



THE UNITED STATES
CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

MASS SHOOTINGS IN AMERICA'S CITIES: MAYORS' EXPERIENCE AND LESSONS LEARNED

PREFACE

For too many times over too many years the U.S. Conference of Mayors has reached out to this nation's mayors with condolences and messages of support following the mass shootings of their cities' residents. While all of these tragic incidents share in the fact that large numbers of lives are lost, each is uniquely painful in the city where it occurs: for victims' families and friends, for many others in the larger community, and for all of the city officials, staff, and emergency personnel who play a role in both immediate and longer-term response to the injuries and deaths that have occurred.

Over the years, individual mayors who have experienced mass shootings in their cities have reached out personally to colleagues confronting the tragedy for the first time, knowing the shock the event has on the city as a whole and, for many reasons, on the mayor in particular. Each knows that it is the mayor who must lead the city's response, and each knows the added stress that a deadly incident on this scale brings to that leadership role.

The Winter Meeting of the Conference of Mayors, held in January 2020 in Washington, was attended by nine mayors whose cities had experienced mass shootings in recent years. Their presence in that meeting offered an opportunity for them, as a group, to share both their experiences and their personal feelings about what was required of them as mayors. Their goal in the session they held was to alert their audience to the need to prepare for a mass shooting; as often expressed by veterans of these tragedies, the question must not be *if* your city will experience a mass shooting, but *when!*

This report captures many of the key points offered that day by these mayors and later by key city staff involved in the response to one of the deadliest mass shooting incidents in our history. It is intended to provide guidance on the preparation that should take place in anticipation of an incident occurring; the critical importance of communication during the response to an incident; and the wide range of tasks that must be anticipated in the incident's wake. Sadly, while it is offered to all mayors in the hope that they will never have to call upon the preparation that is urged, it is likely that, in the months and years ahead, we all will be reaching out to some who will.

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MAYORS' EXPERIENCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The past decade has recorded more than a dozen of the deadliest mass shootings – those claiming at least 10 victims – that have occurred in the U.S. over the past 70 years.

Using the widely accepted definition of a mass shooting as one claiming at least four victims injured or killed, not including the shooter, the nation has averaged about three mass shootings in each of the last 50 years. All told, these incidents account for a very small proportion of the annual total of lives lost to gunfire in the U.S. – calculated to be about one quarter of 1 percent of each year's approximately 40,000 victims – but their impact on the cities in which they occur is always significant. Within the city there are always victims' families and friends needing comfort, and communities seeking information on what happened and explanations of why it happened. A mass shooting always attracts national, even international, news coverage of the incident, its impact, and its handling by local authorities.

EXPERIENCE

On January 24, the final day of the annual U.S. Conference of Mayors 2020 Winter Meeting in Washington, a group of nine mayors of cities that had experienced mass shootings in recent years – some in very recent months – assembled on stage to describe their personal experiences in response to the shock, confusion, pain, anger and action that followed attacks in which more than a few lives were lost, wounds were inflicted, and families and communities were shattered. [Watch the video recording of the session here.](#)

This mayors' presentation was designed to help their colleagues prepare to respond to a mass shooting in their city, should one occur, and to gain an understanding of the special role that a mayor must play in this situation and the strength and sensitivity that such a role requires. Moderated by Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, the chair of the Conference's Criminal and Social Justice Committee, each of the mayors was asked to reflect on the most important things they had learned in the aftermath of their city's mass shooting event. All incidents involved had occurred within the past five years and, owing to the national news media coverage each had received, were familiar to the mayors in the audience. Discussing their experiences were:

- Chattanooga Mayor Andy Berke, on a July 16, 2015 shooting in military facilities in which five personnel were killed and a Marine and a police officer were wounded.
- Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer, on a June 12, 2016 nightclub shooting in which 49 people were killed and 53 were wounded.
- Parkland, FL Mayor Christine Hunschofsky, on a February 14, 2018 high school shooting in which 17 people, 14 of them students, were killed and 17 were wounded.
- Annapolis Mayor Gavin Buckley, on a June 28, 2018 shooting in a newspaper office in which five people were killed and two were injured.
- Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto, on an October 27, 2018 synagogue shooting in which 11 people were killed and six were wounded.
- San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo, on a July 28, 2019 festival shooting in neighboring Gilroy in which three people were killed and 17 were wounded.

- El Paso Mayor Dee Margo, on an August 3, 2019 Walmart shooting in which 22 people were killed and 24 were wounded.
- Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley, on an August 4, 2019 shooting outside a bar in which nine people were killed and 17 were wounded.
- Jersey City Mayor Steven Fulop, on a December 10, 2019 shooting at a kosher market and in a cemetery in which four people, including a police detective, were killed and three others were wounded.

Subsequent to this meeting, Conference staff members were briefed by officials directly involved in the City of Orlando’s response to the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016 which, at that time, was the deadliest mass shooting incident in the modern history of the nation. Information provided in that briefing added valuable detail to the mayors’ recommendations presented here.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is understood at the outset that serving as mayor carries with it the responsibility to ensure public safety for all residents, and that this includes the responsibility to minimize the impact of a mass shooting on those residents, beginning with minimizing loss of life and extending through aiding families of victims and maintaining a sense of security city-wide. In various ways, the mayors of the mass shooting cities acknowledge that they must serve as the moral voice of their cities, with responsibility for social cohesion, and that they must set the tone for residents’ reaction to an incident – as expressed by one mayor, so that the incident is defined not by hate but by the city’s response to it.

While observations and recommendations of mayors experiencing mass shootings range across a wide range of responsibilities, they are summarized here under the broad headings of Advance Preparation, Communications, and Aftermath.

Advance Preparation

Emergency Team – Leaders of all city departments that have a role to play in responding to mass shooting incidents must be clearly designated as members of a team that will immediately be available to, and in communication with, the mayor during all stages of an incident. Members of the mayor’s executive staff must be included in this group. Responding to an incident, every team member is responsible for their piece of it, but the mayor is in charge of it all.

Training – Mayors must acknowledge the likelihood of mass shooting incidents and make preparation for incidents a priority, with ongoing training for personnel programmed throughout city government.

- All city departments should be involved and their roles in incident response clearly identified. Tabletop exercises have been shown to be effective and should be conducted.
- The active shooter training that today is an essential component of police departments should be extended to civilians throughout the community. Community organizations and private companies may have roles to play in carrying out this training.

Emergency Response Center – Because a central emergency response center must be activated quickly following an incident, community facilities suitable for this function must be identified in advance.

- Staffing plans for the center also must be made in advance. Qualified counselors willing and able to respond quickly to an incident must be identified. Sources of other volunteers that may be needed in the center also must be identified and potential volunteers must be vetted.
- The response center must accommodate the families of potential victims of incidents and must be clearly identified as the central gathering place for them. This is a critical need during periods immediately following shootings when persons who may have been killed or wounded are being identified.
- The response center must be separate from the victims' medical treatment facilities. Related to this, a shooting suspect requiring treatment must be kept apart from the victims; this is a sensitive issue for victims' families and the community as a whole.
- It is essential that the family center is kept strictly off limits for all members of the news media.

Call Center – Because of the volume of calls seeking a wide range of information on an incident – names and conditions of victims, chief among them – a call center must be established immediately following the incident and the public notified of its existence. Callers may be directed to a 311 line but because a large-scale incident may generate calls that exceed a 311 system's capacity, other universal call centers may have to be utilized. The availability of these centers should be known to emergency planners.

Hospital Capacity – The surge capacity of area hospitals should be known to planners so that multiple victims requiring treatment are not taken to facilities not equipped to handle them. Large-scale incidents may require a regional medical response.

Trauma Response – Mass shooting incidents are often traumatizing at many levels in a community, ranging from surviving shooting victims, uninjured survivors, families and friends of both, first responders and other city staff involved, and members of the community at large.

- Sources of trauma counseling should be identified in anticipation of the need and the city must be prepared to make it available to all seeking help, and to the community at large, as needs are identified.
- Within city government, a plan should be in place to debrief first responders as well as city staff directly involved in incident response and to assess the need for assistance ranging from self-help information to counseling.
- Mayors must be aware of the potential impact that mass shooting events may have on them personally. Such incidents may be more stressful than virtually any other that a mayor may encounter. One mayor said that when a therapist friend reached out to him following the shootings to ask if he was OK, he responded that he had not yet gotten emotional about it. She said this was because he was staying strong for his city. Two-and-a-half years later, the mayor said, he thinks about what happened every day and believes this probably will be the case forever.

Communications

Press Briefings – Communication with the public during and following an incident is chiefly the responsibility of the mayor. Beyond informing the press and public of what has happened and how the city is responding, the mayor sets the tone for how the incident may be understood by the community affected and the city as a whole. In this role, the mayor can counter anger, even hate, and can empower residents to express their feelings in ways leading to healing and positive outcomes.

- A press briefing by the mayor (and/or Police and/or Fire/EMT Chief, as appropriate) covering what is known about the incident should be held as soon as possible after the incident occurs, to clearly establish the mayor and first responder officials as the sources of accurate information on which both the press and public can rely.
- Beyond this, briefings should be held as soon and as often as critical information on the incident that can be shared becomes available. It should be made clear that the mayor and other officials will not respond to questions for which the requisite information is not yet available.
- Separate press briefings by other emergency managers, including Police and Fire/EMT Chiefs, must be coordinated with the mayor to ensure accuracy and consistency of information provided.
- Coordination among officials providing briefings is a priority need as urgent demands for information on an incident can be expected from national news organizations that will immediately dispatch news crews and reporters to the city. Responding to needs of reporters and news crews from outside the city requires additional staff time and other resources.
- Local news media are key to public understanding of all aspects of an incident; providing them with all relevant information as it becomes available must be a priority. The mayor may consider having local media embedded in the police response to an incident and/or arranging local media availabilities for the Police Chief and Fire/EMT Chief in the days following the incident.
- Local media must understand crime scene management, particularly as it relates to sensitive areas such as removal of bodies.

Interagency Coordination – Constant and reliable communication among city agencies and with outside agencies throughout the response to an incident is critical.

- Communication with and among all first responders throughout incident response must be assured; all first responders must be equipped with the communication devices that this requires.
- Where police department command posts are established in response to an incident, staff members representing the mayor's office should be allowed access in an effort to maximize coordination and communication.
- Beyond maintaining constant contact with the Police Chief and other public safety leaders, the mayor must be in close contact with agents of the federal government such as the FBI and ATF who will arrive on the scene of a mass shooting quickly and may, upon arrival, take over management of the incident scene and investigation.
- Federal agency management of incident scenes can create problems for city officials involved in incident response and for others, and these must be managed. In one city,

streets surrounding the incident site were closed to traffic, making it difficult for workers to get to jobs in the area and requiring the city's economic development staff to work with businesses that were less accessible during the period of the investigation.

Aftermath

Incident Victims – Following the securing of the incident site, wounded victims must immediately be stabilized, treated onsite, and transported to hospitals. Following the requisite crime scene investigation, which in the case of a large-scale event may require a significant amount of time, the fatalities must be removed to an appropriate facility for identification by family members, other appropriate persons, or by other means. Reporters and news crews must be barred from the shooting site while this is underway.

- An emergency response center (described above) may be designed to accommodate the identification and processing of fatalities.
- Following processing, arrangements to promptly transfer bodies to funeral homes should be made, allowing families and friends who are grieving to begin planning funerals and other memorials.

Community Reaction – A mass shooting targeting, or appearing to target, an ethnic or religious group may be expected to elicit an angry response in the victims' community. In this situation, the mayor's public statements must be designed to condemn what occurred, express support for the community affected, and minimize the potential for any public responses beyond peaceful protests.

Observances and Memorials – The deaths of community members may prompt calls for community-wide, even city-wide, observances, such as vigils, that will require the time and attention of the mayor and other officials and staff. And in communities and across the city, residents may seek a site that serves as a memorial to the victims of the shooting incident.

- The city should be prepared to quickly identify a large controlled area in which flowers, notes, and other tokens of remembrance may be placed by residents and observances may be held.
- A time limit on the maintenance of the site must be set and a plan announced for the city's respectful collection and storage of items left at memorials. All such items should be curated.
- In years following an incident, remembrances of victims may be sought by community groups and residents and the city must be involved in the planning and conducting of events. Mayors should be sensitive to the designation of these as anniversaries, as that term is generally associated with celebrations of past events and so may be deemed inappropriate in the case of mass shootings. For remembrances, mayors and other city officials and leaders must be prepared to respond to a range of expressions of grief and anger among community members that are triggered by their memories of the shootings.

Aid for Victims and Families – The desire of city residents across communities to provide financial aid to surviving victims of the incident and the families of those killed may be anticipated. While money may be donated directly to victims and families, the city may

consider establishing, if one does not already exist, a single collective community fund to which donations for subsequent distribution under proper oversight may be made.

Public Records – Managing public records generated by an incident must be an integral part of the emergency response.

- Requests for these may start coming in immediately following the incident and continue for a long period, perhaps years, afterwards.
- The mayor and other spokespersons must review the records and be prepared to answer questions on content that may be received.
- In an effort to be as transparent as possible, mayors may consider putting documents on their city’s website and establishing a core group of reviewers to respond to individual record requests.
- Care must be taken in responding to news media requests, as some records may contain information deemed too dire or too sensitive for public consumption.

Maintaining Perspective – The impact of mass shootings can expand well beyond the critical incident and extend well beyond the day of the incident. Regardless of both the immediate and longer-term demands a mass shooting incident imposes across city departments, normal city functions must not be impaired; the city’s services to its residents must continue.