



# EFFECTIVE ACTIVE SHOOTER AND MASS CASUALTY RESPONSE PLANNING AND COMMUNICATIONS

by **Tom Veivia**

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### About the Author

Tom Veivia is a 26-year law enforcement veteran having served with the New York State Police and who recently retired as a Supervisory Special Agent in the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit in Stafford, Virginia. Tom was an 18-year member of the FBI New Haven office's SWAT Team and was the Senior Team Leader for the FBI's response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting in December of 2012. Tom was also involved in an FBI study of the Hartford Distributor's workplace shooting that occurred on August 3, 2010 in Manchester, Connecticut. During his service with the FBI Tom served as the New Haven Office Crisis Management Coordinator, Behavioral Analysis Unit Coordinator and was the Team Leader for the FBI's Northeast Child Abduction Rapid Deployment Team and has deployed nationwide providing operational support and instruction for kidnapping investigations. Tom is currently the Principal in the 302 Consulting Group, LLC. In Hamden, Connecticut.

## Effective Active Shooter and Mass Casualty Response Planning and Communications

When we view a potential crisis, be it an active shooter, terrorist attack, other mass casualty event or even a major case investigation such as a kidnapping, we tend to think, plan and organize our response in terms of what our individual or team's role, responsibility and mission would be. A patrol officer may plan his or her response to an active shooter call utilizing the most current tactical model for active shooters and what their job would be within that model. A SWAT operator may view their role individually whereas the SWAT Team Leader may view the response in terms of how his or her team would respond. This tends to create a "silo" effect where we plan, organize and train only within our specialty or specific area of responsibility.

As the team leader for the FBI SWAT team that responded to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December of 2012, I had viewed my primary mission prior to the event to be training and preparing my team to respond to an event such as this and tactically engage the shooter and end the killing. However, in the days, weeks and months that followed I realized that the role my team played was only a portion of what the response mandated and that the event required much more (Figure 1). The size and magnitude of it involved the management and employment of responders from many different agencies, both civilian and government, with each having a different role and purpose.

**Figure 1**



The unfortunate reality is that cases such as Sandy Hook are becoming a regular occurrence with the most recent being the sniper attack at the 91Music Festival in Las Vegas, Nevada that claimed 58 lives. In order to effectively address the incident or event, the approach needs to be undertaken with a *holistic approach* and from a crisis management perspective. Sandy Hook and Las Vegas involve more than active shooter tactics. It involves interagency communication and cooperation, consequence management, scene management, follow-on missions and dealing with the long-term impacts, just to name a few.

Adopting a crisis management approach, whether it be in anticipation of a planned event such as a music festival or addressing a response to a crisis event at a critical infrastructure location, will provide a comprehensive view of all parts of the event and how they are interconnected and addressed. Utilizing this approach and mindset will create a template that can be overlaid on more than just one location or event. This same approach can be utilized in a natural disaster, major case investigation or any other type of event that will trigger the response of multiple agencies from multiple disciplines.

In order to implement a crisis management approach, one first needs to understand the following phases of response to a critical event:

<b>1. Pre-event Planning and Training</b>	<b>2. Notification</b>
<b>3. Mobilization</b>	<b>4. Employment</b>
<b>5. De-Mobilization</b>	<b>6. Re-supply and Re-Training</b>

## 1. Pre-Event Planning and Training



This is likely the most crucial phase of response to any critical incident. How we approach this phase will dictate the effectiveness and success of response to any incident and our ability to coordinate resources and train personnel to respond and fulfill their role. It is important to begin this with a data collection mindset and start by defining the area of responsibility (AOR) and the critical locations to which your response

is designed to cover. This involves starting with a macro level view and moving down to the micro level. At the macro level a city police department would define their AOR as possibly the boundaries of the city. They would then begin to identify high threat sites or sites with significant vulnerabilities and potential for significant impact if an event occurred at that location.





An example of this would be a university police department that defines their AOR as the campus under their protection. Within the campus may be a sports venue, student union or student housing that could be significantly impactful if an event, such as an active shooter, were to take place there. Not only could there be a significant loss of life, the response would also prove complex and overwhelming if not properly planned for. Once the high priority locations have been identified the type of event that the department is preparing for should be defined. This could involve a planned event such as a demonstration or protest or an unplanned, reactive event such as an active shooter or terrorist attack.

Once the location and event have been identified it is important to assess what resources would be required to resolve the incident and also define what resources would be available. **Common mistakes that are made by many agencies are the underestimation of the resources needed, an over estimation of the resources available, and an inaccurate estimate of the agency's capabilities.** This is why it is important to coordinate the planning with any agency that may be called for mutual aid to assist in the event. Often times we make plans based upon certain assumptions that are inaccurate. For example, one agency that had requested an active shooter table top exercise assumed that a neighboring agency would have an armored vehicle available at the time of the scripted event. It wasn't until during the process of conducting the exercise that they learned that the asset they would request was no longer stored with that agency. That particular vehicle would now take an additional hour to respond if at all. This illustrated the need to engage all stakeholders during the planning phase so we can discuss rather than assume.

It will be during these discussions that important concepts of operation and details of the execution can be worked out. Important questions may include, but are not be limited to, how many patrols will respond at a given time, where will they stage, by which route will they approach and what equipment will they bring? All of this can be planned for as long as a reasonable amount of flexibility is built in. What cannot be planned for are the individuals or agencies that self-deploy without coordinating with the incident commander. However, even that can be built into the plan by *designating a staging or holding area for the "self-deployers" until they can be properly vetted and assigned.*

Identification of key locations is very important to facilitate an organized and effective response. The plans should designate, where practicable, casualty collection points, an incident command post, a family reunification point, an investigative command post and media staging areas, just to name a few. *It is important to draw a distinction between the incident command post and the investigative command post.* The incident command post will be down range and close to where the crisis is being resolved. The investigative

command post should be in a fixed location with ample space and amenities to conduct the investigation for a more protracted period. The incident command post will serve both purposes initially but the movement to the investigative command post should begin relatively quickly. Keep in mind that once the initial crisis has been resolved (the loss of life stopped and the victims rescued) the investigation will be starting in earnest.

Once the data collection and site surveys have been completed, the development of plan can be drafted. The plan should be drafted consistently with the capabilities and training level of the teams and individuals that will be responding to the crisis. This document will not address specific tactics or concepts of operation. Those will be based upon the techniques, tactics and procedures (TTPs) developed by the primary response agencies.

Once the plans have been drafted it is important to conduct a comprehensive review of the plans by **exercising them**. An exercise can be used to train the plan or test the plan and can be done through the use of table top exercises (TTX), communications exercises (CommEx), command post exercises (CPX) and field training exercises (FTX). Each exercise type builds on the previous and requires a different level of engagement. Of all the exercises, a well scripted and executed TTX can be one of the most effective use of time and resources. This allows you to walk through a new plan and identify potential points of failure. Critical to the success of the response is to have engagement of all stake holders and decision makers that will potentially respond to address the crisis. This includes both government and private sector partners. *One of the best ways to do this is to have someone from outside of the planning agency draft a script and moderate the exercise.* Often times when the exercise is conducted by the response planner, the outcome can be influenced or guided in such a way as to make it ineffective and not provide the ability to truly examine the plan for points of failure or improvement.

## 2. Notification



Notification of a crisis event can be challenging and includes messaging to more than just the groups that are expected to respond. Crisis messaging should target those responders as well as those who have a critical interest in the venue or crisis site. For example, if a critical event is occurring at a school or university you should expect that parents and loved ones of anyone

attending or working at the site will want to be aware of the situation. Part of the notification process should include mass notification of all parties.

Notification will likely be initiated at the patrol level for law enforcement and at the student level for schools going into lockdown. The public should be messaged so they will avoid an impacted area. An effective notification plan will include multiple communication platforms designed to provide specific messaging to the appropriate targeted audience. This will include radio dispatch for on-duty personnel, established hotlines for mutual aid requests, mass notification systems for personnel being recalled to duty, reverse 911 and the effective use of social media to communicate with the public. Finally, **the message needs to be controlled and deliberate.**

### 3. Mobilization



Mobilization of resources may seem like an obvious phase of crisis response. However, this can be the phase where critical items or steps get missed. It is in this phase where personnel and equipment are moved to designated sites or staging areas for utilization. It is in the planning phase where it is decided what will be immediately needed at the site for resolution of the crisis and what will be needed as a follow-on

for consequence management. Often times attempts are made to bring everything all at once and the response capabilities are not sufficient to facilitate this movement. For example, in an active shooter event the personnel and equipment that are immediately needed are those who are to end the killing and provide lifesaving assistance to those who are injured. Follow-on needs will be, for example, investigative personnel and equipment to conduct the follow-on missions and determine the who, what and why of the event.

In order to affect an orderly and efficient mobilization of resources it needs to be determined who is bringing what equipment and by what means are they getting there (remember my previous example of the armored vehicle). Furthermore, there needs to be some *redundancy* built into the plan. If only one person in a given agency is trained and certified to drive the command post vehicle and that person is away on vacation at the time of the crisis then that vehicle is not getting there in a timely manner. All of the steps of mobilizing resources need to be considered, decided and communicated.

## 4. Employment



Employment of personnel can be relatively straight forward provided that everyone understands the plan and that the techniques, tactics and procedures (TTPs) are constant and have been trained together. Most importantly, everyone has to know what the plan is and there has to be reliable communications for proper de-confliction and coordination. This becomes paramount for

officer safety. Not all SWAT teams utilize the same tactics or terminology. Even in describing the crisis site teams will use the “A, B, C or D” to refer to each side while others may use the “White, Red, Green or Black” side to describe the location. A miscommunication or a misunderstanding of the plan during a tactical operation can have catastrophic results. A blending of two teams together that use differing procedures will potentially end badly when the intent was to resolve the issue by combining them. The solution to this is proper pre-event training and communication.

Additionally, not all resources will be employed at the same time. Tactical personnel will move through a crisis site ahead of medical personnel. However, tactically trained medical personnel may move in conjunction with tactical personnel provided that they have trained in the same tactics or if they are already members of the tactical team. Evidence collection teams will be on standby and employed at an appropriate time as determined by the incident commander.

## 5. De-mobilization



Once aspects of the crisis have been resolved then the proper de-mobilization of personnel can be conducted. This may seem intuitive but it is important that this phase be conducted in coordination with the incident commander. The Incident Commander may have follow-on missions or may want to hold teams in reserve in the event they are needed. For example, in an active shooter situation there is always the

chance that there may be more than one subject and more than one intended target. By holding a team in reserve, it will allow the Incident Commander the flexibility to address these issues as needed.



Also, an event may be protracted and last beyond the capabilities of the teams and personnel involved. The de-mobilization of one team may not begin until another team has been mobilized and staged for employment. A protracted hostage situation is an example of where one SWAT team may be on station for an extended period of time and will need to be relieved by a fresh team. This would occur with proper coordination. However, this is not limited to just tactical operations. In a protracted investigation, such as a kidnapping investigation, one investigative team would not be released until properly relieved by the follow-on team.

## 6. Re-Supply and Re-Training



Re-supply and re-training begins with a sound after-action review of the event. This is kicked off by an immediate “hot-wash” of the response to the crisis and should be done informally while everything is fresh in everyone’s mind and can be done back at the team staging area. This will get people thinking and help bring out the fresh recollection of what each person saw and did.

A more formal after-action review (AAR) would include documentation of the lessons learned, what re-training or new training is needed to sustain or improve capabilities and is formalized in an after-action review report. A good “hot-wash” and AAR needs to be an *honest*, critical review of the facts of the event and how the response was conducted. The biggest limiting factor in conducting a good honest review is ego. I have witnessed a poor response to an event that concluded with plenty of “back slapping” and “congratulations” where the resolution was purely luck and good fortune. Improvements can’t be made without a critical review.

The after action should cover all aspects of the deployment to include personnel performance, communications, logistics and equipment, just to name a few. It should include a comprehensive review of the entire plan, how it was enacted, how it addressed the crisis and where changes and improvements can be made. Most importantly, the re-supply and re-training phase is where teams prep for the next crisis. The AAR will identify what training is required to sustain the capabilities and tactics that worked and what is needed to enhance or improve response capabilities.



## Communications

The main goal of communications planning is the interoperability and coordination among the many different agencies, teams and personnel that may respond to the crisis. Communications will often be the first point of failure in crisis response. This breakdown in communication can occur at varying levels from the interpersonal communication between command personnel to the macro-level failure of radio and telecommunications systems. Further, all communications need to be viewed as internal communications and external communications. Internal communications are what is interacted between response personnel and agencies whereas external communications would be the messaging to the public and those outside the response, including media.

For proper interoperability of people, the command and control of the event needs to be delineated clearly prior to response. Making decisions as critical as who is the Incident Commander can be challenging in the midst of the event. The intent and purpose of the **Incident Command System** is to create an organizational chart and a clear chain of command of response agencies during a crisis. It can be done ad hoc during the emergency, but is best to make this part of the original planning and incorporate the decision into the pre-event planning and training phase of development. Once there is “buy-in” from all stake holders the communications can begin seamlessly and in earnest.

As for the technical aspect of the communications plan, it is important to leverage the proper resources prior to the event. Understanding the radio band plan and the equipment of each responding agency is absolutely critical. Doing so allows for the procurement and allocation of radio communications equipment designed to facilitate the interconnectivity of radio systems. For example, as a gang investigator in 2008 I worked a joint investigation with the Connecticut State Police Statewide Narcotics Task Force. In order to conduct coordinated, joint surveillance operations we needed the ability to communicate simultaneously with state task force personnel and FBI Gang Task Force personnel. We did this by interconnecting radio systems on two different bands (HF and UHF) and created on larger radio network. As the FBI SWAT Senior Team Leader, I was issued a Connecticut State Police (CSP) hand held radio. During my response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting, I was able to communicate directly with the CSP Tactical Commander and seamlessly coordinate my team’s response and integrate with the CSP Emergency Services Unit while clearing the school.

Often times the limiting factor can be communications resources. There are ways to work around this issue. Leveraging resources outside of the agencies can be useful. In Connecticut, we had the ability to leverage the National Guard Civil Support Team who were full-time personnel that had the technical capabilities to inter-connect radios



systems. Another valuable resource would be the utilization of a **Tactical Operations Center (TOC)** created by members of each responding agency. The TOC can coordinate the movement of individual tactical teams and de-conflict where needed. This is the communication that saves lives.

Nearly as important as the issues above is a proper external communication plan. Proper planning allows for a unified, clear and concise message that is delivered to the public and facilitates meeting their needs without compromising the effectiveness of the response. This messaging in the early response to a crisis may be an advisory bulletin warning people to remain clear or the crisis site to messaging the families of possible victims as to where they can be reunited with loved ones. Effective use of social media, traditional news media and reverse 911 can aid in this effort.

Also, the creation of pre-drafted communications templates aid in the rapid dissemination of the message. Thinking of messaging before the event is very important to preventing the dissemination of a message that needs to be explained or retracted later because it was crafted in a time of crisis. Just as important is the designation of one point of contact for messaging. This could be the lead agency's public information officer. The Incident Commander needs the freedom to resolve the crisis while the communications point of contact should handle messaging which is coordinated with all stakeholders.

## Keys to Success

The key to making the plan work is maintaining flexibility and adapting to changing conditions and environments. During a crisis, there will be failures of people and equipment that can be entirely unanticipated and the result of simply bad luck and not a result of the quality of the person or equipment. In a tactical setting a breach could fail and delay the entry which could have an adverse result. Sometimes the only thing that can be anticipated is that unanticipated events can occur during the response to a crisis. The ability to accept changing conditions and environments will allow for the capacity to find a solution to the new problem. Even in a pre-planned assault not all aspects can be anticipated despite the best planning. When responding to a crisis incident, anticipating all possibilities can be more challenging given the fluid nature of the event. For example, anyone that has worked as a patrol officer knows that the radio call you receive from dispatch is not necessarily the call you find upon arrival and adapting to the change is crucial to success.

Adaptability in a crisis can include the need to modify tactics to respond to the new situation. Part of the adaptability will come through planning and training. However, it is important to expand the response capabilities to include different tactics to address



different environments. For example, a tactical team should be proficient in close quarter battle for strong hold assaults but also have the technical capabilities to conduct operations in open air assaults and small unit tactics. This will provide them the ability to respond to an active shooter in structure but also provide the ability to move to a secondary location or even to an open area as can be the case in hybrid target violence events such as the San Bernardino, California terror attack which started out as an attack at one location and moved to a running gun battle.

It should be clear by now that critical keys to success are cooperation and organization in advance of a crisis. Working with both governmental and private sector stakeholders and partners creates a collaborative environment and will facilitate the seamless integration of resources. Establishing an organizational response framework will aid in defining what “lane” each resource is in and what the proper chain of command will be. The time to debate and decide who is in charge and responsible for the response is not during the crisis. Much of this can be headed off prior to the event with proper crisis management. Additionally, the utilization of the Incident Command System (ICS) provides a standard by which resources are organized and managed. This is a proven system that works. Proper planning necessitates bringing everyone to the table.

## Making it Work

Managing your expectations will help in your ability to respond effectively. Often times a crisis response situation can be very overwhelming and the key to being able to work through it is to know that this is normal. Accepting that the conditions will not be perfect and circumstances will not necessarily fit exactly into what the plan calls for is the key to success. As a team leader for the FBI’s Child Abduction Rapid Deployment Team I could always anticipate that the command post at a kidnapping investigation was going to be chaotic and disorganized. By accepting this I was able to look for a solution. It should be noted that there is a difference between acceptance and resignation. Acceptance is knowing there is a problem yet knowing that there is a solution to the problem. Resignation, which is a fatal mindset, does not allow for problem solving. There is always time to take a breath and find a solution. This is done simply by slowing things down and moving deliberately and not hastily.

## Preparing for the Long Term

Finally, crisis response is often thought of in terms of solving the problem at hand and moving on to the next call. The impact that an event can have on personnel should be considered in your crisis response planning. This includes dealing with issues over the long term. *The event is not over when everyone goes home.* An event can affect people





in different ways and will be dependent upon how they personally viewed the event. In a mass casualty event, such as an active shooter at a school, some responders will respond to different images and stimuli based upon how they relate to the victims, suspects or even the location. An officer may view a child victim and see their own children. Officers may have an emotional response to the event days later when they walk into a school, business or other site that triggers a memory from their participation in responding to the crisis. Most importantly, two individuals can view the same event and it can have completely different effects on each of them.

The long-term planning for the response aftermath is viewed in short term (weeks), midterm (months) and long-term (years). Our brains are data collection devices that record everything we do, see and experience. Over the course of a long career we create a collection of both positive and negative experiences that are never deleted. Response to a crisis event can stitch those experiences together and create a long period of recovery. A good crisis response plan will include dealing with consequence management beyond the event itself.

Even though not every event, circumstance or eventuality can be planned for or anticipated, a collaboratively established plan for one type of event or location can create a response template that can be overlaid on another location or event and adapted to the environment. Doing this will create conditions for successful crisis resolution.

**“Every Battle is Won Before It Is Fought”**

**~Sun Tzu**



## About Everbridge

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