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MANAGING EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

Project Safe City Schools:

A PARTNERSHIP IN
PLANNING AGAINST
SCHOOL VIOLENCE



**BACK-UP SYSTEMS - INTELLIGENT WORKSTATIONS
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Project: Safe

Moving Beyond Lockdown Protocols

By Nancy J. Rigg



Photos by

James W. McMann

It is a terrifying prospect. An armed gunman enters a school campus and unleashes his fury on the innocent, killing or injuring multiple victims, and devastating the lives of those who witness the ordeal, as well as those who are left to mourn the dead.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), on average, more than 3,000 young people per year die from gunshot wounds. CDC studies note, however, that schools are generally among the safest places for children to be. Less than 1% of all homicides among school-aged children, 5-19 years of age, occur in or around school campuses or on the way to and from school.

Despite this low statistical reassurance, when violent incidents do unfold in the school setting, especially those

involving sophisticated semi-automatic weapons and multiple assailants, they can be deadly and overwhelming. One of the most unforgettable school tragedies was at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999. Twelve students and one teacher perished under a barrage of gunfire, 23 people were injured, and the two young perpetrators ended their own lives before police could effectively intervene.

Since Columbine, school districts throughout the United States have worked hard to develop prevention and intervention programs to reduce violence, including bullying, on school campuses. And many schools have developed emergency protocols specifically for armed intruder scenarios, implementing “lockdown” and “Code Red” plans, and holding school shooter



City Schools



drills along with the usual fire, earthquake, and tornado drills.

But few schools have taken the armed intruder concept beyond its most basic level to develop a truly comprehensive, integrated emergency response system that includes police, fire, emergency medical services (EMS), hospitals, local government leaders, public information officers (PIOs), the media, students, and parents, all working from one tightly orchestrated plan.

According to Mike Gibeau, Director of the East Side Union High School Dis-

trict's (ESUHSD) Office of Safety in San Jose, California, "School administrators want to tell you that protocols are in place nationwide, but in truth, they are not." Gibeau, who is the only full-time school safety director in Santa Clara County, adds, "Having a full-time safety director in a school district anywhere is rare. Usually it's a 'collateral' assignment for the transportation director or someone who handles maintenance."

Gibeau is blunt in his assessment of school safety readiness nationwide. "I

don't care what system you're dealing with," he says, "police, fire, the FBI, schools, or city governments, but the culture is not to admit that you have any problems. Nobody wants to look bad." To build a comprehensive and effective school safety program, however, Gibeau says adamantly, "You've got to have honest dialogue with all the players. You've got to build relationships, develop protocols, secure funding, look at all the issues, including prevention, and you've got to drill and practice and make sure that what you've got on paper

Photos from top left: San Jose (CA) Fire crews triage students "injured" in an armed intruder simulation called "Project: Safe City Schools." The ambitious drill involved the participation of 6500 people, including teachers and administrators, students, parents, emergency responders, and support personnel. A team of Special Ops officers make entry after patrol units have secured a perimeter around the school and identified the location of the suspects. The elaborate "Code Red" drill incorporated the entire student body of a San Jose high school as role-players, either held in lock-down, used as injured patients, or evacuated off the premises. Students are escorted out of danger as police search for suspects.



Communications was a big part of the Safe City Schools exercise. Tactical Incident Dispatchers from both San Jose Police and San Jose Fire deployed to the Command Post to coordinate communications and accountability for fire, police, and EMS responders at the scene.

works in real time in the field.”

The son of a homicide detective, Gibeau began developing emergency response protocols and building partnerships with public safety and other government agencies starting in 1993, well before Columbine and other high profile school shooting tragedies splashed across news headlines.

The result of this decade-long effort, which has been fully supported by ESUHSD District School Superintendent, Joe Coto, members of the school board, and the City of San Jose, is one of the most progressive and effective school safety programs in the nation.

In February 2003, following a full year of planning and preparation, new

and updated armed intruder protocols were put to the test. 6500 people, including teachers and administrators, students, parents, emergency responders, and support personnel from other agencies participated in a massive armed intruder simulation called “Project: Safe City Schools.”

New and Updated Protocols

When armed intruder alerts are sounded, schools generally go into lockdown where teachers lock themselves and their students in their classrooms, hide under desks, and wait to be rescued. While good in theory, lockdown protocols need to encompass more than a traditional duck and cover approach. Carla

Holtzclaw, Coordinator of the ESUHSD Office of Safety explains, “People are taught to be ‘victims’ instead of ‘survivors.’” Following the city’s first post-Columbine simulation in 2000, involving about 750 students, teachers, and police officers, “Code Red” protocols in San Jose were refined and expanded.

“Our training now is that if you’re outside or in a classroom on the perimeter near the edge of campus with free access outside, assuming it’s safe, you take your kids, get off campus and get away from the area immediately,” Holtzclaw says. Nearly all teachers and students have been trained to use a police-style zigzag maneuver to move away from the school, rather than dropping to the ground when gunshots are fired or trying to hide.

Every school has 2-4 designated “safe areas” within a quarter-mile of campus, in churches, or other schools or buildings. When a “Code Red” alarm sounds, everyone has safe areas where police, school district and city personnel will meet up with them.

For those who cannot safely leave campus, instead of merely hiding under desks in locked classrooms, teachers and students are instructed to block the doorways with furniture, cover windows, turn off the lights, and hunker down behind an interior barricade until the police can safely clear and evacuate everyone, room to room.

“What the police tell us is that a shooter has a clock in his mind that says, ‘got to shoot, got to move,’ and it’s going faster and faster,” Holtzclaw says. Shoot-



A “wounded” student is loaded into an AMR ambulance for transportation, with school representatives tracking name and destination while a proctor and training videographer observe. Close interaction between first responders and school officers are essential to keep track of students transported or evacuated.

ers usually take the “path of least resistance. If they open your classroom door and see a solid barricade of filing cabinets and desks, they’re probably going to keep moving.”

While Holtzclaw and San Jose Police representatives guided individual schools through “Code Red” training, partnerships were built with other key agencies, including the San Jose Fire Department, crisis counseling teams, the PTA, teachers union, and the city’s Metropolitan Medical Task Force, which oversees mass casualty incidents, with the goal of creating a seamless and efficient armed intruder response system.

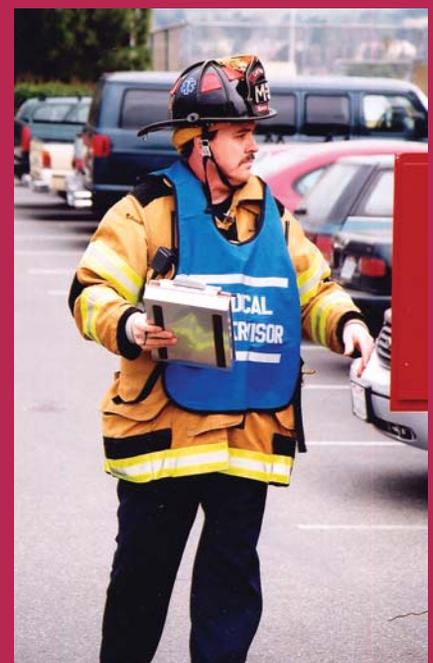
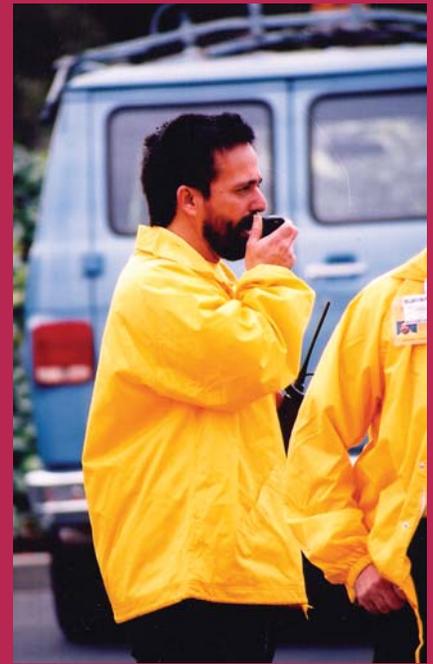
“Project: Safe City Schools” Simulation

Supported by a grant from the San Jose Mayor’s Office, the 2003 “Project: Safe City Schools” simulation was designed to practice existing protocols and test the effectiveness of a multi-agency response to a “Code Red Critical Incident,” including joint incident command (ICS) with police, fire, and education, joint protocols for the designated “safe areas” off campus, new joint protocols for parent notification of injured students, updated joint protocols for mental health and witness interrogation, and new plans to reunite students with their families following any major emergency.

The multi-agency simulation involved four schools including the one where the shooting took place and three others that went into lockdown.

In the script, which was carefully orchestrated and rehearsed in advance, a substitute teacher with mental problems shoots two students in his classroom, moves into a second classroom where he shoots another teacher and student before moving outside, shooting as he flees. Students in the first classroom, who have been left on their own, must initiate the “Code Red” drill, manage their own safety, and attend to the wounded.

Even as police, fire, EMS units, and the media descended on scene, Holtzclaw says, “A couple hundred parents volunteered to act as parents scrambling to get their kids.” Frequently a source of confusion, stress, and chaos, instead of stampeding the school, parents were directed to go to a designated reunification center where school officials reunite



The exercise also practiced command and communication between various responders, including dispatchers at the fire command post, RACES amateur radio volunteers who provided a valuable logistics network, and medical resources handling triage, treatment, and transportation.

ed them with their children. Complications were purposefully factored into the scenario, heightening the realism and challenge.

Capt. Mike O’Connor, Special Operations Division Commander with the San Jose Police Department, explains, “The initial responding officers go in, deal with the shooter, and begin evacuations. In the middle of the evacuation, a

destructive device is discovered near the shooter so we have to quickly evacuate students and direct them into a specific area. It is not known if other perpetrators are involved or if other devices are out there.”

O’Connor notes that one of the most painful lessons from Columbine involved how to quickly identify where people with serious injuries are trapped

and move them to safe areas for emergency medical treatment. Designated window and door cards expedite this process, empowering both students and teachers who are not physically injured to take action safely and allowing police to make quick entries rather than relying on the usual, laborious tactical maneuvers that hampered the response at Columbine. "We've established code words with the school so that when we're clearing they know it's us, and they know to put up special symbols in the windows to alert us if there's an area that needs attention first."

Another lesson from Columbine involved how to tag and transport the wounded. During most mass casualty operations, fire-rescue agencies usually tag victims only with numbers before they ship them off to a trauma center. Because of privacy laws restricting access to medical information, parents of Columbine students spent up to twelve hours driving from hospital to hospital in search of their children. "At 11 PM the night of the shooting," Holtzclaw recounts, "there were 14 sets of parents who could still not find their children. And there were 14 bodies still at the school. That's how they identified who had died."

To avoid this added frustration and trauma, designated and trained school representatives worked alongside fire-rescue personnel at the triage and transport areas to identify each of the victims and note which hospital they were being transported to. This information was then provided to the school district, which contacted parents directly. For the purposes of the simulation, there were a total of 18 victims with serious injuries needing to be transported, as well as several hundred students and teachers, who sought safe haven at designated sites off campus.

Mental health specialists provided support for parents and children at staging areas. Holtzclaw notes, "They were trained in new protocols to avoid contaminating the investigation by having people disclose information too soon, before the police get to interview them. There's a way to attend to mental health

needs without disclosing information that works well."

Communications: a Vital Link

Deanna Mateo, Senior Public Safety Dispatcher, Training and Development, with the San Jose Fire Department, and Heidi Geary, Communications Supervisor with the San Jose Police Department, were involved from the onset in the development of school safety communications protocols. In addition to providing on scene communications personnel



Close interaction between fire, EMS, and police was necessary to coordinate the safe evacuation and triage/treatment of the injured while police neutralized the shooter.

to serve during the simulated response, they also coordinated communications support to keep the simulation running smoothly and safely.

Although communications personnel are usually involved in all disaster and mass casualty drills in San Jose, Deanna Mateo notes, "My overall impression is that nationwide, communications isn't always included in these simulations. Normally, the people who design these drills are line personnel, firefighters, and police officers who may not know a lot about communications. Also, many Comm centers have staffing issues that prevent communications personnel from serving on the committees that plan these drills. This can be short sighted."

"In a disaster, especially a 'Code Red' situation, we've learned how critical the communications aspect is," Heidi Geary adds, explaining that both police and fire bring Mobile Communication Units to the command post, parking their vehicles nose-to-nose. "We each have

fire and police radio capabilities, computer systems that allow us to send messages back and forth to one another, and, if something happens where the radios are tied up, we have the ability to just walk over to the other van to relay information or do joint mapping. During a 'Code Red' response, we can also have communications personnel staged at each command post."

Mateo stresses the need for dispatchers to get hands-on training for worst-case scenarios in the same way that their

police, fire, and EMS counterparts do. "Too often, dispatchers are just told what to do. New policies are put into place and we're given a briefing or a written copy is put in our mailboxes, but we're not provided with the opportunity to actually practice the new protocols to understand and remember them. We need and want this kind of training, too."

Future Plans

Overall, there were very few glitches in the "Project: Safe City Schools" simulation. According to Carla Holtzclaw, the new protocols for injured student

identification and tracking, as well as parent-student reunification, proved solid, and the police-fire-school unified command structure allowed "my problem" to become "our problem," which was quickly resolved. "This speaks to the strength of the collaborative partnerships and joint protocols that have been formed," Holtzclaw says.

Following an in-depth assessment of the simulation, a comprehensive training program for the East Side Union High School District will be developed and new procedures will be implemented citywide. ■

Nancy J. Rigg is a writer, filmmaker, and public safety education consultant. She is a frequent contributor to 9-1-1 Magazine.

For more information on the Code Red exercise, contact the City of San Jose Office of Emergency Services via www.ci.san-jose.ca.us/oes



by *Randall D. Larson*

Back To School

A school shooting can be one of the most catastrophic events a community can endure, especially since it involves so many young people as both victims and possible perpetrators. The prevalence toward this kind of violent solution among a handful of young people is terribly disconcerting to school officials, parents, and the public safety responders tasked with mitigating the ongoing situation.

I recently had the opportunity in my jurisdiction to get involved in a major school safety exercise developed through a partnership between local police, fire, and EMS representatives and school district officials that really demonstrated a remarkable level of proactiveness and cooperation. The major thrust of the exercise was to test existing response tactics and school safety procedures and identify problematic potentialities and devise solutions, and see how we all operated and communicated together. The overall impression by all involved was that the exercise was successful, especially in the level of community involvement it held, and with the level of communications interoperability we achieved, not so much through technological solutions but through a carefully planned out level of field communications organization.

The challenges of the drill, as they would during the real thing, were many - securing a campus and its panicked populace; identifying and neutralizing the perpetrator(s); rescuing, triaging, treating and transporting the injured and maintaining an accountability of where they all went; reuniting panicked and distraught parents with their children; providing stress counseling to all involved. A complicated degree of interaction and interoperability is required by all responders, and that's not something that can just be expected to happen. Plans and procedures must be prepared, agreed upon, published, and then practiced, over and over, so that a fluid response can occur when an incident happens.

Take a thorough read of Nancy Rigg's report on page 16 about the whys, the wherefores, and the what-ifs of our Safe City Schools exercise, and imagine how such an important drill can be developed in your community. It's essential for public safety, school districts, students, and parents to work together to gain an understanding that will serve each properly when the a school shooting happens. Then carefully read Kevin Willett's persuasive suggestions on page 24 as to what you should do to prepare your dispatch center to handle an event like this. The odds are increasing that something like this will happen in your jurisdiction. We've seen too many examples in recent years, in virtually every kind of environment in our nation, to sit back and push it to the back burner.

9-1-1 Dispatch Centers absolutely must be part of this response. Dispatchers taking calls, coordinating a multi-jurisdiction and multi-discipline response, and managing what will be a chaotic scene, at best, must have an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of field responders as well as school personnel so that an effectively integrated response, and a sensitive treatment of worried parents and other students, can be made.

If you're a 9-1-1 Center manager, make it a priority to provide the right kinds of tools and interface with your responders to develop a proactive approach toward planning and training in this area. If you're a dispatcher or supervisor and your administration isn't doing so, knock on some doors and convince them of the need to do so. A school shooting isn't something we can afford to learn from over continued experience and exposure. We owe it to our communities to get it right - right now. ■



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