



## Observe and Report: Does it Work?

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“Observe and report” security officers have gained popularity with private security firms over the past five years. These officers, when faced with danger or a need for physical intervention, are supposed to radio the police or authorities trained to handle dangerous situations. They do not intervene.

Observe and report offers advantages. It requires less training, which can lower costs, and creates fewer opportunities for claims of excessive force, which can also reduce a firm’s liability.

However, when not implemented properly, these officers can pose problems, as illustrated by the well-publicized 2010 Seattle train station incident. Here, a young victim found herself in a life-threatening situation and received little to no help from the observe and report officers on duty.

This tragedy cast a shadow on observe and report security officers. But the underlying problem was not that the officers couldn’t intervene physically, it was that they were not trained properly. The officers should have been trained to respond with more authority, communicate properly and act with speed.

### A Tragic Scene

In the security video broadcast across the country, the security officers working in Seattle’s King County Metro Transit appear to be milling around the station with no sense of urgency as a 15-year-old girl is attacked. They radio for police but say nothing as one of the attackers pushes the victim off the platform into the tunnel right-of-way, and then throws her to the ground and kicks her in the head.

The scene elicited outrage from onlookers, who rightfully asked, “How can security officers just stand by and watch? Why don’t they do something?”

Though Metro Transit police officers reportedly made it to the scene within five minutes, the damage had already been done. The young woman sustained significant injuries, and it was a blow to the public image of the city, as well as the security industry.

## **A Clear Protocol**

Yes, the officers' post orders in this case (which have since been changed) strictly prevented them from intervening physically, but many observers felt they could have done more. For instance, they could have moved faster to call the authorities, announced that police were on the way and acted with more authority. They could have used words instead of physical force.

This situation shows why the training of observe and report officers is so critical for private security firms. A protocol needs to be specifically stated in the post orders and communicated as clearly as possible. The officers need to fully understand who they need to report to in an emergency, and how. Failing to do so creates more liability.

With proper and continuous training, it is clear that security officers that maintain a high visibility presence and use verbal self defense (or verbal judo) to diffuse dangerous situations, enhance professionalism, and decrease complaints and liability.

In this case, were the post orders specific enough? The King County Metro security officers could have been trained, for example, to move quickly and say, "Stop! The police are on the way!" – taking control of the situation without putting their hands on anyone.

## **Understanding the Contract**

Another question that can be asked after the Seattle incident is whether King County Metro fully read its contract with the private security firm and understood what it meant to "respond in an emergency." This illustrates how firms should help their clients by educating them about all of their options – and the related costs.

Clients should know, for instance, that far fewer claims are filed for excessive force when officers are hired to observe and report. Yet, they should also fully understand what "observe and report" means and how it might affect their security services in the case of an emergency.

Perhaps the answer for some clients lies somewhere in the middle—an observe and report officer that does have some training to intervene in an emergency. Some firms have policies that state their observe and report security officers may intervene when necessary to protect themselves or others from immediate bodily harm.

In the end, while private security firms can help clients decide on the best solution, it's really up to each client to decide what level of officer they want and need.

## **What Security Firms Can Do**

To avoid the King County Metro type of tragedy, private security firms can take several steps.

- Educate clients about observe and report officers and their limitations for intervening in an emergency.
- Make sure post orders are clearly established with employees when they are trained, and conduct follow-up training annually. Be specific.
- Go over contracts with clients so that they fully understand the post orders and what action their officers will take should a potentially dangerous situation arise.

When observe and report is done properly, the benefits to your clients include decreased security costs, less liability and peace of mind.



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