

Mass Shootings in American Cities

MAYORS' EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNED



COPS
Community Oriented Policing Services
U.S. Department of Justice



THE UNITED STATES
CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

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Preface

Too many times over too many years, The United States Conference of Mayors has reached out to this nation's mayors with condolences and messages of support following mass shootings of their cities' residents. While all of these tragic incidents are united by loss of life, 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.

Through the years, individual mayors whose cities have experienced mass shootings have reached out personally to colleagues confronting the tragedy for the first time, knowing the shock such an 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.

Nine mayors whose cities have experienced mass shootings in recent years attended the Winter Meeting of The U.S. Conference of Mayors, held in January 2020 in Washington, D.C. 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 that session was to alert their audience to the need to prepare for a mass shooting; as many veterans of these tragedies agree, 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 those 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.

Tom Cochran
CEO and Executive Director
The United States Conference of Mayors



Mayors' Experience

A widely used definition of a mass shooting is one claiming at least four victims injured or killed, not including the shooter.¹ Between 2009 and May 2022, the United States has experienced 274 mass shootings—an average of 20 each year—in which 1,536 people have been killed and 983 more wounded.² While these incidents may account for a very small proportion of the yearly total of lives lost to gunfire in the U.S., with more than 99 percent of gun deaths resulting from shootings other than mass shootings, their impact on the cities in which they occur is always significant: Victims' families and friends need comfort, and communities seek information on what happened and explanations about why it happened. A mass shooting always attracts national, even international, news coverage of the incident, its impact, and its handling by local authorities.

On January 24, the final day of the annual United States Conference of Mayors 2020 Winter Meeting in Washington, D.C., 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 these attacks in which more lives were lost, wounds were inflicted, and families and communities were shattered. (The video recording of this session is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hijqn9q1rQg&t=>.)

The mayors' presentation was designed to help their colleagues prepare to respond to a mass shooting in their own cities, 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 E. 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 the following:

- Chattanooga, Tennessee, Mayor Andy Berke, on a July 16, 2015 shooting in military facilities in which five personnel were killed and a U.S. Marine and a police officer were wounded
- Orlando, Florida, Mayor Buddy Dyer, on a June 12, 2016 nightclub shooting in which 49 people were killed and 53 were wounded
- Parkland, Florida, 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

1. William J. Krouse and Daniel J. Richardson, *Mass Murder with Firearms: Incidents and Victims, 1999-2003* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2015), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44126/5>.

2. "Mass Shootings in America," Everytown for Gun Safety, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://everytownresearch.org/maps/mass-shootings-in-america/>.

- Annapolis, Maryland, Mayor Gavin Buckley, on a June 28, 2018 shooting in a newspaper office in which five people were killed and two were injured
- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Mayor Bill Peduto, on an October 27, 2018 synagogue shooting in which 11 people were killed and six were wounded
- San Jose, California, 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, Texas, Mayor Dee Margo, on an August 3, 2019 Walmart shooting in which 22 people were killed and 24 were wounded
- Dayton, Ohio, Mayor Nan Whaley, on an August 4, 2019 shooting outside a bar in which nine people were killed and 17 were wounded
- Jersey City, New Jersey, 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 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 entails the responsibility to ensure public safety for all residents and that this responsibility includes the duty 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 citywide. In various ways, the mayors who contributed to this session acknowledged 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 one mayor said, so that the incident is defined not by hate but by the city's response to it.

While the observations and recommendations of mayors experiencing mass shootings cover 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. When responding to an incident, every team member is responsible for their own part of the response, 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 personnel training programmed throughout city government.

- All city departments should be involved and their roles in incident response clearly identified. Many city officials who contributed to this report found tabletop exercises especially effective and recommend that they should be conducted.
- The active shooter training that today is essential in 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 incident victims 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 be kept strictly off limits to 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 used. 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: the 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 anything else a mayor may encounter. One mayor said that when a therapist friend reached out to him following the shooting to ask if he was okay, 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 mayor's responsibility. Beyond informing the 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 police, fire, or emergency management services [EMS] chiefs as appropriate) covering what is known about the incident should be held as soon as possible after the incident occurs, but not before critical information on the incident that can be shared has become available.
- In subsequent briefings, which should be held as frequently as possible, the mayor and other officials should strive to provide the most complete information available at the time of each briefing, while being clear that they will not respond to questions that cannot be answered based on available information.
- Separate press briefings by other emergency managers, including police, fire, or EMS 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 national news organizations will immediately dispatch news crews and reporters to the city demanding information. 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 or arranging local media availabilities for the police, fire, or EMS chiefs in the days following the incident.
- Local media must understand crime scene management, particularly with respect to sensitive areas such as removal of bodies.

Interagency coordination

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

- 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 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 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (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, both those involved in incident response and others, and these problems 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 on site, 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 slain victims must be removed to an appropriate facility for identification—by family members or other appropriate persons or by other means. Reporters and news crews must be barred from the shooting site while the investigation and removals are underway.

- An emergency response center (described in “Advance preparations”) may be designated 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 citywide, observances, such as vigils, that will require the time and attention of the mayor and other officials and staff. 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 commemorative events. Mayors should be careful not to call these events 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 brought on by their memories of the shootings.

Aid for victims and families

City residents are likely to want to provide financial aid to surviving victims of the incident and the families of those killed. While money may be donated directly to victims and families, the city may consider establishing or drawing attention to 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 records may start coming in immediately following the incident and continue for a long period, perhaps years, afterward.
- The mayor and other spokespersons must review the records and be prepared to answer any questions on their content.

- In an effort to be as transparent as possible, the mayor 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 time and place of the incident. Regardless of both the immediate and longer-term demands a mass shooting incident imposes on city departments, normal city functions must not be impaired; the city's services to its residents must continue.

About The United States Conference of Mayors

The United States Conference of Mayors is the official nonpartisan organization of the more than 1,400 U.S. cities with populations of 30,000 or more. Each city is represented in the Conference by its chief elected official, the mayor.

Conference members speak with a united voice on organizational policies and goals. Mayors contribute to the development of national urban policy by serving on one or more of the Conference's standing committees, which at annual meetings recommend policy positions they believe should be adopted by the organization. Members discuss and vote on policy resolutions, which collectively represent the views of the nation's mayors and are distributed to Congress and to the President of the United States.

For more information about The United States Conference of Mayors, visit usmayors.org.



About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than \$14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations and the COPS Training Portal.
- Almost 500 agencies have received customized advice and peer-led technical assistance through the COPS Office Collaborative Reform Initiative Technical Assistance Center.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.
- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, roundtables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, <https://cops.usdoj.gov>.

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