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# Mass Shootings: Who Owns the Problem?

## *Mass shootings are multi-agency events*

**T**he increase in frequency and lethality of mass shootings has rightly generated public outrage. As for any evolving threat, emergency managers need to consider what, if any, is our role in regards to such events. Mass shootings fall into the risk category of low probability/high consequence events, a category which is the focus of much of our work. Far from being solely a law enforcement problem, mass shootings require a multi-agency response. Pre-planning that response, as we know, can save considerable time and effort at the time of the incident. Planning for multi-agency response is one of our primary responsibilities.

### **Define strategy**

One of the problems with planning for any incident is the tendency to treat the incident as unique instead of leveraging what we already have in place. We need to leave aside the emotional component of mass shootings and focus on the tasks that need to be performed and who will do them. We need to identify the unique agent generated needs posed by a mass shooting and develop a strategy for how we will deal with

them. At the same time, we need to take advantage of the systems we have already put in place to deal with response generated needs.

A good model for developing strategy is to treat a mass shooting as we would a terrorist event. Start with any plans you have for this type of incident and consider what differences, if any, are presented by a mass shooting. Many of the players will be the same as will the needed resources. Also consider variations: is there a difference between a mass shooting at a school and one at a public building or private business?

### **Recognize the need for multi-agency response**

There is no question that the initial lead for a mass shooting will be law enforcement. But take a minute to consider the other agencies that may be required to support the law enforcement response.

The typical response to this type of incident establishes three zones. There is the inner zone that is used to contain the scene and in which tactical response will take place. There is an intermediate zone where people

involved in the incident are moved for identification, medical triage, tactical debriefing, etc. The outer zone contains support functions such as media briefing areas, transportation, rest areas and so forth. The outer zone also serves as a point of release where victims who have been cleared can be reunited with their families and friends.

In considering the functions that must be performed in these three zones it becomes apparent that there are many more agencies involved than just law enforcement. And this does not even take into account mutual aid resources that may be called up or the influx of state and federal law enforcement agencies who may respond to the scene.

This assemblage of multiple agencies places a high premium on pre-planning. Some areas to consider:

- Unified command structure – Contrary to popular belief, unified command does not mean multiple commanders but means a single operational structure. Understanding how this will operate and how decisions will be made is not easily accomplished in the middle of a crisis.
- Joint information center– What information gets released to the media and who can authorize its release is essential when multiple agency public information officers converge on the scene. An on-scene joint information center ensures unity of message.
- Communications – This is, in theory, an area that should already have been worked out as it is a common problem in any operation. In this case, one of the unique differences from other incidents may be the need for

secure tactical channels for law enforcement use.

## Consider EOC activation

Response to a mass shooting is normally considered a tactical operation and most activities will take place at the scene. However, there may be good reasons for activating the emergency operations center to support the field operation. Some of the areas in which the EOC could support include:

- Coordinating and supporting mutual aid prior to passing operational control to the incident commander.
- Establishing a joint information center to support on scene PIOs.
- Providing information to elected officials.
- Hosting outside agencies.
- Coordinating resources such as transport, feeding, barrier materials, etc.

In short, the EOC can be used to relieve the incident commander of any support tasks not directly relevant to the tactical operation.

## Don't forget recovery

Unfortunately, the incident doesn't end with the initial response. There is still a need to preserve and process the site as a crime scene. There will be mental health needs among responders, survivors, and the general public. There will be a need for cleanup and reconstruction. An after action review is also essential. The EOC could potentially help with all of these.

Mass shootings are traumatic events and chaos is the norm. But this can be said of any major incident that produces mass casualties. Prior planning and coordination among responding agencies can do much to reduce the chaos and confusion at the scene of the incident. 