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# Mass Shooting Protocol FIRST 24 HOURS

A RESOURCE FOR U.S. MAYORS AND CITY MANAGERS



**PUBLIC  
HEALTH  
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INSTITUTE**

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The Mass Shooting Protocol & Playbook is a two-part resource intended for mayors, city managers, and their staff. The Protocol covers the first 24 hours of the response. The supplemental Playbook provides best practices and resources city officials can use to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a public mass shooting.

# Mass Shooting Protocol: The First 24 hours

This Protocol is the result of research involving mayors, city managers, first responders, and others who have responded to a mass shooting. Below you will find key decisions that you, as your community's leader, will need to make during the first 24 hours of the response. You are responsible for managing crisis communications, ensuring appropriate victim services are provided, and offering hope to victims, their families, and your community to help them recover from trauma. Please refer to the companion resource, the Mass Shooting Playbook (available at [www.UnitedOnGuns.org](http://www.UnitedOnGuns.org)), for additional information to help you manage the ongoing crisis.

## 1. Communications

- You are the “communicator-in-chief.” Decide in consultation with your police chief and PIO who will speak about what. Often law enforcement officials communicate details about the investigation. The public will look to you for messaging about public safety, updates about the victims, referrals to mental health resources, and messages of unity and healing. Secure the press area to prevent unauthorized officials from speaking to the press pool.
- Your first challenge is to get as much information as possible, as often as possible, from law enforcement. Ask for a dedicated police official whose sole responsibility is to keep you informed.
- Schedule early and regular press briefings, even when there is not much new information to share, to prevent the development of rumors and misinformation.
- Refrain from political remarks as they may traumatize the families of the victims. Focus instead on comforting them.
- Release information relating to the shooting via one social media account (ideally operated by the public safety office), to be amplified by the city and other agencies. Direct all press inquiries to this single, monitored account.
- Host a dedicated webpage where all public information about the shooting is posted and updated, along with names of the victims. This will reduce the intense pressure to respond promptly to public records requests.
- Consider including a “How You Can Help” section for the public in press releases and all social media and online messages.
- For more information, see Playbook **Chapter 1, Crisis Communications**.

## 2. Emergency Operations

- Decide where to go. Options include the Joint Information Center or city hall. For safety reasons, do not go to an active crime scene.

- If the shooter has escaped, issue an emergency alert immediately to warn the community.
- Consider making a local declaration of emergency. There is no downside to making the declaration immediately; it triggers mutual aid agreements, has the potential to defray costs relating to police and fire overtime, and may protect the city from legal risks.
- Confer with your city counsel, chief administrative officer, chief of staff, and chief financial officer. This “C4 team” should meet daily to coordinate emergency operations and reduce legal exposure to the city and its employees.
- For more information, see Playbook **Chapter 2, Emergency Operations**. See also **Chapter 8, Legal Considerations**.

### 3. Victims and the Families

- Prioritize the needs of victims and their families above all else. Designate a member of your staff to serve as family liaison to keep you updated on their needs.
- Ensure the location of the Notification Center (aka the Reunification Center) is separate from the press center. It should be scalable and have a secure perimeter to prevent the press from approaching grieving family members.
- The families of victims should receive death notifications in the most timely, private, and compassionate way possible. Applicable law can slow the process. You may need to engage with the coroner’s office/medical examiner, and law enforcement to find a way to speed the release of victims’ names to their families.
- Confirm there are dedicated victim advocates assigned to the families.
- After the families are notified, quickly establish the Family Assistance Center to ensure the immediate needs of victims and families are met, including appropriate mental health and bereavement services.
- Spend time with the victims and families. Take their calls. Visit victims in the hospital. Attend their funerals if invited. Consult the families when planning vigils and developing the distribution protocol for donations. Meet with families from previous shootings who have invaluable insights to share.
- Activate national resources. The American Red Cross can help you establish the Family Assistance Center. The FBI Victim Services Division has significant family assistance resources and expertise you can tap into, even if the FBI is not the lead law enforcement agency. However, the city must initiate the request for assistance from both organizations. The National Mass Violence Center provides expertise and resources relating to victim services in the short and long term.
- Consult community leaders, including businesses, attorneys, and faith leaders. These local partners play a vital role during the response by providing funds, space, services, and expertise.
- For more information, see Playbook **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance** and **Chapter 7, Community Partnerships**.

## 4. Donations

- Arrange a funding mechanism to accept donations immediately. If the city has a 501(c)(3) charitable entity already established, you can use it for this purpose (forming a new one may take too long). Alternatively, the National Compassion Fund or a trusted community foundation can receive the funds. GoFundMe has a protocol for crisis fundraising. Whichever funding mechanism is chosen, ensure a fund is established as soon as possible after the shooting, and encourage the public to give to only one, trusted fund to avoid fraud.
- The distribution of the fund should be developed in close consultation with the survivors and families of the victims. Families of victims of previous shootings strongly recommend that 100 percent of the funds go to the victims and their families. However, some cities have set aside a small portion of the funds for education initiatives, mental health services for affected communities, and the restoration of a place of worship damaged during an attack.
- For more information, see Playbook **Chapter 5, Managing Donations and Volunteers**.

## 5. Vigils

- The community needs to grieve and will want to arrange a vigil immediately following the shooting. Security may be required, which could delay the vigil if the law enforcement response is ongoing.
- As noted above, avoid political rhetoric. This may mean limiting the speaking roles of elected officials at vigils.
- If the shooting is a hate crime or perpetrated by a member of a marginalized faith or ethnic group, the risk of retaliation against that group may become an issue. Consult with faith leaders to host an interfaith vigil if relevant.
- For more information, see Playbook **Chapter 9, Commemorations**.

## 6. VIP Visitors and Elected Officials

- Federal, state, and local elected officials may converge on the city. Direct them to activities that will be helpful to victims and their families.
- For more information, see Playbook **Appendix B, Managing Visits from Elected Officials**.

## 7. Mental Health

- The trauma of a mass shooting can impact everyone. You will be affected, as will your staff, first responders, families of the victims, and nearly everyone in the city at the time of the shooting. Consult with your local public health agency, victim assistance experts, and local mental health providers as soon as possible to develop trauma-informed messaging.
- Provide information about available mental health resources in your press briefings. Take the time to learn about psychological first aid to ensure that victims and families receive appropriate services.
- For more information, see Playbook Chapter 10, Mental Health. To ensure first responders have access to the support they need and deserve, see **Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders**.



# RESPONSE CHECKLIST

(Selected actions from the comprehensive checklists found in the Playbook)

## Communications

- Establish a regular schedule for communicating with the press and follow it.
- Decide which officials will speak and in what order at press conferences.
- Focus your messages on hope and healing. Avoid political messaging.
- Keep messages simple, credible, and consistent. Correct misinformation..

## Emergency Operations

- Activate the Emergency Operations Center.
- Request regular briefings from a designated law enforcement official.
- Assemble your senior executive (“C4”) team to provide coordination and legal compliance.
- Consider making a declaration of emergency.

## Victim and Family Assistance

- Work with law enforcement, the American Red Cross, the FBI, and local partners to establish the Notification Center, followed by the Family Assistance Center.
- Ensure both centers are located separately from the Joint Information Center (away from the press), have a secure perimeter, and are scalable.
- Communicate the location of victim services and resources in press briefings.
- Urge the coroner/medical examiner to release victims’ names to families as soon as possible.
- Share resources to help the community cope with bereavement and trauma.
- Ensure first responders are provided support and mental health services.

## Victims Fund

- Establish a victims’ fund right away using a city-operated 501(c)(3) charitable entity, or in partnership with the National Compassion Fund or a local foundation.

## Mental Health

- Seek the guidance of mental health experts.
- Plan vigils in consultation with families and the affected community.



## Mass Shooting Resources

The **Mass Shooting Playbook** is a comprehensive guide outlining a leader's responsibilities during the response to a mass shooting. It is organized into 10 key topics, including communications, emergency operations, victim assistance, and legal considerations. Each chapter provides best practices, resources, and a checklist.

The **Mass Shooting Protocol** is a quick-reference guide to the key decisions leaders must make during the first hours and days following a mass shooting.

The **Preparedness Checklist** and **Tabletop Exercise Worksheet** are planning tools that leaders can use to build readiness before a tragedy.

**Case Briefs** of the eight mass shootings we researched highlight the actions taken by city leaders and offer key takeaways for training and planning purposes.

**Mass Shooting Timeline** provides a high-level overview of the actions that will need to be taken to help a community recover. An abridged timeline is provided below:

- Manage crisis communications, engage with the media
- Establish Notification Center
- Establish Family Assistance Center (FAC) when Notification Center closes
- Visit the FAC and hospitals, meet with families and victims as requested
- Plan and attend vigils, provide security as needed
- Launch a victims' fund to accept donations
- Manage legal consequences in consultation with legal counsel
- Resume non-urgent city operations
- Support the affected business community
- Make plans to remove and manage items left by mourners at the scene
- Apply for state and federal funding to defray the cost of the response
- Commission an after action review

### UnitedOnGuns

UnitedOnGuns is a nonpartisan initiative of the Public Health Advocacy Institute at Northeastern University School of Law. Since 2019, we have helped city leaders prepare for, and respond to, mass shootings and other mass violence incidents. For more information, please visit [www.UnitedOnGuns.org](http://www.UnitedOnGuns.org).