

PEO



By Barbara Y. Roberts

Safety

When do I walk away? When do I hold my ground?

AS YOU PREPARE TO GO TO WORK, do you commonly think about how your shift will include verbal cursing, being punched, threatened, or spat on? Sadly, some parking enforcement officers (PEOs) experience abuse as they simply do their job of issuing parking compliance tickets.

Every employee should be able to go to work knowing that at the end of their shift they can head home without any damage, be it physical or psychological. There are inherent risks and challenges with parking enforcement work, which begs the question: When do I walk away? And when do I defend myself?

The Risks

As a vendor who provides privatized parking enforcement services, we have a catalogue of dangerous situations PEOs have encountered. Receiving a parking ticket commonly invokes a visceral reaction from parkers when they come back to see the rectangular paper ticket affixed to their windshield. The average parker who sees a PEO issue on-street tickets typically worries more about the potential of being stuck with a \$55 ticket than considering that the PEO is simply enforcing parking compliance so congestion will subside.

Actual examples of dangerous situations experienced by our PEOs include a brick thrown through their vehicle window, gang members waiting for them to arrive, an unprovoked attack, and an irate violator who threw a punch. Most people have no idea that a PEO job entails danger.

The average parker who sees a PEO issue on-street tickets typically worries more about the potential of being stuck with a \$55 ticket than considering that the PEO is simply enforcing parking compliance so congestion will subside.



Policies and Administration

As you evaluate your enforcement program's PEO safety, the first consideration should be alignment with your municipality's policies and administration. As an example, be sure the city's policies focus on PEO safety



There are more options as handheld issuing devices are converting to smartphones. With automated issuance, an alert button can be used for assistance and issue escalation.

first and foremost, so it is OK to let a ticket go. Regarding meter time, too little time expired before ticketing can lead to the perception of predatory enforcement, which generates citizen animosity and creates legions of angry parkers. In some cities, parking policy gives a one- to three-minute grace period before ticketing. The public then sees enforcement as more fair because a driver will not receive a ticket immediately after the meter expires.

For issuance policy, when a person walks up while a PEO is issuing a ticket, does he or she still issue it? That is an important policy consideration, and I'd encourage you to consider a more liberal ticket cancellation policy.

Concerning administration, collaborate with local police to identify high-crime areas. In known danger spots, or during certain times of the day, is parking enforcement a necessity? A municipality's policies and administration should always be continuously reviewed to synchronize with PEO safety.

Using Technology

Advancements in market technologies and tools can improve your PEOs' safety. There are more options as handheld issuing devices are converting to smartphones. With automated issuance, an alert button can be used for assistance and issue escalation. Smartphones can automatically call for assistance during threatening situations. GPS-enabled vehicles or smartphones can monitor PEO locations when alerts trigger. Voice recordings or picture captures in handheld-ticketing applications can be supporting evidence in after-action reporting to substantiate field actions taken. Although technology features may add costs, PEO safety is invaluable.

Evaluating Imminent Threats

To improve safety, train your PEOs to be aware of their surroundings and evaluate the types of imminent threat. We suggest several tips:

- Know your routes, danger pockets, and mix up your routes.
- Keep watch for gang areas.

Table 1: Types of Imminent Threat

Threat Type	Description	Response	Action Plan
1 Passive	You don't feel in danger and your public interactions are without active response or resistance.	Defuse the situation using your words.	Improve your verbal communication skills. IPMI offers a Tactical Communications course designed to use effective communication to mitigate situations that are becoming unruly.
2 Passive Aggressive	You feel indirect resistance from your public interaction and sense that the situation could escalate to a more aggressive direct confrontation.	Continue to defuse a tense situation using your words, wherever possible.	Assess if you continue with your duties or leave the situation.
3 Aggressive	You feel your personal well-being is in immediate danger.	Leave the area and call for assistance.	If feasible, record voice documentation of the situation and/or take pictures of the scene.

- Be aware of mentally unstable people and unexpected behavior.
- Monitor altercations in the same area for patterns.
- Teach communication skills to defuse hostile situations.

As a part of PEO training, teach them to evaluate the type of threat they are encountering. In keeping with law enforcement, the three main types of imminent threat are passive, passive aggressive, and aggressive. There are no givens, but examples of each type of threat are shown in table 1 with a description, likely response, and indicative action plan.

Enhanced PEO Training

In most cases, more training is needed for PEOs to understand how to react in different situations. Such training should include:


- Carry yourself with confidence, not arrogance.
- Wear the appropriate safety equipment and clothing to maximize visibility.
- Enforcement is a distracted driving practice; therefore standardize cellphone and radio usage.
- Know where you should position yourself so you can see as much as possible while still completing the issuance of a notice of parking violation to avoid being struck by a passing vehicle, bicycle, or irate person.
- Know what tools your agency authorizes for self-defense.
- Know your own physical health, injuries, and limitations.
- Know what to do if someone grabs you around your neck, waist, hair, arms, or legs.
- If someone threatens you with a weapon, the time for talk is over. Leave the area immediately.
- Know what your reporting system requires to track and collect assault and incident data.

- What application should you use and what information does it need to analyze the data for policy, safety gear, or route modification changes?

Legislative Changes

Consider supporting legislative changes to support PEO safety. In Canada, assault on a parking enforcement officer or bylaw officer conducting traffic bylaw enforcement is punishable under the Criminal Code of Canada as assault on a peace officer and carries higher penalties than standard assault.

Finding the Right Answers

Due to the myriad of variables and scenarios that can occur in the life of a PEO, there are no absolutes regarding the perfect response to every incident. PEOs perform a very important job for municipalities to keep traffic flowing, increase turnover for economic development, and enforce parking compliance on our crowded streets to keep our citizens safe. But our PEOs deserve safety as well. For the questions “When do I walk away? And when do I defend myself?” there are no perfect answers, but new and different training is needed to improve safety as much as possible so every PEO gets home unharmed. 



BARBARA Y. ROBERTS is director, business development with Serco Inc. and a member of IPMI's Safety and Security Committee. She can be reached at barbara.roberts@serco-na.com.

This article is a product of the Safety & Security Committee's Safety for Parking Enforcement Officers Working Group.