Order in the Emergency: The Importance of Staging Areas to Manage Crises

By Robert Mueck, Director of Public Safety, St. John's College, Annapolis, Maryland

If you believe the number of active-shooter events has increased in recent years, you would be right. In 2014, the FBI and Texas State University released "A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013." The study showed that an average of 6.4 incidents occurred in the first seven years, and an average of 16.4 occurred in the last seven years. And the unfortunate reality is that the attack at the Pulse Night Club in Orlando, Florida, had a body count of 49 people killed and another 53 injured. In the mind of some attackers, that is now the number to beat.

In the initial response to a mass-casualty incident, the goal of first responders is to "get there" and arrive safely at the scene. The early phase of any incident is very fluid, with responders trying to determine exactly what is going on and moving to render the scene safe. At this time, command is primarily at the field level, starting with the first responding officer and eventually transferring to the shift supervisor.

With the criticality of life safety at the top of mind, there is so much more to think about in these kinds of incidents. Incident commanders have to consider jurisdictional issues, securing ingress and egress to the scene, identifying the hot zone, establishing perimeters around the hot zone and the entire incident, and gathering information on who, what, where, etc. It is a given that these are complex incidents that also require emergency communications, not just among the responders, but to our communities. Social media has brought a whole new dimension to public safety, as false information can go viral and require additional attention by first responders and engagement by public information officers. While it can provide a means to communicate with witnesses on scene, social media in critical incidents now requires your campus communications staff to coordinate

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with unified command to ensure there is a communication flow to correct false information and gather information from witnesses who may still be inside the scene.

Comprehensive management is required from the onset, as the response to the incident will escalate very quickly. Keeping track of their own officers going in to the incident may be something agency managers do fairly well. The real issue, however, is keeping track of everything else, such as other law enforcement officers who "self-dispatch" to the incident and teams of emergency response personnel who show up.

Cathy Lanier, former chief of the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department, stated that during the 2013 shooting at the Washington Navy Yard, "Not all responding agencies reported to incident command." She went on to discuss issues in coordinating the response effort and accounting for all of the officers afterward. At the height of the emergency, there were more than 200 officers in the building.

Tracking resources, including people, is also important for accountability. Keep in mind that when the incident ends, investigators are left with a crime scene. Not knowing who was in the scene complicates the investigation. Better accountability at the front end of the event makes it easier at the back end of the event. It is standard procedure for a crime scene log at more "traditional" crime scenes, but doing this in an active, mass-casualty event proves much more difficult. And if everyone is running inside, someone needs to take charge and assist with assignments and accountability to avoid officers firing on each other in what is known as blue-on-blue shootings.

Staging Area–First Stop for "Volunteer" First Responders

Past experience shows that when an "active shooter" call goes–EVERYONE comes. Officers from all levels of government and various agencies understand the need to get to the scene and stop the carnage. They will come from jurisdictions around the region, both on- or off-duty. They are coming for the right reasons and with the best of intentions, yet their response presents another challenge to the incident commander. Not just are they now managing the incident, but they are now managing the influx of responders, as well. The last thing anyone wants is a blue-on-blue shooting or an innocent person shot by an officer.

In the initial response, on-duty officers from the jurisdiction move directly to the incident. To be most helpful, officers who self-dispatch (from other jurisdictions, agencies or shifts) need to report to the staging area. They should ask where the staging area is located. If the incident commander has not established one yet, their request may be the prompt he or she needs to set one up.

William McMahon was Chief of the Howard County (Maryland) Police Department in 2014 and responded to the shooting at the Mall in Columbia in his county. He described seeing waves of people in uniform coming to the scene, stating, "…I grabbed a Sergeant and said, 'You need to get a handle on all of those people for me.'"

Chief McMahon recognized quickly that "a lot of people will respond, so you need to manage them. It would be good to have an understanding that officers who self-dispatch to the scene will go to a staging area and wait to be assigned a role, rather than having people just do what they think needs to be done."

Staging Area 1-2-3s

Anyone may be designated a staging area manager, so everyone should know what the function requires. To get the process started, the assigned manager simply proceeds to the designated staging area and establishes the layout. Vehi-

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cles should be positioned in such a fashion to allow them to respond quickly to the incident. The general rule is "first in, first out," which means the first resources to arrive should be the first to be dispatched to the incident once accounted for in the staging area.

No doubt, there will be issues with which to contend. Parking lots may be full or snow may impede vehicles. Crowds of people evacuating the incident may be milling in your staging area–an indication that you need more personnel on-site to corral them and gather intelligence about the incident. Construction may be an issue as well, not to mention that the initial responders' vehicles may be in the way. If these factors exist, the staging area manager may need to reconsider the location of the staging area.
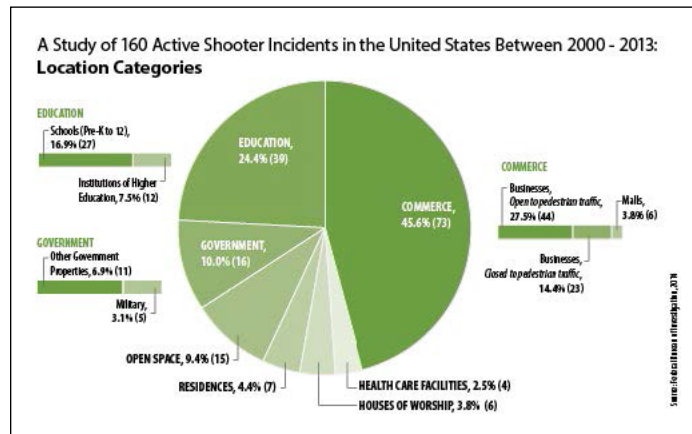
Another matter needs to be taken into consideration, as well: the possibility of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). While not new, their prevalence requires consideration when setting a staging area.

Eric Rudolph was famous for his bombing of Centennial Olympic Park at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, as well as the bombing of abortion clinics and the Otherside Lounge, a gay club. In 1997, he bombed an office building in Atlanta because it contained a family planning service provider. There were two bomb blasts an hour apart from each other. The first blast was directed at the clinic; the second device went off in a parking lot with the intent to kill or injure first responders. Seven people were injured in that blast.

The Columbine High School shooting in 1999 was actually planned as a bombing followed by a shooting. The two attackers were, thankfully, not very adept at their bomb-making skills, and the majority of their devices did not work. However, they, too, left IEDs in their vehicles in the school parking lot, with the possible intent of increasing the body count by targeting first responders.

In the Mall in Columbia shooting, the shooter had IEDs in his backpack. While they were not used in the inci-

A Study of 160 Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 - 2013: **Location Categories**

EDUCATION
Schools (Pre-K to 12), 16.9% (27)

Institutions of Higher Education, 7.5% (12)

EDUCATION, 24.4% (39)

COMMERCE
Businesses, Open to pedestrian traffic, 27.5% (44) — Malls, 3.8% (6)

COMMERCE, 45.6% (73)

Businesses, Closed to pedestrian traffic, 14.4% (23)

GOVERNMENT
Other Government Properties, 6.9% (11)

GOVERNMENT, 10.0% (16)

Military, 3.1% (5)

OPEN SPACE, 9.4% (15)

RESIDENCES, 4.4% (7)

HEALTH CARE FACILITIES, 2.5% (4)

HOUSES OF WORSHIP, 3.8% (6)

Source: Blair, J. Pete, and Schweit, Katherine W. (2014). A Study of Active Shooter Incidents, 2000-2013. Texas State University and Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C. 2014.

dent, their discovery presented a new issue: did he leave any in the parking lot to target first responders? As it turned out he did not, but it presented a challenge in the response.

Given these incidents, it is important that public safety officials include the possibility of multiple forms of attack in our response process. When establishing a staging area, managers need to strongly consider the possibility of IEDs. Securing the staging area, therefore, takes on a whole new meaning and cannot be taken for granted.

The Prince Georges County (Maryland) Fire Department sets two levels of staging. In Level I Staging, fire units respond to the incident, set up to prepare for fire operations, and stand by for instructions. In Level II Staging, fire units stage away from the scene and prepare to deploy when called. Similarly, the department establishes a zone where their tactical resources stage close to the incident for tactical operations and are co-located with the command post. Staging for other resources is placed away from the command post.

**Applying These Principles On Campus**

So what does this mean for us in higher education? How will you accomplish this on your campus? You should use this kind of information in your planning process. The response issues mentioned here are the same for all public safety officers. Campus agencies that do not have armed personnel can still have their staff assist with setting up a staging area to assist law enforcement in their response to and coordination of an incident. For most agencies, staffing will be an issue, as we already know that responders will be quickly overwhelmed by the incident. Coordinate with the responders in surrounding jurisdictions to discuss this issue now, so you can facilitate that response
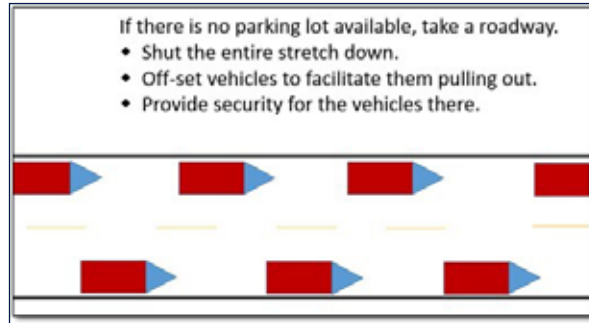
Staging in a roadway.
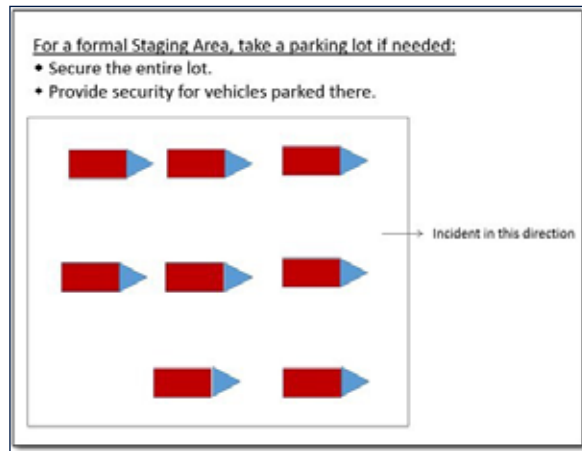
Staging in a parking lot.
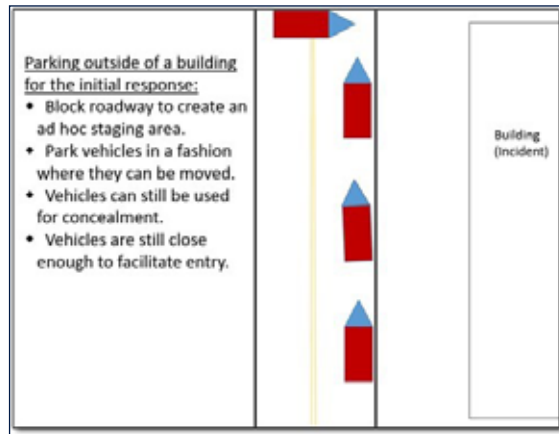
Another version of parking in a roadway. This one presents tactical problems, as the vehicles are too close to the incident; but it is another option.

if the time ever comes. It's also helpful to determine beforehand what areas may be used as a staging area, and what kind of staging areas they establish, such as primary and secondary staging areas. Knowing this in advance is important and also gives you something to train toward.

It's important that your officers understand how local law enforcement agencies are going to respond. Even if they are not armed, their understanding of the needs and practices of local agencies will help facilitate the arrival. In particular, it is beneficial to help local responders understand where they need to go before there is an emergency. Understanding what they will do upon arrival, how they will set up, and what their needs are of your campus (specifically your officers) will greatly assist in their response. Key questions: Do local agencies use the Rescue Task Force concept? Do they have access to campus buildings? Can campus and local officers communicate via interoperable radios? All of these issues need to be discussed and addressed. Developing an understanding that you can assist in establishing the critical staging area may go a long way in helping in this effort.