



Active Shooting Response

POWERPHONE

The Call Taker's Role

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In May 1998, in the days that followed a tragic school shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, I conducted a stress identification and management program as a PowerPhone instructor at the Jonesboro Police Department. During class, we discussed the role of the telecommunicator in detail and the impact the shootings had on them. When the class broke for lunch, I traveled with a few of the students to the Westside Middle School and stood overlooking the property where, just a few days earlier, four students and a teacher had lost their lives. The effect that this experience had on me led to my immediate request for an active shooter plan for my community.

As the weeks and months passed, we examined and created policies to deal with issues like access control, emergency preparedness, lockdown and evacuation, media relations, crime reporting, and the use of DARE or school resource officers in the school. After finishing these tasks, we discovered that a very vital part of the plan was missing: what was the role of the telecommunicator during an active shooting?

In every class I teach, I drive home the point that the first person on the scene of every crime, fire and medical emergency is the *initial call taker*. It's no different when the call for help involves

The Jefferson County 9-1-1 Center in Littleton, Colorado, was the hub of activity in the response to the Columbine High School shooting on

April 20, 1999. The assault on the high school by two students killed 13 and wounded 21 others, challenging responders and dispatchers alike. Inset: In the days following the school shooting, the Jefferson County dispatch center received numerous plaques, letters, and gifts of support from dispatchers across the country, recognizing the difficult situation they had been challenged with - and which continues to be a vivid memory.



RANDALL LARSON



an active shooting incident. When a frightened voice on the other end of the phone is looking for help, you are right on the scene. When the phones start to light up, will you be prepared?

WHAT CONSTITUTES AN ACTIVE SHOOTING INCIDENT?

An *active shooting* is an intense, uncontained incident involving one or more assailants who engage in a shooting spree with demonstrated intent to continuously harm multiple victims. Active shootings generally take place in populated areas - including schools,

malls, churches, hospitals, and government buildings.

The active shooter has a desire to kill and injure as many as possible, often without concern for his or her own safety or possible escape. The shooter may have intended victims, but will accept other targets as these opportunities arise, continuing to move throughout the chosen area until he or she is either stopped by law enforcement or commits suicide.

Some notable examples of active shootings that you may recall from media reports:

- Newington, Connecticut, March 6,



Police and students crowd the campus of Virginia Tech in the hours after the April 16, 2007 shooting that took the lives of 32 students and faculty.

1998. A disgruntled accountant at the Connecticut State Lottery Headquarters killed four co-workers before turning the gun on himself.

- Littleton, Colorado, April 20, 1999. Two students at Columbine High School killed 13 and injured 24 before taking their own lives.
- Blacksburg, Virginia, April 16, 2007. In the deadliest incident involving a single gunman in United States history, a Virginia Tech undergraduate kills 32 and injures 23 before committing suicide.
- Omaha, Nebraska, December 5, 2007. A 19-year-old man kills eight and injures four at the Westroads Mall before dying of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

As you can see from the above examples, there is an important point to remember: *the active shooter, in most cases, is willing to die for the purpose of his or her mission.*

As a telecommunicator, you play a vital role in these incidents. The questions you ask of callers, the decisions you make and the actions you take will help determine the safest and most productive route of entry for officers, aid in the

survival of the injured, and can help minimize casualties.

IMMEDIATE ACTION RAPID DEPLOYMENT TACTICS

The Columbine High School shootings taught us that the response of police officers to active shootings had to change. No longer could officers respond, set up a perimeter, and wait for specially trained tactical units to arrive. To save lives and minimize casualties, the concept of Immediate Action Rapid Deployment (IARD) has become the prescribed method for present day law enforcement response to an active shooting.

IARD works in the following manner: first, arriving officers will set up a quick perimeter, assess the situation, and determine the safest entry point. Officers will likely make this decision using information provided by telecommunicators. Officers on the scene will then take immediate action to stop the active shooter and prevent further loss of life - by going directly to the sound of gunfire. To assist and protect these officers, you must attempt to get vital information from callers regarding the sound and location of gunfire, a description of the

shooter (or shooters) and the potential presence of other hazards, such as explosives.

During the Westroads Mall shooting in Omaha, 9-1-1 call takers repeatedly asked each caller, “Do you know where the shooter is?” In an active shooting, each 9-1-1 caller is a new witness with potentially new and better information that can assist responders. Responders should be updated as you receive location and description information. Whenever possible, gather information from callers regarding all possible points of entrance and exit to the target location. This includes the location of elevators, stairwells, and the discovery of intentionally locked (or chained) exits. In the Virginia Tech shootings, for example, the shooter chained the three main entrance doors of an academic building shut prior to his rampage.

PROTECTING RESPONDERS

In addition to those tactics mentioned above, to best protect all responders the call taker’s checklist should also include the following:

- Obtain specific intelligence as it pertains to the exact location of the active shooter.

- Keep responders updated and eliminate surprises.
- Think in terms of potential multiples (multiple shooters, multiple victims, multiple responders, multiple responding agencies, etc.).
- Initiate integrated communication under your agency's Incident Command System.

PROTECTING VICTIMS

Protecting responders is only one portion of your responsibilities. The survival of victims and potential victims can be enhanced by giving critical pre-arrival instructions.

When speaking with callers, first determine whether they can talk without being exposed to danger. Callers should never be encouraged to interfere with or neutralize the shooter; rather, they should be instructed to get to safety as quickly as possible.

As with all incidents in progress, the caller should be kept on the phone *only if it is the safest environment*. If you determine that the environment is not the safest, your priority is to work with the caller to make it safer. For example, if the caller is in an open area, tell them to seek immediate shelter where they will not be visible to the shooter.

Remember, when citizens call 9-1-1 they are looking for assistance at the scene and on the phone. You should always consider ways to deter, delay or deny the shooter from gaining physical access to the caller.

PRE-ARRIVAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR CALLERS IN DANGER

The following instructions can help protect callers caught in the middle of an active shooting incident:

- Secure the immediate area - classroom, bathroom, office etc.
- Lock the door, if possible.
- Many doors in public buildings are solid core, and many walls are block and brick, which may provide some protection from bullets.
- Whether the door is locked or unlocked, block it using whatever is available - desks, file cabinets, boxes, or other furniture.
- If the shooter enters the room a caller is in and leaves, lock and barricade the door after the shooter exits.
- If safe, the caller may allow others to seek refuge with him or her.

- When secure inside a room, the caller should:
- Close blinds.
- Block windows.
- Turn off radios, televisions and computer monitors, if necessary.
- Silence cell phones.
- Seek protection behind walls, desks, file cabinets, etc.
- Place signs in exterior windows to identify the location of injured persons.
- Keep occupants calm and quiet.

THE AFTERMATH: CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

As a telecommunicator, you work feverishly to protect responders without compromising the safety of callers and victims. Active shootings are obviously an extremely stressful event to deal with. Your role is often overlooked because of the danger faced by on-scene responders. Communications personnel must be included in a mandatory critical incident stress debriefing conducted after the event.

According to recommendations from the United States Fire Administration in their technical report on the Columbine High School shooting (USFA-TR-129/April 1999), the following issues should be taken into consideration after an active shooting:

- Following an incident, there is an immediate need for affected personnel to have an outlet for understanding and processing their reactions.
- Many public safety personnel may refuse to leave after they are relieved.
- Most are emotionally and physically exhausted.
- Families and friends of personnel will need reassurance that these individuals are alright.
- Personnel released from duty after a major incident should not be left alone.
- If necessary, allow those alone to meet with others and seek support.
- Agency personnel should be alert to co-workers "distancing themselves" from the group.
- A critical incident stress debriefing should be scheduled for all personnel.

ESTABLISHING YOUR OWN ACTIVE SHOOTING PLAN

As I mentioned, my community didn't realize almost until the end of building our active shooting plan that we had not sought enough input from our telecom-

municators. You and your fellow telecommunicators should commit to taking an active role in helping your department and community plan and prepare for possible active shooting incidents.

You can take the following steps in helping to plan for active shootings:

- *Identify likely targets in your community.* With the prevalence of school violence, special attention must be paid to all schools in your community. Analyze the floor plans of these schools and determine how responders will approach and intervene in an active shooting. Also identify any other targets where a large number of people will be gathered (shopping malls, sports arenas, office parks, etc.). Many of you have participated in ride-along programs; you should also request a walk-along to discover these potential targets first-hand.
- *Review your internal communications procedures.* Ensure that you and your responders can communicate efficiently through an incident command system. Establish procedures for using common terminology and ensure clear understanding so that seconds can be saved in a crisis.
- *Make sure your team is adequately trained.* Just as police officers must continually refine their skills, so must telecommunicators. Make sure you and your fellow telecommunicators receive regular training in police-related communications and pre-arrival instructions, plus specialized training in areas such as hostage negotiations, suicide intervention and active shooting response.

Remember, planning and preparation are the only things that can help us minimize the fear, panic and chaos that accompany active shooting incidents. Your contribution is vital, so insist on being part of the process from day one. **9-1-1**

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