

Nov/Dec 2007

5 Lessons Learned From the Platte Canyon School Shooting

It has been more than a year since a gunman barricaded himself and seven female students inside a Bailey, Colo., classroom. Although this incident resulted in the tragic death of one student, experts have gleaned valuable information from this shooting and offer best practices that other campuses can incorporate into their emergency plans.

- by Kate M. Dempsey and Lori R. Hodges

The 1999 Columbine school shooting in Jefferson County, Colo., yielded numerous lessons learned that prompted schools and law enforcement agencies across the country to reassess how they prepare for, respond to and mitigate incidents of targeted violence in schools.

Park County, Colo., incorporated a number of these improvements into its daily operations, including the use of active shooter response tactics and the coordination between law enforcement officers and school personnel. Many of these lessons helped Park County responders and school personnel respond efficiently and limit the loss of life when, on Sept. 27, 2006, an armed intruder took seven students hostage at Platte Canyon High School (PCHS) in Bailey, Colo.

This article provides a synopsis of the incident and highlights some of the lessons learned identified in the Park County Office of Emergency Management's Platte Canyon High School Shooting After Action Report. These lessons, like the ones from Columbine, can assist school personnel and emergency responders in preventing, preparing for, responding to, recovering from and mitigating future incidents of targeted school violence.

Law Enforcement Notified Immediately of Intruder

At 9:44 a.m. on Sept. 27, 2006, a stranger arrived at Platte Canyon High School and parked his jeep in the school parking lot. He exited his vehicle at 10:53 a.m., walked toward the school, and entered Room 206 at approximately 11:40 a.m. He placed his backpack on a desk, pulled out a handgun, and ordered the teacher and all male students to leave the room.

When the teacher confronted him, stating that she was responsible for the students' safety and could not leave without them, he fired one shot, hitting no one. He then ordered all but seven female students to leave the classroom.

The teacher and students complied, and the teacher immediately notified school staff, who called 911 at 11:41 a.m. A staff member announced a "Code White" alert on the school's intercom system, and the high school and adjoining middle school immediately went into lockdown.

Approximately 3 minutes later, four Park County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) uniformed deputies arrived at the school. Within 5 minutes they had located the perpetrator and barricaded him in the classroom. Subsequently, arriving officers secured the perimeter and positioned a sniper inside the school.

Lesson 1: Establish Incident Command Immediately

The first responding officers did not immediately establish incident command because it was not part of their active shooter training. These officers followed what was at the time proper active shooter protocol. However, as the response quickly grew to include responders from several different jurisdictions, the lack of incident command hindered incident management, and communications between the incident site and the 911 communications center. The center did not receive timely information from the incident site until fire personnel established incident command several minutes later.

The Park County Office of Emergency Management recommends that, in an active shooter situation, the first responder on scene after the initial entry team should establish incident command.



That officer may then transfer command to a superior officer if necessary when more resources arrive. This will allow the first arriving officers to carry out the necessary immediate tactical response while also promoting improved communications.

Lesson 2: Assign Additional Staff Early in the Process

Numerous state, local, and federal agencies responded to the Platte Canyon shooting. Some agencies established command staff positions at the outset of the response to support incident command and to organize response operations. However, many command staff positions were either never established or were set up later in the response. Emergency response personnel quickly became overwhelmed with duties as the incident progressed and expanded, and the lack of command staff support led to three operational impediments.

First, while fire and emergency medical services (EMS) established a liaison officer at the outset of the incident, other disciplines did not establish this command staff position. The fire and EMS liaison facilitated resource tracking and overall coordination among the various fire and EMS agencies. Additional liaison officers also would have improved cross-agency coordination in other disciplines.

Second, information flow problems led to confusion between the incident site and the 911 communications center. So much information flooded into the center at the outset of the incident that communications center staff members were unable to process and relay pertinent information to responders in a timely manner. As a result, many fire units arrived on scene before they were needed because they heard the call on the radio and self-dispatched before they were requested by the center.

The establishment of incident command facilitated increased information flow to the 911 communications center. However, incident command staff still did not provide the center with new information as quickly as it was needed. This lack of information flow also led to false media reports, including false information regarding the location of the parental reunification site. Many parents consequently crowded around the PCSO's Bailey substation in search of information, which encumbered operations there. A public information officer (PIO) was eventually established to manage these communication problems, but not until after incorrect information had already been disseminated.

Third, the incident commander was inundated with information and with requests for his time to answer questions and make decisions. His responsibilities could have been better managed by the assignment of an additional staff member to assist him with the influx of information and requests. These impediments to effective incident management may have been minimized by the immediate establishment of additional command staff positions.

Emergency responders should consider establishing command staff positions at the outset of an incident in order to improve incident command's ability to effectively and efficiently coordinate response operations.

Lesson 3: Account for All Students

Once the perpetrator was barricaded in the classroom, Park County Sheriff's deputies coordinated with PCHS personnel to evacuate the school. Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams from Park County, Clear Creek County and Jefferson County coordinated to evacuate all students and school personnel from the school, except for the seven students still held as hostages. Before evacuating, PCHS staff members printed attendance lists for the day, which they used to account for all students once they were safely outside the building.

The students and staff members were first evacuated to one of two locations, a field near the school or a gymnasium in another school building. Once staff members had accounted for the students there, the students were evacuated by bus to a nearby elementary school. School staff members accounted for the students again on the bus and ensured that each student was released to his or her parents upon arrival at the elementary school.

School administrators should consider including student accountability procedures in their emergency plans. These procedures should include a system for fast, easy access to class rosters.

Lesson 4: Establish Traffic Control Plans for Evacuations

The evacuation of all students to a single location simplified the parental reunification process. However, there was only one entrance/exit driveway at the elementary school and no traffic control plan. This caused a large traffic jam, which slowed and complicated the otherwise simple reunification process.

School administrators should consider including a traffic control plan in their emergency plan. An ideal traffic control plan will designate a pick-up location with one way in and one way out to facilitate traffic flow.

Lesson 5: Build Relationships With Law Enforcement

One of the main operational strengths that enabled the PCSO to respond efficiently to the shooting and to limit the loss of life was its strong relationships with Park County School District Re-1 personnel and students. The PCSO has been proactive in developing these relationships since 2005.

For example, many deputies serve as coaches at schools in Park County School District Re-1, and the PCSO holds regular team meetings and briefings in a conference room at PCHS. Consequently, PCSO officers have become an integral presence in the schools. These relationships have been invaluable in building trust between law enforcement officers, school personnel and students, and in improving their ability to work together on a daily basis and during emergencies.

Because PCSO officers had been in the school many times before the shooting and were comfortable with its layout, they were able to easily navigate the school during the incident and locate the shooter within minutes of arriving on scene. Additionally, due to their positive relationships with school personnel, deputies were able to obtain critical information (e.g. a student attendance list and a schematic of the school's floor plan) immediately.

School districts and local law enforcement agencies should consider initiating programs to build positive relationships between law enforcement officers and school personnel, and to familiarize officers with school layouts.

Hostage Negotiators, Incident Command Staff Sent in SWAT

The perpetrator, who claimed to have 3 pounds of C-4 explosives in his backpack, released all but two of the hostages by 1:45 p.m. The final two hostages conveyed to law enforcement that the crisis would be over at 4 p.m., but the perpetrator refused to give further details on what exactly would happen at that time.

At approximately 3:32 p.m., he ceased communicating with law enforcement. Hostage negotiators and incident command staff feared he planned to detonate the bomb or initiate some other violent action at 4 p.m. Members of the incident command staff, therefore, agreed law enforcement should intervene and attempt to rescue the final two hostages.

A combined SWAT team, including officers from different counties, made entry into Room 206 at 3:35 p.m. The tactical entry included an explosive breach of the classroom door, the detonation of a water impulse charge positioned along the classroom wall, two simultaneous diversionary concussion grenades, and the physical porting of the only window in the classroom. In the course of the SWAT entry, the perpetrator killed one of the hostages and himself. The final hostage escaped to safety.

Apply These Important Lessons to Your Campus

Although school shootings are rare, this type of targeted school violence can happen at any school. The lessons learned from the Columbine tragedy enhanced Park County's ability to respond effectively when a similar situation struck Platte Canyon High School. The lessons learned from Platte Canyon, like those from Columbine, could further assist school personnel and emergency responders across the nation in preventing, preparing for, responding to, recovering from and mitigating future school shootings.

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The National Incident Management System

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) standardizes methods for responding to all hazards. It enables community organizations to coordinate management of incidents with emergency responders at all levels using a standardized set of concepts, principles and terminology.

The Incident Command System (ICS), part of NIMS, is an emergency management method that provides an integrated organizational structure.

More information on NIMS and ICS is available on the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Web site and at www.llis.gov.

Campus at a Glance

Bailey is a small town in rural Park County, Colo. Park County is located in the heart of the Rocky Mountains and is adjacent to Jefferson County. As of 2000, Park County had a total population of 14,523. Platte Canyon High School is in Park County School District Re-1 and has an enrollment of approximately 450 students. It is connected by a single hallway to Fitzsimmons Middle School, which houses approximately 350 students.

Smart Construction, Access Control, Visitor Management Can Deter Intruders

By Robin Hattersley Gray

Although appropriate response tactics are vital to the protection of a campus, construction that follows crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) strategies, appropriate access control technologies and visitor management solutions can all help to prevent access by unauthorized individuals.

K-12 schools, in particular, can benefit from having secure vestibules and single ingress/egress points. This type of design, along with card access control solutions, enable schools to keep all exterior doors locked and direct the public to come in through one monitored entrance. School administrators or security officers can then visually inspect and interact with each visitor.

Card access control solutions also allow campus administrators a way to reduce key management hassles and track which authorized cardholders enter and when. Employees can be granted access according to their needs and/or limited according to district protocols.

Visitor management solutions allow campuses to run background checks on guests, issue badges and track their whereabouts. These types of solutions can quickly register visitors via their drivers' licenses or other forms of identification.

A combination of all three of these approaches work best to discourage intruders from attempting access.

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