

Three steps to safety: Developing procedures for active shooters

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Received (in revised form): 6th December, 2013

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ABSTRACT

Every Second counts once gunshots are heard in the workplace environment. Close the office door, turn out the lights and turn the mobile phone to 'silent' is the standard mantra for what is expected in the response efforts; however, is that enough? In a perfect world, this sermon may fall short of what emergency management practitioners might preach as it does not adequately fulfil the reality of what is best practice for optimal life safety. This paper offers options for lockdown preparedness and response to address internal lockdown from the moment

shots are fired. Recommendations for the creation of a lockdown plan, building assessment surveys and a controlled, simulated exercise are addressed to raise awareness in response methods and reduce overall response time. The procedures suggested in this paper will optimise training efforts using the community's standard emergency operating procedures in response to workplace violence to minimise loss of life.

Keywords: *risk, active shooter, lockdown, assessment, college campuses*

INTRODUCTION

Safety can no longer be defined by the 'Mayberry' lifestyle. That is, when in trouble, simply call the police and peace will be promptly restored. Mayberry never experienced the active shooter — a person who threatens or attempts to kill people in a confined space or populated area.¹ Indeed, what causes the present author to lose valuable hours of sleep is the ever-changing idea of what life safety actions should be taught to hesitant faculty staff and student communities to achieve an optimal level of response should an active shooter suddenly emerge in a full classroom, dining hall or student centre.

Over the past ten years, the reality of active shooter events upon campus constituents and the campus law enforcement community has served as a safety wake-up

call for college and university campuses across the nation. Research indicates that many campuses, following these high-profile tragedies, have implemented new or enhanced processes and technologies to improve communications along with the mobilisation of emergency resources and training for first responders.

A nationwide survey of student life officers and campus safety directors conducted by the Midwestern Higher Education Compact in March 2008, assessed the impact of the tragic events at Virginia Tech on campus safety and security practices. The study indicated that a flurry of activity occurred on campuses across the nation as colleges and universities conducted internal reviews of emergency procedures, notification systems and policies related to student behaviour.²

Post Virginia Tech, the US House of Representatives passed the College Opportunity and Affordability Act 2008, which requires the secretary of education to clarify Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA): a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records and applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education, so that campuses know when they can share with parents the information of their college-age children. Moreover, according to *Campus Safety* magazine, reaction to the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December 2012, became the overwhelming theme of the campus risk and law enforcement community in 2013. Fifty-two per cent of university and hospital respondents have reported plans to change or have implemented change, while 88 per cent of primary and secondary education respondents say they have made or plan to make changes to their public safety, security or emergency preparedness programmes as a result of the Newtown tragedy.³

While the shootings spurred renewed discussion and debate about weapons regulation, mental health counselling and the difficult balance between the administrator's role in student privacy and the need to share certain information with parents, medical professionals and law enforcement agencies, the lack of a nationally consistent method *vis-à-vis* defensive reactions to an active shooter, whether on the college campus or in the workplace, has served only to confuse the public. Following the Columbine High School shootings in April 1999, law enforcement agencies changed how they train and react to an active mass murder situation in order to arrive at a standard method for building entry and neutralisation of the shooter. The logical next step is to establish a similar standardised method for training public response to such incidents.⁴

At Southern Methodist University (SMU), years of study have led to the development of a holistic lockdown methodology that includes a lockdown plan, building assessment surveys and simulated lockdown training exercises.

THE LOCKDOWN PLAN

What actions should be taken following shots fired remains a topic of controversy. This was made abundantly clear at the 2013 Annual International Association of Emergency Managers Conference, where emergency management and risk management speakers differed in their opinions on how to direct life safety actions in their communities during active shooter events. One speaker argued that shelter in place is an appropriate response while another advocated lockdown to safeguard the community, to include barricading or hiding away from public areas to avoid a face-to-face meeting with random, roving violence.

The Department of Homeland Security warns that: 'Most active shooter situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly. Because most incidents are over within minutes, we must be prepared to deal with the situation until law enforcement personnel arrive'.⁵ At the first sound of gunshots or violence, it is the opinion of this emergency manager that sitting idle and waiting for law enforcement will not be sufficient for optimal life safety. Effective response will depend instead on an individual's ability to have a workable plan and, moreover, to have practised this plan.

There is little doubt that the efficiency of the core emergency operations plan depends upon the creation of a lockdown appendix. Lockdown standard operating procedures, written in copious detail, will serve as the 'go to' instruction book for procedural protocols in training. This plan is best created with the partnership of the local law enforcement leadership to address the specific contingencies of the area and facility as people move to conduct the lockdown assessment surveys. This plan will be a living document updated annually and activated at any time a viable threat or violence is confirmed and will conclude at the point when law enforcement arrives on scene.

The lockdown plan might include:

- (1) building security procedures (ie access control, after-hour protocols, etc);
- (2) how to lock external doors (ie card readers, post-lockdown actions, etc);
- (3) how to lock internal doors (contingent on data provided by site assessment survey);
- (4) notification procedures (from activation to demobilisation);
- (5) site or building characteristics that could affect lockdown actions;
- (6) the role of the building and facility managers during lockdown;
- (7) variations to lockdown (ie after hours may differ from business hours, soft versus hard lockdown, etc);
- (8) instructions to aid law enforcement response;
- (9) evacuation procedures post lockdown;
- (10) reunification procedures;
- (11) continuity of operations;
- (12) guide for addressing post-lockdown improvements.

The lockdown plan might also include levels of lockdown (such as 'hard' and 'soft'). Hard lockdown is referred to action taken when individuals are near the violence of an active shooter incident or witness the sound of violence. At the first sign of violence, protocols require building occupants to run away from public areas, preferably to a room that locks or may be barricaded. Next steps require responders to turn out the lights, silence mobile phones and lock the door, creating as many barriers between the person hiding and the entry point. The intent is to make the room appear unoccupied, providing the least amount of stimuli to encourage entry into the locked or barricaded area. Keep in mind that, once the first shots are fired, the intruder's objective is mass casualties and no method for the selection of their victims is readily apparent.

Soft lockdown most often refers to actions taken when an alert is received but no evidence of violence is apparent in the immediate area. Soft lockdown protocols require all external and internal doors to be locked and secured, with staff monitoring notification websites. Depending on the incident, building perimeters are secured and no entry or exit of occupants is allowed until law enforcement announces an end to the event.

Before writing the first draft of the lockdown plan, consider what system and processes need to be in place for an

organised and efficient lockdown response procedure as this will be included in the training during the subsequent simulated training exercise. Be careful not to limit the scope of the plan but instead include contingencies as they relate to the community.

The building assessment survey will assist investigators with reporting challenges to provide accessible, detailed floor plans marked with recommended lockdown areas. The marked floor plan will also be a welcome job aid for law enforcement during building sweeps in an effort to retrieve building occupants following an active shooter incident.

BUILDING ASSESSMENT SURVEYS

One technique that is essential to reduce response time in an active shooter event is the Lockdown Building Assessment Survey. The survey helps to provide important lockdown information when exercising the plan and offers important information to predetermine the amount of lockdown areas available based on the ratio of building occupants. This survey will serve as the foundation for response procedures as determined in the written lockdown plan and assist practitioners in preparation for the next step in planning, which is the active shooter simulation exercise.

The site assessment is conducted as a planned, organised walk-through (or tour) of each building, assessing each floor and room for acceptable space to hide and barricade based on accessibility, security, capacity and low visibility. The site assessments are conducted using the expertise of small teams mainly comprising the facility manager, a police lieutenant (preferably one who supports emergency management missions) and the emergency manager. The facility manager serves as the building's subject matter expert to assist

with answering questions regarding room schedules and evacuation routes, taking into consideration the environment and culture of the facility to determine any anticipated barriers to the success of tactical lockdown procedures. The police lieutenant will serve as the expert for anticipating best practices with security protocols and possible entry/exit points should a real event occur in the building. The emergency manager will mark approved lockdown areas in an effort to incorporate this information into the building site lockdown plan in anticipation of developing training procedures among building occupants as it becomes a part of the building's emergency operations plan.

The responsibility of the assessment teams will become easier as it is determined what each room requires for optimum security and safety. With building floor plans in hand, the site or building assessment team begins with a tour of each building, marking either 'recommended' or 'rejected' for each accessible room that might be used by building occupants. The team collaboratively assesses each room based on its: (1) accessibility (ie doors that remain unlocked during regular business hours); (2) security (ie entry doors to accessible rooms equipped with an internal locking mechanism that can be locked manually without the use of a key); (3) low visibility (ie the absence of windows or window coverings, which when the lights are turned off would reduce stimuli to an active shooter that would create the desire to enter the room). All survey requirements must be met before the room may be approved (or recommended) for lockdown and marked on the floor plan.

The main focus will be entry points. Doors and locks must be in good working order. Be willing to address current policies for added lockdown approved areas. For instance, a room that offers building

occupants a well-barricaded area to lockdown will not be helpful if the room can only be accessed by a person providing the key. Additionally, if a space is strategically located off a public area and offers the best chance for safety but has high visibility, could additional window treatments be added to increase safe areas?

The objective here is to offer safe havens against the goal of an intruder who approaches a room that is locked, dark and quiet, to reduce stimuli for forced entry to a room that, by all appearances, looks vacant. By focusing attention on the strength of entry points to include accessibility, security and low visibility, the risk to life safety may be lowered.

THE EXERCISE

In his book, 'Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions'^{5,6} Gary Klein indicates that experiencing or simulating a wide range of crisis situations can prepare individuals to make life or death decisions more effectively.

Simulation training in which students have the opportunity to practise response using high-stress situations within a safe and controlled environment are most beneficial. In contrast to classroom instruction, training through simulation allows the participants to experience the situation as if it were real with the added benefit of immediately reviewing their response actions for improvement. The benefit of simulation exercise is for participants to make mistakes and wrong assumptions in advance of a real event in order to improve actions for efficient tactics and reduced response time.

On 10th September, 2013, SMU moved to a stronger level of preparedness when hosting a lockdown training exercise using the simulation of an active shooter in a large venue environment, such as an auditorium. The exercise followed on the heels

of a real active shooter event at SMU in May 2013, whereby the results of this study for active shooter and lockdown training were unexpectedly tested campus-wide. Senior administration approved the training exercise in the hope of raising campus awareness and understanding when called to lockdown. The exercise design was based on a case study of the massacre at Northern Illinois University on 14th February, 2008, where a graduate student with a history of mental illness entered Cole Hall (a large lecture hall) and shot and killed five students and wounded 18 more, some critically.

For SMU's exercise, campus leadership organisations were tapped for participation; over 165 faculty, staff and students responded. Security was a priority as police swept the building for unrelated personnel one hour prior to the event and required all non-exercise participants to exit the building. Doors were closed and guarded at the start of the training programme to ensure no press or unrelated persons would sneak in to watch.

To avoid social media frenzy, participants signed waivers that prohibited the use of mobile phones for video recording or photographs that could inadvertently wind up on social media. Prior to exercise play, participants were encouraged to respond in the way they felt best served their location in the room and physical capability. Although caution was stressed in how they moved to safety, they were asked to respond as if it were a real threat.

In 2012, SMU approved the use of City of Houston's 'Run, Hide, Fight' video as the approved source for how the campus community will respond. This video, available on YouTube, includes detailed instructions for life safety actions:

- (1) *Run*: if possible, run away or evacuate to a safe location and call the emergency services.

- (2) *Hide*: hide or barricade away from the public areas — find a secure area and lockdown; turn out the lights and silence all mobile phones.
- (3) *Fight*: if all else fails, fight for one's life to take the shooter down — act with aggression, use improvised weapons and fight to overcome the shooter and save lives.

Participants were shown the video and the floor was opened for questions. Moments later, simulation play began when an acting intruder entered (unexpectedly to participants) and began firing blanks. The shooter was a police lieutenant who volunteered to portray the active shooter. He carried a .38-calibre starter pistol armed with blanks and was cued to begin his act following the video, activating two shots in the backstage area of the auditorium before entering the room. Once inside, no effort was made to seek out individuals. The 'shooter' strolled calmly along the centre aisle firing the gun only when spotting individuals inadequately hiding.

At the close of the exercise play, participants returned for discussion, which encouraged self-evaluation in their actions for assessment and improvement by facilitators:

- 'What were your strengths and weaknesses?'
- 'What did you do that could have got you hurt or killed?'
- 'What could you have done better?'
- 'What can you do to improve on your own life safety actions?'

All participants agreed that the sound of gunshots was recognisable following the training video but opinions varied as to the location of the shooter. Reaction to the shots was immediate, as they rose and ran in the opposite direction to the gun-

shots. Some were hindered by older individuals who did not move as fast as their younger colleagues. One female reported her (high heel) shoes prevented her from running while another participant admitted she dropped her bag and stopped to retrieve its contents, trapping others behind her from escaping quickly. One participant in a wheelchair was left sitting clearly in sight of the shooter, unintentionally left behind by her colleagues in their attempt to escape.

During the two-hour training session, exercise participants were provided with four opportunities to review and recall the details of lockdown actions by: (1) viewing a video that provided tactical response to various situations; (2) practising response in a simulation exercise within a realistic environment; (3) open discussion of lockdown actions in the presence of police and emergency management professionals; and (4) completing a feedback form detailing their personal experience. Participant feedback uniformly applauded the bold, proactive education initiative in SMU's effort to raise lockdown awareness and provide training.

CONCLUSION

Granted, there are no foolproof answers regarding how to run, hide, barricade or fight for all people in all situations. But practitioners must be careful not to lapse into a state of peaceful coexistence to the level that reality is ignored. An individual's greatest chance for survival when facing a gunman rests on a thoughtful plan shared and practised by the community. The duty of emergency management practitioners is to prepare their community in advance for what to do and provide the systematic training for an organised response as the situation allows.

While it may take valuable time to

write a plan, train the community and then host a simulation exercise, it is essential to address these challenges ahead of time is to ensure that the organisation is sufficiently prepared should a violent intruder enter the workplace.

What history says about active shooter incidents calls for a community trained in lockdown and prepared to seek safety in a calm, organised and intelligent manner. Begin today to equip the community with the resources they need to reach that goal: (1) a lockdown plan vetted by local law enforcement; (2) building floor plans marked with approved lockdown areas (created by a completed building survey); and (3) swift response procedures based on lessons learned in a simulated training exercise.

Then, go home and sleep well.

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