance on de-escalation tactics to be employed by officers
- Acknowledging the need for de-escalation tactics to be used in all encounters while still accounting for officer safety<sup>78</sup>

OPO's recommendations incorporate guidance from law enforcement research and policy organizations by:

- Acknowledging that noncompliance may not be deliberate or a threat, instead related to the inability to hear, the inability to comprehend, fear, etc.<sup>79</sup>
- Providing clear guidance on de-escalation tactics to be employed by officers<sup>80</sup>
- Clearly communicating that de-escalation is a priority while acknowledging the need for officer safety<sup>81</sup>