

UNITEDONGUNS

2025 EDITION

Mass Shooting PLAYBOOK

A RESOURCE FOR U.S. MAYORS AND CITY MANAGERS



**PUBLIC
HEALTH
ADVOCACY
INSTITUTE**

**Sarah C. Peck
Emily Nink
Mark Gottlieb
Alexis Weldner**

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 Playbook

A Resource for U.S. Mayors and City Managers

2025 Edition

Public Health Advocacy Institute

Sarah C. Peck, Emily Nink, Mark Gottlieb and Alexis Weldner

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or downloaded for official use by
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and their staff.**

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Public Health Advocacy Institute

The Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI), founded in 1979, is a legal research and advocacy center focused on public health law. It is an independent 501(c)(3) organization located at Northeastern University School of Law. PHAI is committed to researching public health law, advancing public health policy development, providing legal technical assistance, and leading collaborative work at the intersection of law and public health. In 2019, PHAI launched an initiative called UnitedOnGuns to promote public health approaches to reduce gun violence, while respecting the rights of responsible gun owners.

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We are indebted to Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto, who responded with inspiring leadership and compassion to the tragic Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting on October 27, 2018. He proposed this project to help mayors prepare for, respond to, and recover from a mass shooting in their communities.

We are grateful to all the mayors, staff, first responders, and experts who generously contributed their time, experience, and expertise to this project. We are also grateful for the support of Northeastern University, our funders, and our advisors, especially Professor James Alan Fox, who generously contributed his time and expertise throughout the project.

Finally, we acknowledge the tragic loss of life and the widespread trauma caused by mass shootings in our country. It is our hope that the Mass Shooting Protocol and Playbook will help mayors and other local leaders save lives and comfort grieving families and community members.



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Foreword

Mayor Nan Whaley
Dayton, OH
July 2021

In the early morning hours of August 4, 2019, a disturbed young man fatally shot nine people and wounded 27 others with an AR-15 style pistol outside a bar in my city's downtown entertainment area. Our outstanding police responded in less than a minute of the first shot and killed the attacker. I received the news no mayor wants to receive in the early hours of the morning, when the city attorney knocked on my door.

Of course, every mayor must be prepared to handle a crisis, whether snowstorms in the Northeast, wildfires in the West, hurricanes in Florida, or flooding along the Mississippi. Less than three months before the attack, my team and I responded to a tornado that ripped through Dayton. But these are familiar challenges. We know how to plow our streets, even if there is a record amount of snow.

Mass shootings are a different kind of crisis. They are sudden, unexpected, and extremely traumatic to large numbers of people in your community. As mayors, we are not responsible for the law enforcement response, but we are responsible for the aftermath. How we handle this crisis will permanently affect the lives of our residents and could be the most important work of our tenure in office.

Having lived through the experience, I now tell other mayors, "it isn't if, but when" a mass shooting happens in your community. You need to prepare. The best way to start is by planning a tabletop exercise with your staff and the relevant stakeholders.

Fortunately, you have in your hands a resource that can help you be as ready as you can be. Researchers at Northeastern University's Public Health Advocacy Institute interviewed me, Dayton Police Chief Richard Biehl, and other city leaders who responded to a mass shooting. Their hard-earned experience is consolidated in this Playbook, which is filled with best practices you can use to prepare, respond, and help your community recover from, a mass shooting.

I am proud to have been a part of this important project.

2025 Update: Note from the Field

Mayor Nancy Rotering
City Manager Ghida Neukirch
Highland Park, IL
May 2025

We are honored to contribute to the updated Mass Shooting Playbook, which we relied on during our response to the mass shooting in Highland Park on July 4, 2022.

That day, a gunman opened fire during our Independence Day parade, killing seven people and injuring dozens more. The pain remains, but so does the impact of the steps we had taken—as a city and region—to prepare for a mass casualty incident. We hope this letter illustrates how preparedness can make a meaningful difference.

In the years leading up to the shooting, we prioritized readiness. City officials completed multiple levels of NIMS training. We conducted regular tabletop exercises and full-scale drills simulating mass violence scenarios. Two years before the parade, Highland Park participated in a multi-agency active shooter exercise at the Ravinia Festival grounds, strengthening regional coordination and response protocols.

Our police and fire departments trained together regularly and formed a Rescue Task Force, a national best practice that allows medics to provide stabilizing care before an area is declared safe for ambulances. We participated in the Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS), ensuring access to regional support. We also built strong relationships with local hospitals, Lake County Emergency Management, and the Regional Healthcare Coalition to ensure medical capacity for multiple victims.

These investments proved critical. Our Emergency Operations Center was activated within minutes. The City Manager served as Incident Commander, coordinating a response that involved more than 115 agencies. The Rescue Task Force evacuated 24 victims to definitive care in under 30 minutes, saving lives. CERT volunteers, trained in crowd control and first aid, provided first aid and logistical support in the immediate aftermath.

Our response was strengthened by clearly defined roles between the Mayor, City Manager, and City Council. As Mayor, Nancy served as the city's "chief of compassion," delivering consistent, empathetic public messages. As City Manager, Ghida led the operational response. That balance—built on trust—enabled us to lead both emotionally and effectively.

In the weeks and months that followed, we prioritized trauma-informed care, multilingual access, and long-term support for residents, employees, and first responders. We opened a Family Assistance Center in partnership with the FBI and American Red Cross. We launched a Resiliency Division to coordinate ongoing services. And we worked with state and federal partners to expand access to mental health care, support remembrance events, and complete an independent after action review.

We never believed it would happen here, but we prepared as if it could. And on that terrible day, the time and care we invested helped save lives and guide our community toward recovery. We hope our experience encourages other cities to take those same steps—before tragedy strikes.



About This Playbook

The Mass Shooting Playbook was inspired by Mayor Bill Peduto of Pittsburgh, who led that city's response to the Tree of Life synagogue shooting. Mayor Peduto urged us to develop practical resources for mayors, city managers, and other local officials called to respond to mass shootings and other forms of violent mass casualty incidents.

Research

Starting in 2020, our team conducted interviews with mayors, first responders, and professional staff from six cities that responded to a mass shooting: Dayton OH, El Paso TX, Orlando FL, Parkland FL, Pittsburgh PA, and San Bernardino CA. Our focus was on the role of the mayor. We used the research to develop the Mass Shooting Playbook: A Resource for U.S. Mayors and City Managers.

In 2024, we updated our research to include mass shootings in Highland Park IL and Nashville TN – two cities that used the Playbook during their response. We included best practices from these cities that highlight the importance of preparedness.

The Mass Shooting Playbook, updated in 2025, is the result of our research.

Mass Shooting Playbook

The Mass Shooting Playbook is a comprehensive guide outlining a leader's responsibilities across the critical phases of a mass shooting response. It is organized into 10 key topics:

- Crisis communications
- Emergency operations
- Victim and family assistance
- Collaborating with first responders
- Managing donations and volunteers
- School shootings
- Community partnerships
- Legal considerations
- Commemorations
- Mental health

Each chapter has an executive summary and a checklist for quick reference. The chapters are divided into the three phases of a mass shooting: preparedness, response, and recovery. Each section provides best practices, training, and resources specific to the topic.

Throughout the Playbook, key resources are highlighted. Many chapters include a leaders in action vignette to illustrate how mayors handled a specific challenge.

The Playbook's appendices contain additional guidance, including preparedness and prevention strategies, potential state and federal funding sources, and tips for commissioning an after action review or hosting a presidential visit.

Other Resources

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 Protocol is provided in the first section of the Playbook and is available on our website.

The **Preparedness Checklist** and **Tabletop Exercise Worksheet** are planning tools that leaders can use to build readiness before a tragedy. These resources are provided in Appendix A of the Playbook and on our website.

Case Briefs of the eight mass shootings researched for this project highlight the actions taken by city leaders, and offer key takeaways for training and planning purposes. Case summaries are provided below. The full case briefs are available on our website.

A Word About City Leaders and Government Structure

When we use the term “mayor,” we are referring to the top civilian leader in your community. This may include mayors, city managers, select persons and city council members, and county officials.

We note that local government structures in the United States are not uniform. Some cities have a “council-manager” system in which the city council sets policy and the city manager is responsible for implementing policy and day-to-day operations. Other cities have a “strong mayor” who acts as the city executive. We interviewed mayors from both structures. Whether you are the mayor of a small town or the mayor of a large city with complex executive functions, this Playbook provides insights and resources that will assist you in the event of a mass shooting.

This project focused on responding to mass shootings. However, many of the best practices may apply to other extreme emergencies, such as a terrorist attack, extreme weather emergencies, and other mass casualty incidents, such as a building collapse or fire.

Mayors Helping Mayors

This Playbook was made possible by the generous support of the mayors and city officials who participated in this research. They contributed generously of their time. They relived the emotional pain of their experience. They freely shared their staff, their protocols, and their best practices with us.

So please share these resources. Email the Protocol, along with your condolences, if a mass shooting happens on the watch of a mayor you know. Share the Playbook with members of your staff and encourage them to plan a tabletop exercise. Encourage your state municipal league and professional organizations to share these resources with their members.

Finally, if you have experience you want to share, or have ideas, resources, or feedback that could improve this Playbook, please contact Sarah C. Peck at speck@phai.org.

Leaders in Action: Mass Shootings Researched for the Playbook

Nashville, TN—The Covenant School Shooting (2023)

On March 27, 2023, an active shooter killed six people, including three children, at The Covenant School. Nashville's response garnered national attention, particularly in contrast to the delayed law enforcement actions during the 2022 Uvalde school shooting. The city's swift and coordinated response is notable for the high level of preparedness of both civilian and law enforcement leaders.

Highland Park, IL—Mass Shooting (2022)

On July 4, 2022, an active shooter opened fire during the city's Fourth of July parade, killing seven people and wounding 48. Highland Park's response is notable for its multi-faceted preparedness (including a multi-agency, regional mass shooting exercise), robust collaboration between city and county officials, and a clear delineation of roles between elected officials and professional staff. Mayor Nancy Rotering described her role as the "chief of compassion."

El Paso, TX—Walmart Shooting (2019)

On August 3, 2019, a hate-motivated attack at a Walmart store killed 23 people and wounded 22. El Paso's mayoral response is noteworthy for Mayor Dee Margo's ability to mobilize corporate and community partners, as well as the public, in key aspects of the response and recovery. The Mayor relied on national media experience to advocate for the residents of El Paso, including the speedy release of death notifications to grieving family members.



Dayton, OH—Oregon District Shooting (2019)

On August 4, 2019, an active shooter killed nine people and injured 17 others in Dayton's Oregon District. Law enforcement stopped the shooter in 32 seconds. Dayton's mayoral response is noteworthy for Mayor Nan Whaley's effective communication strategy, her close relationship with the Police Chief, which aided in the response and recovery, and her adept handling of the visit of President Donald J. Trump, who was a divisive figure in her city.

Parkland, FL—Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting (2018)

On February 14, 2018, a former student killed 17 students and staff members and wounded 17 others at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. This incident illustrates the unique issues posed by a school mass shooting, which command national attention and are especially traumatizing for children and families. Parkland's mayoral response is noteworthy for Mayor Christine Hunschofsky's compassionate leadership during a tragedy that affected community members she knew personally.

Pittsburgh, PA—Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting (2018)

On October 27, 2018, an active shooter killed 11 worshippers and injured six others at the Tree of Life synagogue. Longstanding ties between city leaders, police, and faith communities helped protect other congregations and aid recovery. Mayor Peduto's singular focus on meeting victims' needs became a model for mayoral leadership during a mass casualty event.

Orlando, FL—Pulse Nightclub Shooting (2016)

On June 12, 2016, an active shooter killed 49 people and wounded 53 more at Pulse, a popular LGBTQ+ nightclub. Mayor Buddy Dyer's response illustrates a well-coordinated response by a large city with sophisticated municipal resources. The Mayor's tabletop exercise before the attack is noteworthy, as is his management of key operations, including the victims' fund, the Family Assistance Center, and the Resiliency Center.

San Bernardino, CA—Inland Regional Center Shooting (2015)

On December 2, 2015, two shooters killed 14 people and wounded 22 others during a workplace event at the Inland Regional Center. The response to the San Bernardino shooting illustrates a case in which the Mayor took a background role to the county response, which was the employer of the victims of the attack. While Mayors always have a role to play as the face of their community and voice for unity and healing, there may be less city involvement in a shooting that targets a workplace capable of a strong organizational response.



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Mass Shooting Protocol



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), 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 Timeline

An approximate timeline of a mass shooting for planning purposes. Actual response will vary.

Days 1 & 2

- Shooting occurs
- Law enforcement response begins
- Notification Center opens
- Death notifications should be made as soon as possible, ideally within hours
- Emergency Operation Center (EOC) and Joint Information Center (JIC) established
- State of Emergency declared (optional)
- First press conference held
- Key partners contacted, including American Red Cross and FBI Victim Services Division
- First vigil may take place
- Victim's fund should be launched to accept donations
- Mental health experts consulted
- Family Assistance Center (FAC) opens when Notification Center closes
- Presidential/VIP visits may take place
- Press conferences continue
- Visits made to the FAC and hospitals, meetings held with families and victims
- Regular updates received from law enforcement

Weeks 1 & 2

- Funerals attended, if invited
- Vigils planned and attended, security provided as needed
- Press updates continue
- Messaging transitions from factual updates to messages of healing
- Community board is formed to oversee victims' fund management
- City begins responding to public record requests
- Executive "C4" team meets daily
- Mental health support is provided to first responders, dispatchers, and city staff

- Neighboring communities may provide administrative mutual aid
- Manage legal consequences
- Non-urgent city operations resume
- Make plans to remove and manage items left by mourners at the scene
- Meet the needs of affected businesses

Later

- Resiliency Center opens to provide long-term services to families and community
- Reach out to the families to make sure they have what they need
- Apply for funds to defray costs of response
- Plan and host first annual remembrance ceremony
- Consult with families to plan permanent memorial
- Conduct an After Action Review of response
- Update training and protocols for future emergencies
- Prepare community for the distress of the criminal trial, if any



Playbook Chapters



Chapter 1: Crisis Communications

"You are communicator-in-chief."

— Mayor Nan Whaley, Dayton OH

Chapter Summary

Following a mass shooting, your messaging goals are to share the facts, correct misinformation, and comfort your community. While your previous public speaking experience will be helpful, mass shootings present unique challenges. This chapter offers guidance from mayors, public information officers (PIOs), and communications experts to help you navigate those challenges and lead your community with clarity and compassion.

In the **preparedness** phase, you can develop a crisis communications plan in partnership with your chief of police and PIO, plan the location and operations of a Joint Information Center (JIC), arrange crisis communications training for yourself and your team, review communications systems and capacities, and learn about trauma-informed messaging.

During the **response** phase your goal is to stay ahead of the news cycle, which is now continuous and real-time. Communicate early and often to prevent the spread of inaccurate information. Coordinate with public safety officials to get regular updates, deliver the facts as they become available, proactively correct misinformation, and coordinate your message with other agencies to present unified leadership. As "communicator-in-chief," you should decide who will speak, about what, and when. Usually, law enforcement officials deliver information about the investigation. Your messages might instead focus on public safety, the victims, and messages of unity and healing. Above all, avoid remarks that could politicize the shooting.

You may need to manage a stream of dignitaries, including a Presidential visit. One mayor advised directing visitors to where they can provide comfort to the victims and their families.

As recovery begins, your messaging should gradually shift toward hope, healing, and connecting the community with available support. Partner with victims' assistance agencies to ensure these messages are sensitive, accurate, and responsive to the needs of survivors and families.

Preparedness

Your primary role after a mass shooting is to share facts with the community, correct misinformation, and communicate messages of public safety, unity, and empathy. You will develop these messages in response to the specific circumstances of the shooting. However, you should develop a crisis communications plan, form relationships with mental health experts, and obtain media training, if needed, in advance. Your crisis communications plan is the road map you will follow in the aftermath of a shooting, to ensure unified messaging in the chaotic aftermath of such an event.

Crisis Communications Planning

In collaboration with your public safety executives (police, fire, and emergency management services) and your PIO, develop a crisis communications plan. It should be informed by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) guidance for responding to a crisis, as described in the National Incident Management System (NIMS). If you already have a crisis communications plan that covers natural disasters or other types of emergencies, review the plan for its applicability to a mass shooting. Elements of the plan should include:

- A protocol for press conferences
- The operations and location of a JIC. Consider including a virtual presence to ensure proper communication to stakeholders who are not on site.
- A policy for the city's emergency alert system
- A protocol for managing social media accounts
- Template messages for a range of critical incidents
- A plan and resources for translating messaging into languages commonly used in your community



Image 1: Best practices in risk and crisis communication¹

¹Seeger, Matthew W. "Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process." *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 34, no. 3 (August 2006): 232–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880600769944>.



Develop Press Conference Protocol

Meet with your police chief (and other public safety executives as appropriate) to determine the roles you will play during press conferences. Often law enforcement officials take the lead communicating details about the investigation, including what is known about the shooter. You may opt to speak about public safety, the victims, the availability of resources, and offer messages of unity and healing. Also, develop a system for receiving regular briefings from law enforcement officials. One staffer recommended appointing a dedicated law enforcement official in the Emergency Operations Center whose responsibility is to keep you informed.

Sidebar: Press Conference Best Practices

The following best practices were provided by the law enforcement PIO who managed the press conferences during the response to the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting.

1. Speak with one voice. Assign one point of contact for media.
2. Do not provide “off the record” remarks. Make sure everyone follows this guidance, including people who answer phones.
3. Plan in advance where your press conferences will be held.
4. Have some prepared remarks on hand so that you do not have to start from scratch.
5. Initial remarks should include answers to who, what, when, where (but not why), and what you are doing about it.
6. Think about the questions the media will ask and find the answers (e.g., did the shooter have a record?). In the early stages of the investigation, you will not have all the answers. It is okay to say you do not have the answer yet, but an update will be provided at the next briefing.
7. Include instructions to the families of victims (such as the location of the notification center) and to the public (such as road closures, lockdowns, and other public safety updates).
8. For the speakers: agree in advance on a signal for when you are ready to end your remarks so that your PIO can smoothly end the briefing for you. Keep your remarks brief.
9. Determine speaker order and length of remarks. Avoid redundancy. Practice.
10. For speakers who like to read remarks: memorize your most important points and look up at the camera when you make them. That is what the media will cover.

Best Practice Tip

“Create ‘template’ messages in advance. Having an approved set of templates your team can use to craft the first messages will streamline the process.”

—James Hagerty, Communications Expert



Plan Joint Information Center

The JIC coordinates interagency communication and manages the media during a mass shooting. Your plan should identify where it can be located, as well as locations for the media pool and their vehicles. Brainstorm potential JIC sites ahead of time, based on the location of City Hall, the Emergency Operations Center (if known), and where a shooting could happen in your community. Ideally, the JIC should be located close to the site of the shooting. If a mass shooting happens, you may want to station yourself at the JIC to facilitate the flow of information. Review with your staff the information technology systems and digital communications resources needed to activate the JIC.

In addition to a physical site, plan to establish a virtual JIC for media and other key stakeholders who cannot be on site.

The mayors we interviewed strongly recommended locating the JIC separately from the Notification and Family Assistance Centers so that family members are protected from the media, and so that people working in the JIC are not distracted by the sounds of grief. For other considerations for planning the Notification and Family Assistance Centers, see **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance**.

Key Resources: Joint Information Center



National Response Team Joint Information Center Model: This resource explains the JIC model, how to establish a JIC, functional responsibilities for staff, and worksheets and other sample materials for use by JIC staff.²

FEMA Basic Guidance for Public Information Officers. This guide provides operational best practices to help PIOs (or anyone with PIO responsibilities) perform their duties within the NIMS Command and Coordination structures. The material is adaptable to individual jurisdictions and specific incident conditions.³

Develop Social Media Protocol

Social media will play an important role in your crisis communications for two reasons. First, victims and witnesses send social media messages from the scene almost instantaneously. These messages are quickly reported by the media and often go viral. Initial social media posts are often inaccurate and may cause confusion and undermine public safety.⁴ Therefore, you will need to use the city's social media to get ahead of the real-time news cycle, providing timely, accurate information to your community.

²The U.S. National Response Team. *Joint Information Center Model: Collaborative Communications during Emergency Response*. NRT.org, 2013. <https://www.nrt.org/sites/2/files/Updated%20NRT%20JIC%20Model%204-25-13%20v2.pdf>

³Federal Emergency Management Agency. *National Incident Management System Basic Guidance for Public Information Officers*. FEMA, 2020.

⁴Gilbert, David. "Maine Mass Shooting Disinformation Floods Social Media as Suspect Remains at Large." *Wired*, October 26, 2023. <https://www.wired.com/story/maine-mass-shooting-disinformation/>.



Second, your city’s messaging from law enforcement, city leadership, and agencies will need to be unified to promote accuracy and legitimacy.

During a tabletop exercise that took place before the Pulse nightclub shooting, Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer and his team developed a social media protocol that was subsequently used during their response to the shooting. The best practices of their social media protocol include:

- Use the social media account of the public safety office or a law enforcement agency to provide regular updates to the public. Direct the media to this account and share the content from the mayor’s office accounts and other agency accounts to amplify the messages. The advantage of this approach is two-fold: (1) messaging is unified, and (2) messages sent through public safety channels may be seen as more legitimate and less politicized.
- Create “template” messages for shooting-related circumstances that may occur (and for other crises, for that matter). Having an agreed upon and approved set of templates from which the team will craft the first draft of messages will streamline the process.
- Regularly scheduled social media messages on other topics may need to be cancelled across city accounts during the crisis. This is critically important to avoid sending the wrong message in the wake of a shooting. Therefore, plan to review and potentially halt routine social media messaging, city marketing, advertising, and public relations activities (including events).
- Use social media to directly and proactively correct misinformation.
- Include “how you can help” guidance to the public through social media channels (e.g., identify the official victims’ fund, where to donate blood, how to volunteer, and what not to donate). For more information, see **Chapter 5, Donations and Volunteer Management**.
- Post updates as quickly as is feasible, balanced with the need to clear posts through your internal review. Using a sole account reduces the number of clearances and ensures consistent messaging.



Image 2: Example of initial social media messaging used by a mayor following a mass shooting, amplifying a statement from law enforcement. (Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/mayor_margo/status/1157730991265345536)



Key Resource: FEMA Emergency Social Media Training

FEMA, Social Media in Emergency Management: This online training course (IS-42) covers the use of social media in emergency response plans. The course is for state, local, tribal, and territorial emergency managers and their staff.⁵

Crisis Communications Techniques and Training

Trauma-informed Messaging Basics

Establish or strengthen relationships with your local victims' assistance office, mental health experts, and public health officials. Meet with them in advance to discuss how to craft messages for a traumatized community. This guidance will be useful during any mass casualty event, including an extreme weather-related emergency, train derailment, plane crash, or structural collapse.

Review available resources to better understand the psychology of trauma. One excellent resource is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Crisis and Emergency Response Communication (CERC) Manual. The chapter on the psychology of crisis is short and informative. According to the CERC Manual, to be effective during a crisis, your messages should:

- Be simple and consistent
- Come from multiple credible sources
- Be specific to the emergency being experienced
- Offer a positive course of action

Crisis Communication Media Training

Consider media training for yourself or your staff if you have limited experience with the national media. Training can help you project confidence in front of the cameras, craft appropriate messaging, properly handle information related to the investigation, and understand privacy laws. Media training may also be appropriate for your police chief or other agency spokesperson.

⁵FEMA Emergency Management Institute. "IS-42.A: Social Media in Emergency Management." *FEMA*, 2021. <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-42>.



Key Resources: Crisis Communications/Media Training

CDC Crisis and Emergency Response Communication (CERC program): The program includes trainings, presentations, and the CERC Manual.⁶

CDC CERC: Crisis Communications Plan: This guide describes how to develop a crisis communications plan and integrate it into the local emergency operations plan.⁷

FEMA Training for PIOs: FEMA provides three levels of training for PIOs.⁸

Consultants: Check with your state municipal league or local media station for referrals to local consultants who can provide in-person media training. Recommended public relations firms with crisis communications expertise include:

- Denterlein Communications (www.Denterlein.com)
- PRCG I Haggerty LLC (www.PRCG.com) (Jim Haggerty)
- Julie Parker Communications (<https://www.julieparkerco.com>) (Julie Parker, Christopher Mannino)
- VikStory Media (<https://vikstorymedia.com>) (Anastasiya Bolton)



“Go-Kits” for Yourself and Key Staff

The core emergency response team (e.g., you, your chief of staff, city manager, chief administrative officer, city attorney) should be asked to carry a cell phone at all times so they can be reached immediately in the event of an emergency. The team should also assemble a “go-kit,” as described by FEMA’s guidance for PIOs. The go-kit can be left in the car or office. Include a jacket in case you must unexpectedly appear before the media, snack bars, basic sundries, an umbrella, a sweater, etc.

During the response to the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh, phones were waterlogged by rain, and backup phones were not available, interfering with the ability to provide social media updates to the public. Therefore, include extra cell phones and chargers in your go-kit.

Best Practice Tip

Assemble a duplicate supply of essential equipment, such as extra cell phones and chargers for you, your staff and visitors.

— Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto



⁶Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) Manual. Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication (CERC), January 31, 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/cerc/php/cerc-manual/index.html>.

⁷Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CERC: Crisis Communication Plans. CDC, 2014. https://www.cdc.gov/cerc/media/pdfs/CERC_Crisis_Communication_Plans.pdf.

⁸National Disaster & Emergency Management University. “Public Information Officer (PIO) Program.” Accessed February 25, 2025. <https://training.fema.gov/programs/empp/pio/>.

Response

Initial Communication Decisions

During the first hours and days after the shooting, you will likely spend much of your time in the JIC, gathering information, planning and scheduling press conferences, managing visiting elected officials and dignitaries, and responding to media requests. The first decisions you will need to make include:

- Choose locations for the JIC and the Notification Center, if they have not already been determined. It is important to keep them separate (see **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance**).
- Schedule your first press conference with your public safety team. Deliver it at the predetermined hour and announce the schedule for the following press conferences at the conclusion of the first. In the beginning, you can indicate the timing may be fluid (e.g., “We expect to hold briefings twice daily, but these may be more or less frequent depending upon circumstances.”). Highland Park officials held press conferences hourly immediately following the incident.
- Determine your roles through a pre-conference “huddle” that takes place 30–60 minutes before the first press conference. Often law enforcement officials take the lead communicating details about the investigation. If the shooter has not yet been apprehended, the first press conferences may focus only on public safety and requests for leads to identify and locate the shooter.
- Limit the number of speakers to the minimum required. Too many speakers (especially if they are elected officials), are redundant and run the risk of creating confusion or politicizing the tragedy.
- Consider including a “How You Can Help” section in your social media strategy, on the city’s website, and in every press release or other communications issued during the response. Inform the public of ways they can help, such as where they can donate money, volunteer, give blood, or provide assistance to the response operations, where appropriate.
- Best practice: ask for a dedicated police official responsible for keeping you informed. Request regular meetings with your chief.
- Direct your communications team to proactively correct misinformation.
- Initiate your social media strategy. As noted above, a best practice is to release information relating to the shooting through a single social media account (operated by your public health office or the police PIO), which is retweeted by the city and other agencies. Direct all media inquiries to that account.

Focus at all times on the needs of the victims and families. This is not just the right thing to do, it will also avoid bruised egos and hard feelings among the various stakeholders involved in the process. Remind the speakers and their staffers that you are on the same team and should present a unified front in the immediate aftermath of the crisis.



Leaders in Action: Negotiating the Order of Speakers

Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer: “We had a discussion with the FBI about who should take the lead in the first press conference. We felt strongly we should lead the press conference. Our rationale was that our community and the families of victims should hear first from somebody that they know and trust. They did not know the FBI special agent in charge, so we felt he would be unable to convey the message of safety and unity we thought was needed. That message needed to come from the Mayor of Orlando. Eventually the FBI deferred to us.”



Your First Public Statements

Mayors told us their top priority at the first press conferences was to convey that the situation was under control and provide information about the victims. Be mindful that law enforcement considerations may limit what you can say and when you can say it. Convey this to the public; they will understand if you are up front about what you can say and what you cannot, given the active investigation. Work with the coroner’s office and law enforcement officials to identify the victims as quickly as possible so that you can convey that critical information first to their families and then to the public.

Keep messages simple, credible, and consistent. Your messages should express empathy and show respect and sensitivity for victims and families.

Points to include in first messages:

- Where families and members of the affected community should gather (“Notification Center”)
- The status of the coroner’s office investigation to identify the victims
- Reliable sources of information, such as a dedicated social media account, a city website where information about the shooting will be posted regularly, and hotlines established for this purpose
- “How you can help” guidance for the public

Best Practice Tips

“Avoid saying, ‘It could have been worse.’”

— Anastasiya Bolton, *Journalist and Crisis Communications Expert*

“In the immediate aftermath, there may be little that is known definitively—and often initial reports are wrong. You can say, ‘this is what we know now, this is what we are working to find out, and this is when the next update will be provided.’”

— Heather Fagan, *Chief of Staff for the City of Orlando*



Don't Name Them Campaign

One mayor said he avoided naming the shooter at all press conferences. Research has shown that naming the shooter repeatedly can increase media focus on the perpetrator instead of the victims, potentially contributing to a desire among some individuals to imitate the shooter's actions or to glorify the violence.⁹ For these reasons, Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) officials and the FBI established a "Don't Name Them" campaign. The "No Notoriety" campaign, formed by families of victims of the Aurora Theater, offers guidelines for media and law enforcement to use to limit the publication of the shooter's name and image.^{10, 11}

For similar reasons related to the shooter's desire for infamy, Nashville Chief John Drake and the families of the Covenant School victims opposed the public release of the shooter's writings.¹²

Leaders in Action: Remarks at the First Press Conference



Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley: "If you are the family or friend of a victim, we invite you to come to the convention center or call [local helpline number]. And if you have any information on the incident, if you were in the Oregon District today and have information, please call [police tipline]. The Red Cross, the Greater Dayton Area Hospital Association, Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS), and support for our police and first responders are on the scene to help the situation. Of course, we are incredibly grateful for our partners in this very sad incident.¹³

Best Practice Tip



"It is important to speak with one voice."

– *Former San Bernardino Mayor R. Carey Davis*

⁹Meindl, James N., and Jonathan W. Ivy. "Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation." *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 3 (March 2017): 368–70. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303611>.

¹⁰<https://nonotriety.com>

¹¹Loller, Travis. "Nashville School Shooter's Writings Reignite Debate over Releasing Material Written by Mass Killers." *AP News*, July 25, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/covenant-nashville-shooting-manifesto-efb8c1d737bb24a88d6c91e6809af7d1>. <https://nonotriety.com>

¹²Loller, Travis. "Nashville School Shooter's Writings Reignite Debate over Releasing Material Written by Mass Killers." *AP News*, July 25, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/covenant-nashville-shooting-manifesto-efb8c1d737bb24a88d6c91e6809af7d1>.

¹³Dayton, OH City Government. "7:00 am Press Conference - Mass Shooting Incident of Aug 4." Facebook, August 4, 2019.



Managing the Media



Image 3: Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto speaks to the media following the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting. (Photo by Alexandra Wimley. Copyright © Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 2021, all rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.)

Schedule the first press conference as soon as possible, even if you do not have much information to share. Inform the media that you will schedule regular press conferences, and deliver them when you say you will. There will be changes in the schedule, of course, but be sure to manage media expectations properly to show you are in control. Use social media channels to provide updates on when press conferences will occur.

Tips for managing press conferences:

- Secure the press conference site. Many people will want to speak, but you need to control the messaging. You may need to restrict access to the press conference area.
- Provide all journalists and types of media equal access to information.
- Find a balance between local media (to provide relevant information to affected residents) and national media (to reach a broader public audience). One mayor suggested reserving time for briefings with local media only.

Journalists from the same network may compete with each other for an interview. Your time will be limited. After agreeing to an interview with a journalist, feel free to limit additional interview requests from other journalists from the same network to make time to speak to other networks and local news (or to attend to other duties).

Also, due to the newsworthiness of a mass shooting, your interviews, even with local media, may be aired nationally. You should prepare yourself and your remarks accordingly. One mayor pointed out that he chose to deliver messages intended for the local community, leaving messages geared to the national audience to others. If you are prioritizing the needs of your local community, the victims, and their families, this may make the most sense.

Prioritize the Needs of Victims and Families

One mayor recommended prioritizing the needs of the victims and their families in your communications strategy. Another saw her role as the “chief of compassion.” Strategies for establishing effective communication with victims and families include:

- Designate a media liaison for victims and families at the JIC to facilitate the exchange of messages and information between the families and your office.
- Do what you can to speed the release of the names of the victims to their families and loved ones (the public’s need to know is secondary).
- Take steps to ensure that the names of victims do not leak out before the families are informed.
- Tailor messaging to be respectful to the families.
- Visit the families at the Notification Center as soon as possible so that you can communicate face-to-face.
- Prioritize your time. If faced with a choice between an interview and an invitation to meet with family members, feel free to pass on the interview. The media will still be there when you are free.
- Families can be overwhelmed by efforts of the media to contact them. PIOs from other communities may volunteer to assist. In that case, assign a volunteer PIO to every family to help them manage (or restrict) their engagement with media. Do not assume that they do not want to talk to the media.

Leaders in Action: Remarks About the Family Assistance Center



Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer: “It’s important to remember that these victims are having normal reactions to a very abnormal event...Services at the family assistance center range from grief counseling to financial assistance to obtaining visas...we can’t thank these organizations enough for their tireless efforts in this difficult situation...If you don’t feel comfortable coming down to the site, we would still encourage you to call us...and we will reach out to you. The Family Assistance Center will remain open throughout the weekend.”



Managing Visits from Elected Officials

In the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting, elected officials may converge on your city. Visitors can range from the President of the United States (“POTUS”), to your governor, to national and state legislators and officials from neighboring districts. They may burden your already overstretched staff and police force. Some of these visits could be controversial. Yet, hosting these visitors provides the opportunity to communicate your city’s needs to policymakers who may be able to help. Mayors who welcomed VIPs following a shooting offered these tips:

- Decide whether inviting them to speak at press conferences will be beneficial to your community.
- Give them something to do that can help victims and survivors.
- Help them develop appropriate messages to avoid politicizing the shooting or traumatizing the affected community.
- Encourage them to honor the first responders, including dispatchers and medical providers.

For best practices for managing VIP visits, see **Appendix B**.

Recovery

Messaging: Shifting from Response to Recovery

As the public begins to process what has happened, your messaging will gradually shift from the “response” to the “recovery” phase. This process may begin within hours of the shooting and continue for months or even years. Your recovery messaging will focus on fostering long-term community resilience, restoring hope, and healing from trauma. Common themes include solidarity, unity, and resilience.

Communities often adopt slogans intended to convey strength over adversity (e.g., “Boston Strong”). However, the Office of Victims of Crime recommends against such slogans, as some victims and families feel anything but strong as they recover from tragedy. Your community may adopt the “strong” slogan before you can offer an alternative. But, if appropriate, you may choose to highlight compassion and hope, rather than strength, in your messaging (e.g., “Dayton Shines”). El Paso Mayor Dee Margo’s messaging, which highlighted the triumph of love over hate, set the tone for the city’s immediate response and long-term recovery. Listen to your community; they will tell you what they need when it comes to public slogans.

In addition, use this opportunity to highlight the many caring actions taken by members of the community, from volunteers who bring meals to first responders, to community members who donate blood, to companies that make financial and in-kind donations and provide needed services to victims and families, to groups that contribute art and culture to lift the spirits of victims and their families. These people are “ambassadors of hope.” Their selfless actions and compassion can help make a tragedy bearable.



Image 4: Fifteen hundred quilts were handmade and distributed to victims, family members, first responders, and city officials who responded to the Pulse shooting. (Photo by Paula Kennedy)

Consult Mental Health and Behavioral Health Experts

Consult with mental health experts to understand the long-term mental health impact on your community and for guidance in developing trauma-informed messages to help them recover. For example, to prepare messaging after the shooting in Dayton, Mayor Whaley consulted a countywide mental health services network with which she had previously partnered. For more information, see **Chapter 10, Mental Health**.



Best Practice Tip

Whether promoting healing, planning vigils, or arranging services for victims and family members, remember to consult with mental health experts.

Engage Community Partners in Interfaith or Hate Prevention Work

In the wake of a hate-motivated shooting, it is especially difficult for the community to process and understand the event. Retaliation against the group associated with the shooter may be a risk. Consult with trusted community leaders to develop messages of religious pluralism, respect for minority groups, and unity across cultures.

For example, reflecting on his response to the shooting at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, WI, Mayor Steve Scaffidi wrote, “The messages of diversity, mutual respect, and acceptance are important, and I began to talk about them in earnest at the vigil [three days after the shooting].”¹⁴ Other mayors also spoke of the importance of interfaith messaging, engaging the leaders of the groups targeted in a hate crime, and developing respectful relationships with

¹⁴Scaffidi, Stephen A. *Six Minutes in August: A Story of Tragedy, Healing and Community* (p. 66). Marketpoint Media LLC, 2015.



these groups long before any attack happens. Some religious groups have prepared prayers for victims of mass shootings, which may provide comfort to members of the community who turn to their faith for comfort.¹⁵

Engage Schools

If you are responding to a school shooting, you may need to include messages about school safety, and mental health and counseling services for anguished students. Work with your relevant partners, including school boards, superintendents, parent advocacy groups, and school nurses, to understand your role in the school's recovery and how to include relevant and timely messages to the school community as well as the broader public. For more information, see **Chapter 6, School Shootings**.

Suicide Prevention

Research has shown that many mass shooters were suicidal. You might use this opportunity to speak generally about suicide prevention resources in your community, and the importance of secure firearm storage when a member of the household is suicidal or in crisis. Doing so could help prevent suicides (nearly 60 percent of all gun deaths annually are by suicide). Additionally, educating the public about suicide may help prevent a future public mass shooting. See **Appendix D** for more information.

Advocacy

It is vitally important to make sure you do not appear to be exploiting a tragedy for the purpose of advancing political or policy positions. Therefore, as noted above, it is important to avoid political language in the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting.

However, after you have met the urgent needs of your community, the victims, and their families, you may consider how you can use your access to the media to educate the public about gun violence prevention topics of relevance to your community. Public health-related measures include calling for increased mental health resources, school safety measures, crime victim compensation, and more. It could be helpful to advocate for additional state or federal funding to help other cities respond to mass shootings.

According to the CDC's CERC Manual, it is also appropriate to inform the public of ways they can give, volunteer, or advocate for change. Helping community members play a positive role can promote healing.

¹⁵Boorstein, Michelle. "Denominations Have Begun Creating Special Prayers for Fatal Mass Shootings." *Washington Post*, July 16, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/07/16/mass-shooting-newtown-parkland-pulse-new-prayer-litany-episcopal-mass-shooting/>.

COMMUNICATIONS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Develop a crisis communications plan.
- Establish relationships with your local victims' assistance office, mental health experts, and public health officials. Consult with them on messaging.
- Assess the Emergency Notification System. Develop a policy for its use and request regular testing.
- Review the CDC's CERC Manual for tips for communicating during a crisis.
- If you have limited experience speaking to the national media, consider media training.
- Ask your PIO to assemble messages that you can use in a crisis, and practice delivering them.
- Prepare a "go-kit." Program contacts into your phone and assemble supplies.

Response

- Establish a schedule for communicating with the media, and stick to it.
- Decide who will speak and in what order at press conferences.
- Seek the guidance of victims' assistance and mental health experts to develop trauma-informed messaging.
- Keep messages simple, credible, and consistent.
- Provide information about available resources and ways the community can give.
- Act quickly to correct misinformation.
- Avoid political messaging. Instead, deliver messages of hope and unity to comfort the families and prevent community division.

Recovery

- Focus your messaging on bolstering long-term community resilience, restoring hope, and healing from trauma.



Chapter 2:

Emergency Operations

“This can happen anywhere. Think about your plan.”

– Mayor Buddy Dyer, Orlando FL

Chapter Summary

Emergency preparedness is the creation of organizational structures within government agencies that enable them to provide the support, resources, and services needed during and after emergencies. Although you may never feel fully prepared, you can take steps to ensure that you and your agencies are equipped to handle the specific challenges posed by a mass shooting and other types of violent mass attacks.

Therefore, the primary focus of this chapter is **preparedness**. In consultation with city or county public safety and emergency management staff, you can review and update your emergency management plans and determine whether a supplemental plan for a mass casualty incident is needed.

To inform your emergency management plan, you can organize tabletop exercises, schedule training as needed, and practice emergency operations specific to a mass shooting. Include public health officials in your planning, as they will play an essential role in shaping messaging and coordinating mental health services and other aspects of crisis response.

Your planning will ensure you understand your role, your first responder agencies are trained to respond effectively to an active shooter and deliver life-saving tactical medical care to the injured, and your community is prepared to deliver specialized victim services. In addition, evaluate your communications infrastructure to ensure it is equipped to handle a mass shooting.

During the **response** phase, public safety officials should establish an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) that coordinates operations. This might be a mobile command unit or a permanent EOC established in the city. Collecting information will be a top priority. You should monitor all aspects of the emergency response while you work with your staff to ensure all needs are met.

Emergency management continues after the incident is contained and the crime scene is processed. Work with the appropriate agencies to transition from emergency operations to long-term services to help your community “return to normal” during the **recovery**. Consider commissioning an After Action Review (AAR) to evaluate the level of preparedness and the emergency response to strengthen the future performance of your city’s agencies, and to share lessons learned with other localities. Apply for funding to mitigate the cost of the response.

Preparedness

Emergency Operations Plan

Review your community's emergency operations plan (EOP) in collaboration with public safety and emergency management staff. This plan, often required by law, generally designates authority among agency directors and specifies operational procedures for crisis management. It may not, however, cover issues specific to a mass shooting.¹ Work with your team to determine whether a supplemental plan for a mass shooting is needed.

In some cases involving a mass shooting, the all-hazards EOP was never officially activated, nor did elected officials declare a local state of emergency. In other cases, communities responding to a mass shooting experienced problems implementing their EOP. For this reason, it is crucial that you to understand your EOP and its applicability to a mass shooting.



Image 1: An example of an Emergency Operations Center in action, showing coordination among a Public Information Officer and officials during a simulated mass casualty incident (Photo by Shannon Arledge, The U.S. National Archives).

National Incident Management System

Emergency operations planning usually utilizes the National Incident Management System (NIMS), which was prepared by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for elected officials. One aspect of the NIMS model is Emergency Support Functions, a structure used to coordinate among multiple federal agencies to provide the support, resources, program implementation, and services needed during an emergency. Review the NIMS guidance to understand your role in the NIMS model and guide your planning.

¹Use the term “mass shooting” to include public mass shootings and other forms of violent mass casualty incidents that can involve a wide range of weapons—including vehicles, knives, and explosives.



Key Resource: NIMS Guidance

FEMA, National Incident Management System (2017, 3rd edition): This resource provides guidance on using the NIMS at all levels of government, including commentary on the roles of local elected officials in incident management.²



Training and Executive Information

Training is an important component of emergency preparedness. Your planning exercises should identify the training needs of your staff, first responder agencies, and community victim service providers. Key training resources are included in each chapter of this Playbook.

Elected officials may benefit from executive training. FEMA training and guidance for elected officials is detailed below. In addition, the federal government funds executive education on security-related topics for mayors, governors, and other elected leaders through the federally funded Center for Homeland Defense and Security.³ Additional executive resources are provided in **Appendix A, Readiness Toolkit**.

Key Resources: Executive Training Resources

G-402 Incident Command System Overview for Executives/Senior Officials: FEMA recommends elected officials complete this course, which covers the basics of the NIMS, Multiagency Coordination Groups, Incident Command Systems, and Emergency Operations Centers. The course also summarizes the chief elected official's role in emergency preparedness, which may be applied to preparedness for a mass shooting.⁴

Local Elected and Appointed Officials Guide: Roles and Resources in Emergency Management: FEMA recommends this guide to help elected officials understand the basics of their roles in emergency management, including preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. The guide outlines essential tools and strategies for coordinating with partners, managing public information, and building community resilience. It also highlights the role of elected officials in emergency preparedness, which can be applied to planning and responding to a mass shooting.⁵

Center for Homeland Defense and Security Executive Education (CHDS): The Center for Homeland Defense and Security offers training for elected officials on mass shooting preparedness and response.⁶



²Federal Emergency Management Agency. *National Incident Management System*. FEMA, October 2017. https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_nims_doctrine-2017.pdf.

³Center for Homeland Defense and Security. "Mass Casualty Event Preparedness, Response, and Recovery: Offerings for Mayors and Local Leaders." Accessed March 7, 2025. <https://www.chds.us/c/resources/uploads/CHDS-Executive-Education-Program-Mass-Casualty-Event-Offerings.pdf>.

⁴Federal Emergency Management Agency. *G 0402 NIMS Overview for Senior Elected Officials (Executives, Elected, & Appointed)*. FEMA, May 2019. [https://training.fema.gov/gstate/xcr3wnlp/g0402%20-%20ics-402%20-%20incident%20command%20system%20\(ics\)%20overview%20for%20executives%20and%20senior%20officials/04%20ig/g402_complete_ig.pdf](https://training.fema.gov/gstate/xcr3wnlp/g0402%20-%20ics-402%20-%20incident%20command%20system%20(ics)%20overview%20for%20executives%20and%20senior%20officials/04%20ig/g402_complete_ig.pdf).

⁵Federal Emergency Management Agency. *Local Elected and Appointed Officials Guide: Roles and Resources in Emergency Management*. FEMA, September 2022. https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_local-elected-officials-guide_2022.pdf.

⁶Center for Homeland Defense and Security. "Executive Education Program." Accessed March 7, 2025. <https://www.chds.us/c/academic-programs/eepl/>.

Tabletop Exercises

Mayors we interviewed strongly recommend tabletop exercises. Make time to schedule a tabletop exercise for your staff and relevant agencies. They can be scenario-based to test the effectiveness of your EOP, or an informal planning session with staff or relevant experts to address specific elements of the response. A tabletop exercise, or a series of them, can be used to:

- Define and deconflict roles of city agencies.
- Identify the role of mutual aid partners, which may include administrative support.
- Identify potential community partners willing to provide funding, services, or other support.
- Outline a plan for the city's long-term recovery (which is often overlooked in planning).
- Understand how the Emergency Operations Center and 911 center will operate, and who will serve as the EOC Incident Commander.
- Agree on an assembly point for the mayor, city manager, and city council.
- Develop a communication protocol for press briefings and social media messaging.
- Ensure public safety agencies (including law enforcement, fire department, and emergency medical services) have the necessary training and equipment.
- Plan victim transport and hospital surge capacity with fire/EMT, area hospitals, and the Hospital Preparedness Program Manager for your state.
- Plan how self-deploying and unvetted mental health resources will be safely moved away from the scene.
- Plan the services that victims and families will need and how the city will provide them.
- Plan tabletop exercises with local school officials to help them understand the services the city can offer before and during an emergency, including security planning, lockdown drills, and victim and family services.

For more guidance on tabletop exercises, see the **Tabletop Exercise Worksheet** in **Appendix A**.

Public Health Resources

Public health officials—especially mental health and behavioral health experts—should be included in planning emergency operations for a mass shooting. They can provide assistance on messaging and identify victim service providers who can deliver appropriate mental health services, such as providing psychological first aid to victims, witnesses, and first responders. In some cases, they can activate large groups of volunteers, such as the Medical Reserve Corps, a national network of volunteers, organized locally, that supports public health and emergency preparedness in communities across the United States. Public health officials can also help plan for the recovery phase.

For more information, see **Chapter 10, Mental Health**.



Key Resources: The Public Health Agency Role

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Public Health Emergency Response Guide for State, Local, and Tribal Public Health Directors: Actionable and accessible guidance for local public health agency staff in all phases of an emergency incident. The guide explains how to coordinate with existing emergency operations plans and management frameworks and does not replace or duplicate these plans. The checklists for each phase are easy to follow and are geared toward public health staff.⁷

National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) Resources for Public Health Agencies: This resource provides a list of active shooter trainings and psychological first aid resources tailored to local public health agencies.⁸

NACCHO: The Role of Public Health in Terrorism and Active Shooter Preparedness and Response: This article provides examples of how public health officials served their communities in the aftermath of mass shootings and terror attacks.⁹



Alert Systems and Capacities

The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) is FEMA's national alert system that allows local, state, and federal officials to send emergency messages to the public across multiple platforms. These include Wireless Emergency Alerts to mobile phones, the Emergency Alert System for radio and television broadcasts, and alerts through social media, text, email, and other digital channels. In the case of a mass shooting, IPAWS can be used to warn the public of immediate safety concerns, issue shelter-in-place orders, or direct the public to avoid specific areas if a shooter is still at large. For example, in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing, shelter-in-place messages were sent multiple times during the manhunt for suspects that spanned days.¹⁰

⁷U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Office of Readiness and Response." Office of Readiness and Response, January 30, 2025. <https://www.cdc.gov/orr/index.html>.

⁸National Association of County and City Health Officials. "San Bernardino Shooting Incident: Community Preparedness Resources for Active Shooter Incidents." NACCHO, December 2, 2015. <https://www.naccho.org/blog/articles/san-bernardino-shooting-incident-community-preparedness-resources-for-active-shooter-incidents>.

⁹Hodges, Mary. "The Role of Public Health in Terrorism and Active Shooter Preparedness and Response - NACCHO." National Association of County and City Health Officials, January 6, 2016. <https://www.naccho.org/blog/articles/the-role-of-public-health-in-terrorism-and-active-shooter-preparedness-and-response>.

¹⁰National Policing Institute. *After Action Report for the Response to the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings*. National Policing Institute, December 2014. https://www.policinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/after-action-report-for-the-response-to-the-2013-boston-marathon-bombings_0.pdf.

Leaders in Action: Effective Use of a Public Safety Warning



In San Bernardino, following the attack on the Inland Regional Center, authorities quickly issued public safety warnings through traditional broadcast outlets and official social media channels, urging residents to shelter in place and stay safe. Law enforcement agencies also asked the public for help identifying the suspects. A critical tip from a community member—who noticed suspicious activity—led police to the shooters' location, where they were intercepted and killed in a shootout. The alerts and public cooperation played a pivotal role in bringing the crisis to a close. Mayor Davis said that he waited to speak until public safety was restored.

The IPAWS system is not always used effectively. Notifications may be sent too widely and thus ignored, or may lack important information and cause confusion. In some cases, no alert is issued when one may have been warranted. Following the mass shooting in Monterey Park, CA, in 2023, it took law enforcement five hours to alert the public that the shooter was still at large. During that time, the shooter attempted another attack—fortunately thwarted. The delay in public notification was widely criticized and prompted calls for better alert protocols.¹¹

To prevent these problems, meet with your public safety officials and emergency management team to review notification best practices and plan how your city will activate the IPAWS system in the event of a mass shooting. Understand who is responsible for maintaining and testing the system. The FEMA resources provided below offer guidance for the effective use of your city's IPAWS system. Consider layering IPAWS alerts with local tools such as text-based systems, opt-in email lists, and verified social media accounts to maximize reach and reinforce key messages.

If your city does not yet participate in IPAWS, consider applying to join the system. To access IPAWS, your city must apply through FEMA and complete required training and system integration steps.

In addition, review your city's emergency hotlines. If a hotline already exists, ensure it can be activated quickly to provide accurate, recorded information to the public. You may wish to pre-record general emergency messages that can be used during a crisis.

Best Practice Tip



If the shooter is not apprehended, issue a public alert to warn residents. Advise sheltering in place or avoiding the area and provide clear safety instructions using all available channels.

¹¹Condon, Bernard, Jim Mustian, and Julie Watson. "Cops Took 5 Hours to Warn That Dance Hall Shooter Was Loose." *AP News*, January 24, 2023. <https://apnews.com/law-enforcement-shootings-california-general-news-024e51999209bfb311f4d2f71690be52>.



Emails are another important tool. The City of Highland Park established a general information email address (Hpcares@cityhpil.com) that residents could use to share tips, ask questions, and provide feedback. This account was monitored by multiple staff members, which increased response time and reduced the number of messages directed to senior officials actively managing the incident.

Key Resources: Integrated Public Alert and Warning System

Best Practices for Using IPAWS: This resource provides helpful information for determining when and how to send emergency notifications.¹²

IPAWS Message Design Dashboard: This tool can be used to create complete, clear, and effective emergency notifications.¹³

IPAWS Course for Content Originators: Your emergency manager or appropriate staff member can take this course to ensure that your city issues timely, effective IPAWS notifications.¹⁴



Keep Abreast of Innovations and Technology

Consider forming a team to consider new technologies that could aid in the response. These developments may be of interest:

- **Live-911** allows patrol officers to hear the caller's voice and tone directly on their devices even before the 911 operator can process the information and relay details on law enforcement channels. This may make it possible for a patrol officer near the scene to respond sooner. The Splash Pad shooting in Rochester Hills, Michigan, in June 2024, is an example of Live-911 being utilized successfully during a mass shooting incident.
- **Smart 911**, in use in Highland Park, allows residents to voluntarily register personal details into the system. They can enter medical history, household members, allergies/ medical history, pets, and emergency contacts, which appear on the dispatcher's screen when they call 911. This can help dispatchers make better-informed decisions and relay accurate information to responders.
- **Emergency radio channels** continue to encounter interoperability challenges across agencies and jurisdictions. You may want to form a task force that includes first responders and dispatchers to review best practices for your community. Some states have adopted single shared channels/talk groups during mass incidents. These range from FCC-designated nationwide channels, to statewide systems like ISICS (Iowa),

¹²Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Best for Alerting Authorities Using Wireless Emergency Alerts," March 24, 2023. <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/practitioners/integrated-public-alert-warning-system/public-safety-officials/alerting-authorities/best-practices>.

¹³Federal Emergency Management Agency. "Integrated Public Alert & Warning System," April 22, 2024. <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/practitioners/Practices-integrated-public-alert-warning-system>.

¹⁴Federal Emergency Management Agency. "IS-247.C: Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) for Alert Originators." FEMA Emergency Management Institute, June 3, 2024. <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=is-247.c&lang=en>.

CoMIRS (Massachusetts), StasCom21 (Illinois), and regionally defined interoperability channels in states like Indiana. The key is pre-programming and training so that responders know to switch immediately during a large-scale critical incident.

- **Threat detection systems** have advanced beyond video cameras and magnetometers to include artificial intelligence, enhanced screening tools, gunfire detection, and other technologies that may identify threats earlier and more cost-effectively.

Response

Emergency Operations Center: Activation and Access

EOCs are locations where staff from multiple agencies, including law enforcement and other public safety officials, come together to address imminent threats and hazards. EOC staff provide coordinated information management, resource allocation and tracking, and advanced planning support.¹⁵ The EOC is typically in a separate location from the Incident Command Post, which houses the incident commander or Unified Command.

EOCs may be fixed locations, temporary facilities, or virtual structures with staff participating remotely.¹⁶ The EOC may be a mobile command unit, as happened in Orlando. In El Paso, the EOC was located at the 9/11 Fusion Center, an all-crimes and all-hazards tactical information and intelligence hub for the El Paso Police Department and the region. In Dayton, the EOC was located in the convention hall.

In Highland Park, the EOC was initially located in the fire station because it was a designated backup EOC and allowed for a quick, centralized response in the early moments of the shooting. Once the scene stabilized, operations were moved to city hall to allow for better coordination, more space for interagency teams, and integration with senior city staff and elected officials.

Your first decision upon learning of the incident will be to determine where to go. For security reasons, law enforcement officials discourage elected officials from going to the scene while the response is ongoing. The EOC may not be the best option, as the presence of elected officials may prove a distraction. For these reasons, some elected officials operate from the Joint Information Center, where they can receive briefings from the EOC or command unit. Another alternative may be city hall. San Bernardino Mayor Carey Davis went to city hall, where he could most effectively engage with his staff and city council members.

Wherever you go, the challenge can be obtaining timely information. Daniel Gilman, Chief of Staff to Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto, recommended having a law enforcement designee in the command unit whose job is focused “outward” to communicate with city leaders. In Highland Park, City Manager Ghida Neukirch coordinated city operations from the EOC and kept the mayor and the city council informed.

¹⁵Federal Emergency Management Agency. *National Incident Management System*. FEMA, October 2017. https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_nims_doctrine-2017.pdf.

¹⁶Federal Emergency Management Agency. *National Incident Management System* (p. 35). FEMA, October 2017. https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_nims_doctrine-2017.pdf.



Leaders in Action: City Manager Served as EOC Incident Commander

Highland Park City Manager Ghida Neukirch coordinated city operations from the EOC following the mass shooting, while law enforcement officials served as incident commanders for the tactical response. The EOC functioned as the operational hub, integrating emergency responders, communications teams, and city leadership. Following NIMS protocols, City Manager Neukirch received law enforcement briefings and coordinated messaging and resource support, ensuring that elected officials—including the mayor—were safely relocated and kept informed. Multiple agencies, including the FBI, Illinois State Police, ATF, and over 100 local departments, provided mutual aid during the response and investigation. The police chief initiated coordination with federal partners, while the Lake County sheriff's office led media briefings related to the investigation. City Manager Neukirch played a central role in interagency coordination and ensured continuity of city governance.



Highland Park later conducted a leadership succession drill to ensure city officials were prepared for scenarios in which key leaders might be unavailable during an emergency.

Best Practice Tip

Request a designated public safety official in the EOC whose sole responsibility is to provide updates to the mayor and city manager.



Emergency Response Briefing

During the first 24 hours, you should be briefed regularly on the emergency response, including on the operations of the EOC, the law enforcement response, and the establishment of the Notification Center. Based on these briefings, begin planning for the closeout of emergency services and the de-escalation of the EOC and incident response teams. Consult FEMA's NIMS, 3rd Edition for guidance on demobilizing first responders from other jurisdictions and deactivating mutual aid responses. Request regular updates until the demobilization of resources is complete.

Emergency Declarations

Consider whether to declare a local emergency. There is no downside to making the declaration, which can be terminated at any time, but there are important benefits. The implications of the declaration vary state by state, but the declaration may authorize you to:¹⁷

- Activate local EOP and mutual aid agreements with nearby jurisdictions, county law enforcement, the FBI, and other resources.
- Activate the local EOC and the NIMS system.
- Suspend or temporarily waive union rules or other labor laws that will allow first responders to be deployed for longer work shifts.
- Activate immunities and liability protections for staff who respond.

¹⁷Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. "Emergency Authority & Immunity Toolkit." Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, 2012. <https://www.astho.org/advocacy/state-health-policy/legal-preparedness-series/emergency-authority-immunity-toolkit/>.

In some cases, an emergency declaration may help the city obtain funding to defray the costs of response, such as overtime for law enforcement and other public safety officials, or to obtain FEMA assistance for small businesses impacted by the incident.¹⁸

You may also ask the governor to declare a statewide emergency, depending on the scope of the incident and whether state resources are needed. Local declarations of emergency may require you to assess whether local emergency response resources would be exhausted before allowing the declaration of a statewide emergency or requesting state aid.

A state or federal emergency declaration for an incident that meets the criterion of a “major disaster” may provide access to federal funding, including Small Business Administration disaster loans authorized by the Stafford Act.¹⁹ See **Chapter 8, Legal Considerations** for more on the legal and financial considerations in making an emergency declaration, including opportunities for reimbursement of local costs. See **Appendix C, Funding Sources** for information about FEMA and other funding sources.

Leaders in Action: Emergency Declaration



In consultation with Mayor Buddy Dyer, then Florida Governor Rick Scott declared a local state of emergency in Orange County and the City of Orlando following the Pulse Nightclub shooting. According to the Mayor, this declaration relaxed certain rules in Orlando related to police overtime and allowed full deployment of law enforcement and other emergency management staff for the response by suspending paid time off during the emergency.

Activate County Emergency Operations Resources

Your county will likely be a key partner in the response to a mass shooting, particularly in smaller or rural communities where municipal resources may be limited, or where county employees or buildings are involved, as in the case of the San Bernardino shooting.

County support can include law enforcement, medical services, emergency management coordination, victim and family services, public information officers, and even funding or logistical assistance. Strong relationships and pre-established protocols can significantly improve the speed and effectiveness of your county’s response.

The response to the San Bernardino shooting illustrates a case in which the mayor took a background role to the response of the county, which was the employer of the victims of the attack. While mayors always have a role to play as the face of their community and a voice for unity and healing, there may be less city involvement in a shooting that targets a workplace capable of a strong organizational response. The mayor focused on maintaining critical city operations, fostering unified messaging between multiple agencies, and coordinating between city, county, and federal authorities.

¹⁸Congressional Research Service. *Stafford Act Assistance and Acts of Terrorism*. Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2023. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/R44801.pdf>.

¹⁹Congressional Research Service. *Stafford Act Assistance and Acts of Terrorism*. Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2023. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/R44801.pdf>.



County officials also played a central role in the Highland Park mass shooting response. The Lake County sheriff's office immediately deployed officers and tactical resources. It also provided investigative leadership through the Lake County Major Crimes Task Force, which coordinated evidence collection, witness interviews, and intelligence sharing. The deputy chief of the sheriff's office served as the law enforcement public information officer, standing alongside Highland Park officials during public briefings in the early hours following the shooting.

The Lake County coroner's office led victim identification and family notifications in coordination with law enforcement. Simultaneously, the Lake County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) helped establish the Family Assistance Center. Drawing on existing relationships and an established Mass Fatality Response Plan, the EMA coordinated trauma-informed services, brought in the American Red Cross and local behavioral health providers, and ensured cultural and linguistic support for victims' families.

After the incident, the Lake County EMA worked closely with Highland Park to update its EOP, adding annexes for victim services, multilingual crisis communications, and IPAWS coordination. These improvements reflected lessons learned and formalized new protocols to enhance future response and recovery efforts.

Activate Federal Resources

The federal government offers support to cities following a mass shooting, mostly through the FBI and the Office of Victims of Crime. However, as a former White House official explained, federal agencies will not intervene without an invitation from the mayor (or sometimes the governor). Therefore, it is important to establish a relationship with the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, and to reach out to that office during an incident to request assistance.

Recovery

Obtain Funds to Cover Costs of Emergency Response

Federal and state funding may be available to help your city cover some of the cost of responding to the incident. These costs may include police overtime, operating the EOC, and victim and family services. See **Appendix C, Funding Sources** for a detailed explanation of potential funding sources.

Evaluate Emergency Response

A key aspect of emergency recovery is evaluating the performance of first responder agencies and city services after the incident. Consider initiating an after action review (AAR). Doing so will help your city plan for future emergencies. For AAR best practices and examples, see **Appendix G, After Action Review**.

EMERGENCY OPERATIONS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Review the EOP for applicability to a mass shooting.
- Consider/complete mass casualty annex for the EOP, if needed.
- Review FEMA materials.
- Arrange NIMS and Incident Command System training for yourself and your team.
- Schedule tabletop exercises.
- Include public health agencies in your planning.

Response

- Activate the EOC.
- Activate IPAWS if necessary.
- Request regular briefings from the designated EOC official.
- Consider making a local declaration of emergency.
- Consider whether a state declaration of emergency is needed. If so, call the governor to request.
- Consult emergency management officials from county and state agencies about available resources.
- Monitor all aspects of the emergency response.
- Begin planning for the recovery phase.

Recovery

- Evaluate the emergency response.
- Apply for grants for reimbursement of response costs.



Chapter 3: Victim and Family Assistance

"Nothing shows you care like showing up."

— Mayor Christine Hunschofsky, Parkland FL

Chapter Summary

Following a mass shooting, victims and their family members have immediate, short- and long-term needs. Cities often establish specialized centers to meet these needs: the **Notification Center**, followed by the **Family Assistance Center**, and then in many cases, the **Resiliency Center**. Background on the role of these centers is provided below.

Given the urgency of these needs and the chaos that follows an incident, **preparedness** is essential. Meet with your team to anticipate the needs of victims and their families and determine how your community will meet those needs. For example, how will critically injured victims be medically stabilized and transported to the nearest trauma facility, which may be some distance away? Who will provide mental health care? How will victim services be provided? What support will be offered to foster the long-term recovery of the victims, their families, and your community?

The planning should include the partners most likely to play a role in the response. Together you should develop a victim assistance protocol as part of your overall emergency management plan.

In the **response** phase, focus on the victims and families. There are three things you can do for them. As the victim service centers are established, ensure they are secure and separate from the Joint Information Center (where the media will be located). Work with law enforcement, the coroner's office, and victim service providers to ensure death/trauma notifications are promptly delivered in a private, compassionate manner by trained professionals. Ensure all families are assigned a victim advocate to connect them to services and to help them apply for crime victim compensation.

For help establishing the victim service centers, deploy the American Red Cross and the FBI Victim Services Division, and include local partners and faith leaders. Meet with the victims and families directly to ensure their needs are being met and to comfort them. Solicit their input for distribution of the victim funds and when planning vigils and remembrance events. Consult with your public safety executives to ensure first responders, including call-takers and dispatchers, receive the support they need and deserve. Your compassion will be remembered.

As the response transitions to **recovery**, continue to provide support for victims, their families, and first responders. You may need to establish—and find funds for—a Resiliency Center to meet their ongoing recovery needs. If the alleged shooter is arrested, they will need additional support throughout the legal process, especially when the shooter goes to trial.

Background

Victim Service Center Overview

In the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting, the **Notification Center** provides a place for families and friends to gather and receive updates, be reunited with their loved ones, and receive death and trauma notifications. (Please see the box below to learn about other common terms for the Notification Center.) The Notification Center may also return some personal effects and provide psychological first aid and other services.¹ The Notification Center is often jointly operated by emergency management, law enforcement and crime victim services, and is closed once a Family Assistance Center is ready to open.

The **Family Assistance Center (FAC)** provides continuing assistance and wraparound services for victims, families, and affected members of the community for a longer period. Ideally, the FAC should open within 24–48 hours of the shooting. The FAC may be collaboratively operated by local government, local agencies and businesses, law enforcement and victim service agencies, the American Red Cross, and the FBI Victim Services Division. Coordinated case management begins at the FAC, which identifies and addresses victims' needs. Plan for a seamless transition between the Notification Center and the FAC so that the families receive services without interruption.

Similarly, there should be a seamless transition from the FAC to the **Resiliency Center** during the recovery phase, which can take months or over a year to establish. The lasting effects of trauma are addressed by the Resiliency Center, which often offers services and programming to meet the specific needs of impacted victims, survivors, and communities. The Resiliency Center serves as a central, “safe place” for victims and families, first responders, and the affected community to heal. It connects them to a network of behavioral/mental health care and other services they will need over the long term. Given the lasting impact of trauma, the Resiliency Center may continue to operate for many years after the incident.

A determination of who may be considered a victim for the purpose of receiving services and financial assistance will need to be made. The definition may be expansive, depending on the situation. The possibilities include the families of murdered victims, those physically injured, those present but not injured, witnesses, and the general community. All these people may need some form of assistance.

¹Psychological first aid is a process for helping people by providing safety, stability, and resources in the immediate aftermath of a stressful, disturbing, or life-threatening event. See <https://www.verywellhealth.com/psychological-first-aid-5210291> for an introduction to psychological first aid.



Victim Services at a Glance

Best practices for establishing and operating these centers are provided below. Additionally, the National Mass Violence Center (NMVC) has developed an overview of the three centers in a handy tip sheet.²

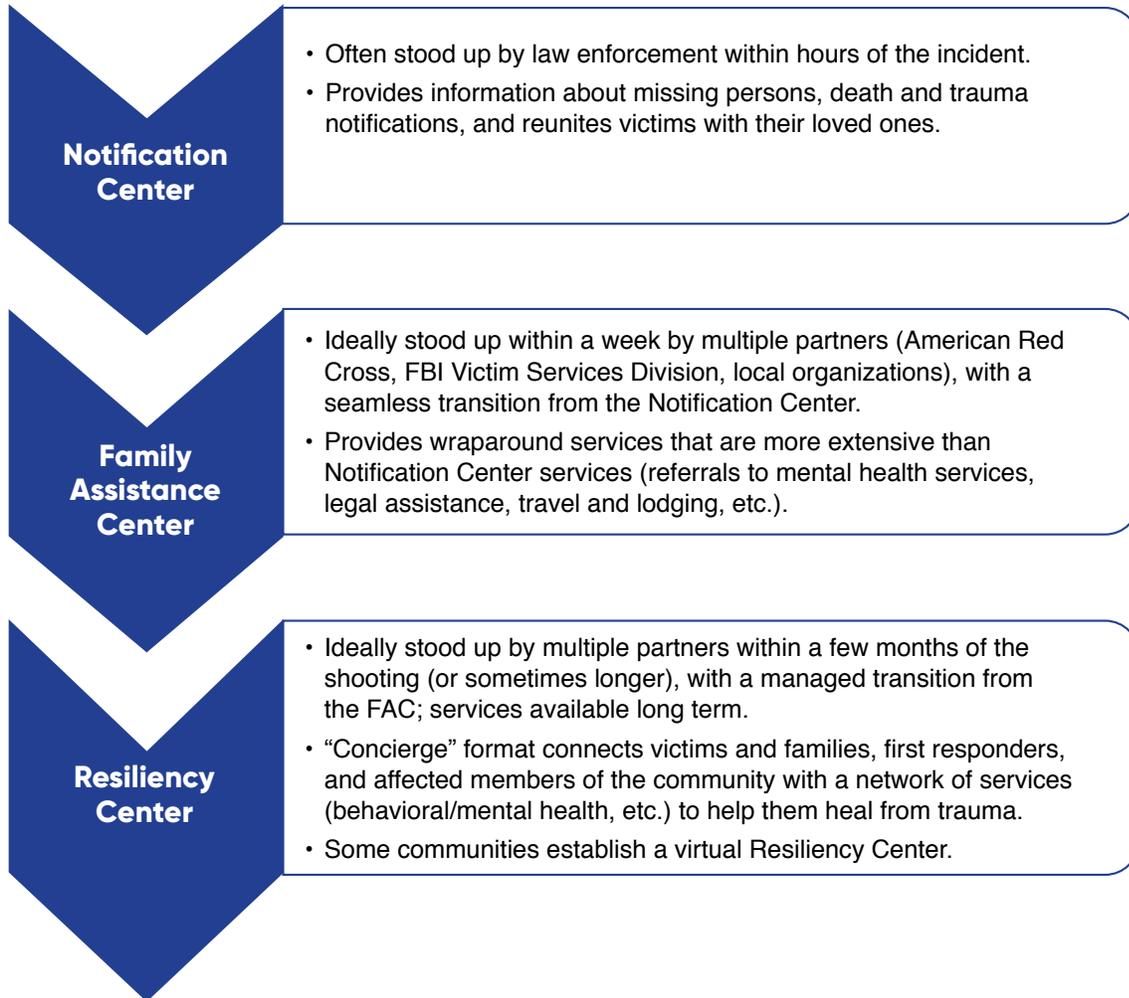


Image 1: Overview of Centers for Victims, Families, and Friends

²National Mass Violence Center. “Overview of Three Centers: Friends & Relatives Center, Family Assistance Center, and Resiliency Center,” 2025. <https://nmvrc.org/media/lsbjobzl/overview-of-three-centers-friends-relatives-center-family-assistance-center-and-resiliency-center.pdf>.

Sidebar: Notification vs. Reunification Center Terminology

Jurisdictions use varying terms to describe the location where families gather immediately after a mass shooting hoping to be reunified with the victims. These terms include:

- Notification Center
- Notification and Information Center (“NIC”)
- Family Information Center
- Friends & Relatives Center
- Family Reunification Center

There is no universally adopted term. However, each carries different functional implications and emotional connotations, which can significantly affect public understanding and expectations:

- **Notification Center** suggests a location where families will be informed about the status of their loved one, which could include receiving a death notification.
- **Reunification Center** is often used in school and emergency protocols to plan *how* survivors will be reunited with their families. Law enforcement typically uses this term. However, victim advocates say this term may imply that everyone will be reunited, which is not always the case. For this reason, the NMVC discourages using this term.
- **Friends & Relatives Reception Center** is the term recommended by the NMVC. However, this term is not currently in common usage. It does not include the word “family,” which may be confusing to families. Also, “reception” suggests a social occasion, which does not fully reflect the function of the center nor the gravity of a mass shooting.

In this Playbook, we use the term **Notification Center** because its meaning is clear, respectful, and aligned with the difficult realities of mass casualty events. Nevertheless, you should be aware that all these terms are in use and could be chosen by others before you are able to weigh in. If you have a preference, you should clearly communicate it during the planning stage, *before* an incident occurs.



Preparedness

Your city’s response to a mass shooting will be measured by the successful delivery of urgently needed services to victims and their families. Yet many Emergency Operations Plans do not include specifics on how to meet the needs of the victims and families. For that reason, your initial planning efforts should focus on developing a victim service plan. Be sure to include the agencies and partners who will be needed to support victims and their families at each stage of response and recovery efforts.

Your victim service plan should include:

- First responders who are trained to deliver tactical emergency casualty care
- A transport and hospital surge capacity plan to ensure victims receive life-saving trauma care
- Victim service providers with disaster-specific, trauma-informed training
- Protocols for the Notification Center, FAC, and Resiliency Center
- Support services for victims and families provided by local, state, and national partners
- Robust wellness and peer support program for first responders, EMTs, dispatchers, and crime scene investigators

The NMVC developed “16 Best Practices,” a tool that identifies the tasks your city will need to address during the response. The tool offers guidance on managing these tasks in a victim-centered way.³

1. Incident Command 	2. Committee Identification & Engagement 	3. Up-to-Date Contact List 	4. Family & Friends Center (FC) 
5. Victim Identification & Notification Protocol 	6. Public Information & Crisis Communications Protocol 	7. Volunteer Management Protocol 	8. Family & Friends Assistance Center (FAC) Plan 
9. Financial Donation Management Protocol 	10. Memorial & Special Event Management Protocols 	11. Community Behavioral Health Response 	12. First Responder Support 
13. Planning & Preparedness Grants and Emergency Funding Assistance 	14. Community Resilience Planning 	15. Criminal Justice System – Victim Support 	16. Training and Exercise 

Image 2: Overview of Office for Victims of Crime ICP TTA Best Practices

³ICP TTA. “16 Best Practices.” Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://icptta.com/16-best-practices/>.

Plan Tactical Medical Care

Serious bleeding is the most frequent cause of preventable death from an injury sustained during a mass shooting. Therefore, your victim service plan should include tactical medical care to stabilize critically injured victims (provided by trained law enforcement officials or emergency medical technicians (EMTs) in a Rescue Task Force protected by police). It should also include plans to transport victims to the nearest trauma center (which may be located far from your community). These basic, but critical, steps will save lives. See **Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders** for more information and resources.

Plan Victim and Family Services

Planning for non-medical victim services requires a multidisciplinary approach. This process should begin long before a mass violence incident so that relationships are established, roles and responsibilities are understood, resources are identified, protocols are developed, and training is provided.

This can be accomplished by convening a team to do the necessary planning and develop protocols. These protocols will become part of your local emergency management plan described in **Chapter 2, Emergency Operations**, and integrated into regional and state emergency management plans.

The team may include your senior staff, as well as emergency management, law enforcement, and fire/EMT officials. The American Red Cross and the FBI Victim Services Division should be included. The input of local medical center representatives and behavioral/mental health experts will also be needed. As described below, additional partners will need to be consulted as planning progresses.

The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) is the primary federal resource for victim services. OVC funds the NMVC, the national resource center for victims and families harmed by mass violence. The NMVC is home to two important programs:

- “Improving Community Preparedness Training and Technical Assistance” (ICP TTA), which helps communities plan their victim services protocol, and
- “Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center (OVC TTAC), which provides experienced consultants to help communities actively responding to mass violence.



Key Resources: OVC Mass Violence Resources

National Mass Violence Center: The NMVC website provides resources for different audiences. During the planning phase, visit the “Community Leaders” tab. There you will find the **OVC Toolkit** and other resources of interest to civic leaders. Mental health training for local practitioners and state-specific resources are available on the “Help Survivors” tab.⁴

ICP TTA—Improving Community Preparedness to Assist Victims of Mass Violence: Consultants can assist in planning victim services *before* an incident.⁵ Their resources include the 16 Best Practices protocol (see the graphic in Figure 2 above).⁶



Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center (OVC TTAC):⁷ OVC TTAC consultants provide technical assistance to victim assistance providers *after* an incident.⁸ Examples of resources available to victims of recent mass shootings can be found on the “News and Events” tab.⁹ OVC TTAC can also help communities apply for OVC Antiterrorism and Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP) funding to cover some of the cost of delivering victim services.¹⁰

Partner Agencies and Organizations

Get to know the organizations that provide services to victims of crime in your community. In addition to law enforcement and public safety agencies, these may include:

- Special offices or divisions within prosecutors’ offices.
- Regional or county public health agencies.
- State agencies that distribute Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding. These state agencies may offer victim advocacy and support services, support to nonprofit organizations serving victims, and referrals to services that may be needed in the aftermath of a mass shooting.
- Community-based non-governmental organizations that specialize in trauma recovery and can provide mental health services to victims of crime or social services to their families.

⁴Visit <https://nmvvr.org>.

⁵ICP TTA. “Contact Us.” Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://icptta.com/contact-us/>.

⁶ICP TTA. “16 Best Practices.” Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://icptta.com/16-best-practices/>.

⁷Visit <https://www.ovcttac.gov/massviolence/?nm=sfa&ns=mvt>.

⁸Office for Victims of Crime. “Terrorism & Mass Violence.” Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/terrorism-mass-violence/overview>.

⁹Office for Victims of Crime. “View Resources for the Victims of Recent Mass Violence Incidents.” Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/news/announcements/view-resources-victims-recent-mass-violence-incidents>.

¹⁰Office for Victims of Crime. “Antiterrorism and Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP).” Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/aeap/overview>.

In addition to these resources, local organizations, businesses, and faith institutions can provide essential services to victims and families, which can vary depending on the community and nature of the crisis. Examples of services that local partners may be able to provide at the FAC include:

- Health care
- Behavioral health care services specific to disasters/mass violence
- Childcare and pet care
- Crime victim compensation
- Crime victim advocacy (victim advocates work directly with the victims to support them with services that meet their individual needs and may stay with them for years in some cases)
- Employee assistance
- Insurance guidance
- Travel assistance
- Assistance with funeral and medical costs for victims (especially the uninsured)
- Legal services

See **Chapter 7, Community Partnerships** for more information.



Key Resource: Planning Partners

ICP TTA Statewide Preparation and Planning Resources: A comprehensive list of potential local, state, and federal partners.¹¹

Recommendations for Victim Services Centers

- Identify potential locations for the Notification Center and FAC. Using a grid of the city, determine possible locations an attack could take place. Look for buildings nearby that are large enough to host victims and families (ideally scalable), in a secure area away from the press, with adequate parking. Examples include stadiums, hotels, and institutional buildings. Make a list of available facilities and update it regularly. The City of Nashville has identified a location for a Notification Center for every school in the district.
- Ask public safety agencies and victim service providers to provide their protocols for the Notification Center and FAC. Review these protocols to ensure they are inter-operational, their roles are clearly defined, and best practices are implemented. The goal is to develop a combined multi-agency protocol. Test the protocol in a scenario periodically and revise as needed.
- Work with the coroner's office and medical examiner to develop a protocol that will speed the process of victim identification during a mass casualty incident.
- Determine the victim service providers (sometimes referred to as VSPs) in your community. Ensure they have disaster-specific, trauma-informed training.

¹¹Visit <https://icptta.com/statewide-preparation-planning-resources/>.



- Develop a death and trauma notification protocol based on best practices, and train on it.
- Plan to incorporate the command of the FAC into the existing Incident Command Structure so that the unified command stays intact and there is clear leadership.
- Plan to secure the perimeter of the Notification Center and FAC using local law enforcement assets, private security contractors, or mutual aid partners.
- Keep in mind that not all victims and family members will be from your city. To stay connected to them, you may need to offer remote or online services or hotlines, or partner with organizations with national reach.

Key Resources: Victim Service Provider Training and Resources

OVC Resources for Victim Service Providers: Tools for victim service providers to ensure they are prepared to appropriately respond to a mass violence incident.¹²

Death Notifications: Training¹³ and resources¹⁴ to deliver notifications with compassion.

Mass Fatalities Incidents: A Guide for Human Forensic Identification: Resource for medical examiners, who may need assistance in managing a mass casualty incident.¹⁵

Psychological First Aid Information and Training: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network recommends specific actions to enhance the safety of comfort of survivors and to prevent PTSD.¹⁶ It also offers a five-hour interactive course for individuals who want to learn the core goals of psychological first aid, as well as for seasoned practitioners who want a review.¹⁷

Lessons Learned from the Boston Marathon Bombing Victim Service Program: A comprehensive article about the challenges and lessons learned following the bombing, including the importance of advance planning, developing close working relationships, and understanding of the impact of mass violence on victims and communities.¹⁸



¹²National Mass Violence Center. "Victim Service Professionals." Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://nmvrc.org/vsps-clinicians/vsp-resources/>.

¹³Office for Victims of Crime. "Death Notification." Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/taxonomy/term/death-notification>.

¹⁴Office for Victims of Crime. "Trauma Notification Training." April 23, 2024. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/events/trauma-notification-training>.

¹⁵Gonzales, Alberto R., Tracy A. Henke, and Sarah V. Hart. *Mass Fatality Incidents: A Guide for Human Forensic Identification*. U.S. Department of Justice, June 2005. <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/199758.pdf>.

¹⁶Visit <https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/psychological-first-aid-and-skills-for-psychological-recovery/about-pfa>.

¹⁷Office for Victims of Crime. "Psychological First Aid Online." July 6, 2022. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/events/psychological-first-aid-online>.

¹⁸Naturale, April, Liam T. Lowney, and Corina Solè Brito. "Lessons Learned from the Boston Marathon Bombing Victim Services Program." *Clinical Social Work Journal* 45, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 111–23. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-017-0624-7>.

Other Planning Considerations

- **Language:** The Notification Center and FAC may need interpreters or translators. For example, some families and victims did not speak English in Oak Creek, WI. Community members served as volunteer interpreters for law enforcement and the media. After the Pulse shooting in Orlando, the majority of victims and their families received services in Spanish.¹⁹
- **Online/virtual services:** OVC recommends establishing an FAC website to provide services to those who cannot or will not visit the FAC in person.
- **Advocacy:** Designate a family liaison for each family to ensure that they get the services they need and to facilitate communication with your office. In one incident, the public information officer (PIO) reached out to their professional PIO network. Many PIOs volunteered their services. Each family was assigned a volunteer PIO to help them manage (or decline) press requests.
- **Cultural practices:** Learn about the cultural practices of minority groups in your community so that services are culturally appropriate. In Pittsburgh, understanding Jewish traditions related to caring for the dead was essential in responding to the Tree of Life shooting. In Oak Creek, vigil attendees covered their heads out of respect for Sikh traditions. In Orlando, service providers needed to understand that the LGBTQ+ community broadly defines “family member” to include close friends and partners, and some victims did not want to be “outed” by the media.
- **Residency status:** Mass shootings may affect undocumented residents and foreign citizens. This was the case in the Oak Creek, Orlando, and El Paso shootings. All victims of crime are eligible for victim services, regardless of residency status, but some victims hesitate to access services due to fears of immigration consequences. Family members living abroad may need help gaining an emergency visa to come to your jurisdiction. At the Notification Center and FAC, these issues pose unique legal challenges. If you suspect immigration services will be needed, include immigration attorneys (contact your local bar association for volunteers) and organizations trusted by local immigrant communities in the planning process.
- **Privacy:** Some families will need a private, quiet space where resources are available but not intrusive. Plan for private rooms that offer beverages, informational materials, soft toys for children, and above all—peace and quiet.
- **Vetting:** At the Notification Center and FAC, service providers and approved volunteers should use an entrance/intake area separate from the entrance used by families and victims. For more information, see **Chapter 5, Managing Donations and Volunteers**.
- **Information management:** Victim service providers recommend appointing one agency responsible for creating a comprehensive list of resources to share with the survivor community. This practice will reduce duplication, eliminate advertisements, and streamline resource and referral details. This information can be shared using the city’s social media channels, distributed at the FAC, and posted on the city and FAC websites.

¹⁹Molina, Olga, Bonnie Yegidis, and George Jacinto. “The Pulse Nightclub Mass Shooting and Factors Affecting Community Resilience Following the Terrorist Attack.” *Best Practices in Mental Health* 15, no. 2 (September 1, 2019): 1–15.



Best Practices Tip

The Notification Center and FAC should be:

1. **Separate** from the Joint Information Center, volunteer intake process, and the news media
2. **Scalable** to meet the needs of any number of victims and families
3. **Secure**, with access controlled by law enforcement



First Responder Wellness and Peer Support

First responders often experience significant psychological trauma from witnessing the violence and bloodshed of a mass shooting.²⁰ Work in partnership with your police and fire chiefs to ensure that first responders in your community—including police and fire officials, EMTs, dispatchers, and crime scene investigators—receive the mental health support they need and deserve.²¹ For more information and resources you can share with your chiefs, see **Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders.**

Response

Emergency management, law enforcement officials, and crime victim service agencies typically establish the Notification Center, which operates for the first 24–48 hours or so. However, you and your team have a significant role to play in the early hours and days following the shooting, as described below.

Establish the Notification Center

- Ensure the Notification Center is situated in an appropriate, secured location. It should have private rooms where family members can meet with counselors. If possible, these rooms should be physically separate by sight and sound so that difficult discussions cannot be heard by others. In Nashville, officials used two floors of the building, one for reunification and the other for death notifications. Families of the deceased were discreetly guided away before reunification began.
- Work with law enforcement and the medical examiner/coroner's office to speed the process of victim identification to ensure families and friends are notified as quickly as possible with compassion and dignity. Feedback from family members suggests that delayed death notifications are a significant and continuing source of preventable anguish (see sidebar below).

²⁰Usher, Laura, Stefanie Friedhoff, Maj. Sam Cochran, and Anand Pandya. *Preparing for the Unimaginable: How Chiefs Can Safeguard Officer Mental Health Before and After Mass Casualty Events*. U.S. Department of Justice and National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2016. <https://www.nami.org/support-education/publications-reports/public-policy-reports/preparing-for-the-unimaginable/>.

²¹Hanover, Mel, Danielle Crimmins, Jonathan McGrath, Jillian Barnas, and Christina Harris. "Officer Wellness Is Not Enough." *Police Chief Magazine* (blog), November 20, 2024. <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/officer-wellness-not-enough/>.



- Ensure that every family has a dedicated advocate to make sure they get the services and information they need immediately and over time.
- Contact the American Red Cross and FBI Victim Services Division to request help establishing the Notification Center and FAC. The Red Cross has responded to nearly all mass shootings in recent years but must be requested. Likewise, the FBI Victim Services Division can provide comprehensive services (even if the FBI is not the lead law enforcement agency), but must be requested. Instruct your Emergency Management staff to contact the Red Cross. Ask your police chief to contact your state's FBI special agent in charge to mobilize the FBI Victim Services Division.
- Determine whether your city will establish a fund to receive donations for victims, survivors, and first responders. If so, consider contacting the National Compassion Fund for guidance. For more information, see **Chapter 5, Managing Donations and Volunteers**.



Image 3: An FBI Victim Assistance member carries a bag of personal effects from the site of the November 2018 mass shooting at Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, California, to the nearby FAC for collection by its owner (Courtesy of FBI Multimedia Database).

Track Victims

Experts recommend a centralized system for tracking victims as they are identified by law enforcement. This system should be made accessible to your staff if possible. The tracking system allows Notification Center and FAC officials to know where victims are being treated, or whether they have been released, and communicate this information to families and friends. This may be a challenge due to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) but can be accomplished through the Red Cross, which is HIPAA-exempt during disasters. In Orlando, Mayor Dyer called President Obama to discuss HIPAA regulations and request a waiver, which may have helped to speed the release of names in compliance with the law.

Engage with Hospitals

Hospitals may also establish limited victim and family services at their facilities, but families and victims should be connected to the larger response. If needed, direct your staff to contact responding medical facilities to request access for outside responders (e.g., victim service professionals or the Red Cross) to brief families and victims on the services available and how to access them. Provide remote access to the family briefings at the FAC.

Key Resource: Family Assistance at the Hospital

ASPR TRACIE Tip Sheet on Family Assistance for Hospitals: summarizes the actions a hospital should take to manage the no-notice arrival of injured victims and family members. The recommendations are also applicable to establishing a community Family Assistance Center.²²



Establish the Family Assistance Center

Your role is to ensure the victims and families receive the specialized support they need. Refer to the sections above for information on the services needed, the partners who may be able to provide them, and key resources available to help your community establish and operate the FAC. See also **Chapter 7, Community Partnerships**.

Your first step is to mobilize the partners who will stand up the FAC, typically the American Red Cross, the FBI Victim Services Division, and local partners. Meet with them to determine the services that will be provided at the FAC and who will provide them. They should refer to the city's existing FAC protocol, if one exists, or develop one that can be referred to throughout the response.

Actions that need to be taken by partners and staff under your leadership include:

- Identify the location for the FAC. Ensure the site is ADA accessible and can be secured. Make legal arrangements for its use and arrange security.
- Define who is eligible for services (typically the lead law enforcement agency or the District Attorney makes this call). Advocate for a broadly inclusive definition.
- Discuss the cost of services with partners. Determine who can donate funds or provide pro bono or in-kind services, and develop and implement a plan to fund the FAC.
- Ensure the incident commander of the Notification Center retains command of the FAC.
- Assign roles for city staff at the FAC. Ask them to brief you regularly so that you can ensure victims' needs are being met and troubleshoot as needed.
- Ensure every family has a dedicated victims advocate to make sure they get the services and information they need immediately and over time.

²²ASPR TRACIE. "Mass Violence/Active Shooter Incidents: Family Assistance." TRACIE, May 2022. <https://files.asprtracie.hhs.gov/documents/no-notice-incidents-family-assistance.pdf>.

- To keep families informed, request a daily family briefing (or more frequently as needed) and provide educational materials on common trauma responses and resources on the city's website.
- Communicate the location and services of the FAC in your messaging.
- In the recovery phase, seek reimbursement from OVC and other sources. See **Appendix C, Funding Sources**.

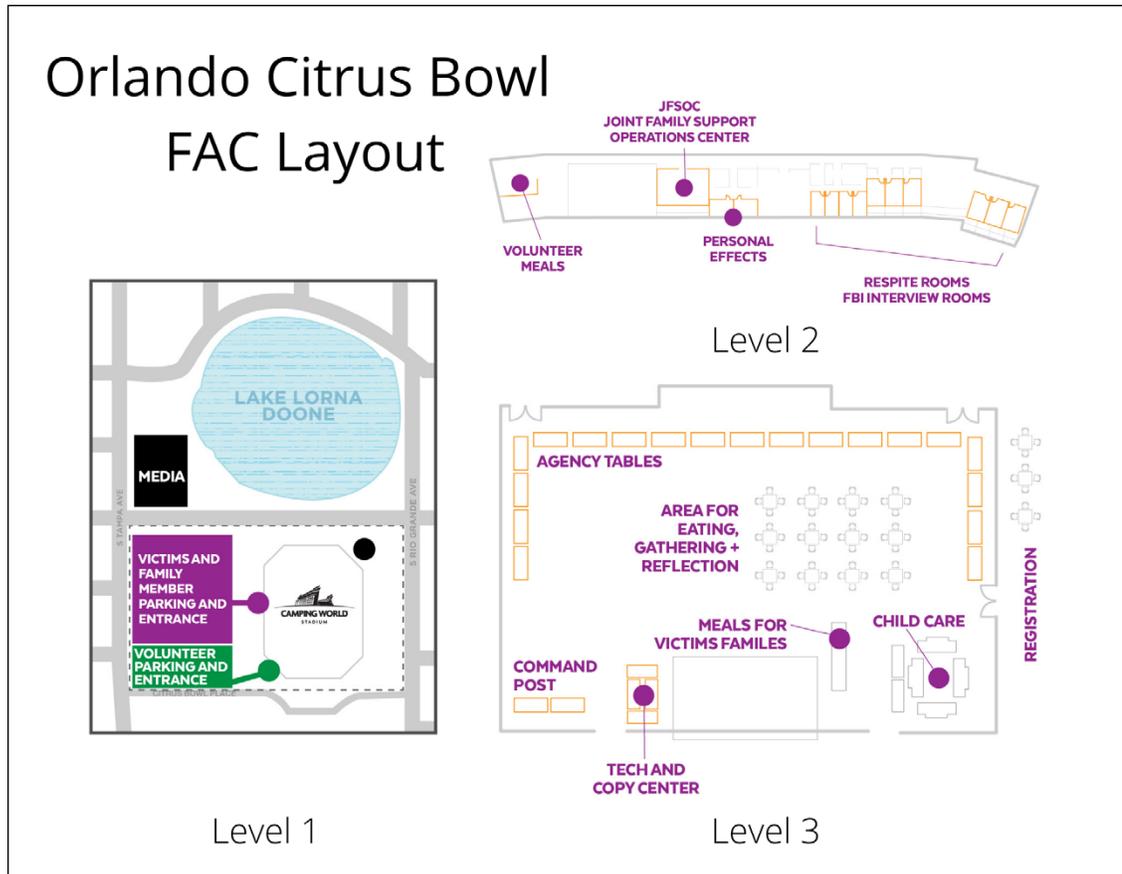


Image 4: The layout of the FAC established during the response to the Pulse Shooting, showing separate entrances for victims and families and volunteers, private rooms, and a secure perimeter with a separate area for media. (Courtesy of City of Orlando staff)

Key Resources: Family Assistance Center

OVC Bulletin: Providing Relief to Families After a Mass Fatality: This resource illustrates how the Oklahoma City Bombing “Compassion Center” met the needs of family members.²³

OVC TTAC: Upon request, OVC TTAC deploys consultants following a mass shooting to help communities support victims and families.

Tips for Community Leaders: Establishing a Family Assistance Center (FAC): This NMVC tip sheet provides factors to consider when selecting a location for the FAC and best practices for its establishment.²⁴

Lake County Family Assistance Center (FAC) Plan and Templates: A comprehensive set of planning documents developed by Lake County, IL, outlining the structure, operations, and staffing of a FAC after a mass casualty incident. Includes the full Lake County FAC Plan (Base Plan, Toolkit, and Staff Checklists) as well as editable templates that any jurisdiction can adapt to create its own local FAC Plan.²⁵

Mass Fatality Incident Family Assistance Operations—Recommended Strategies for Local and State Agencies: This guide was developed by the FBI Office for Victim Assistance and the National Transportation Safety Board Transportation Disaster Assistance Division for local and state agencies involved in the response to mass fatality events. It provides an overview of the components of the family assistance process and FAC operations as they relate to transportation and criminal incidents.²⁶



Overview of the FBI's Victim Assistance Resources: The FBI Victim Services Division and Critical Incident Response Group can provide significant law enforcement and victims assistance resources for the Notification Centers and FACs.²⁷

American Red Cross: Can assist in establishing FACs to help families reunite and cope during such crises. Basic services delivered by the Red Cross include health care, mental health services, spiritual care, and childcare. Your local Red Cross chapter can mobilize a response from the national headquarters, including experts who have responded to similar incidents. This press release describes the support the Red Cross provided to the community affected by the Parkland shooting.²⁸

United Way: Can mobilize resources, coordinate support services, and assist victims, families, and communities during the response to a mass shooting.

²³Blakeney, Ray L. *Providing Relief to Families After a Mass Fatality Roles of the Medical Examiner's Office and the Family Assistance Center*. Office for Victims of Crime, November 2002. https://www.ncjrs.gov/ovc_archives/bulletins/prfmf_11_2001/188912.pdf.

²⁴National Mass Violence Center. “Tips for Community Leaders: Establishing a Family Assistance Center (FAC).” September 2018. https://www.nmvrc.org/media/nmophnv4/tip-sheet_guidelines-for-family-assistance-centers.pdf.

²⁵Visit www.lakecountyil.gov/5211/Family-Assistance-Center.

²⁶U.S. Department of Justice, and National Transportation Safety Board. *Mass Fatality Incident Family Assistance Operations: Recommended Strategies for Local and State Agencies*. Accessed July 15, 2025. <https://www.nmvrc.org/media/tw5lw23j/mass-fatality-incident-family-assistance-operations.pdf>.

²⁷FBI Victim Services Division. “How We Can Help You.” Federal Bureau of Investigation. Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/victim-services>.

²⁸“American Red Cross Assisting Families in School Shooting,” February 14, 2018. <https://www.redcross.org/local/florida/south-florida/about-us/news-and-events/press-releases/American-Red-Cross-Assisting-Families-in-School-Shooting.html>.

Leaders in Action: Highland Park Family Assistance Center

The Highland Park FAC opened the day after the shooting in partnership with the city, FBI Victim Services Division, American Red Cross, Lake County EMA, School District 113 and its partner agencies, and the Highland Park social services team. The FAC offered mental health counseling, legal aid, and financial assistance. The city prioritized separating media and press activities from the FAC to maintain family privacy, drawing on lessons from other cities' experiences.



At peak operation, the FAC hosted 100 volunteer counselors daily and served more than 1,300 individuals and families. With the assistance of the Lake County EMA, counselors were recruited from the local Medical Reserve Corps and trained in psychological first aid. A grant awarded after the incident allowed dozens of local therapists to pursue advanced trauma certification and remain deployable for future incidents anywhere in the state.

Officials prioritized trauma-informed care, privacy protections, and multilingual access. Lake County, working with city officials and others, developed a FAC protocol to clarify roles, streamline translation access, and support long-term recovery coordination.²⁹

Connect with Victims and Families

Mayors who have responded to a mass shooting emphasize that nothing can prepare you for the difficult conversations you will have with victims and family members. Nevertheless, a few suggestions are provided here and in the **Sidebar: Perspective of a Family Member** below.

- Be composed and compassionate.
- Be well-briefed so that you can provide information about available resources.
- Anticipate anger, anguish, and pain, so know your limits.
- Be authentic: Draw on beliefs and trainings that give you strength and inspiration in difficult times. For example, one mayor spoke about relying on his faith when engaging with his community.
- Recognize the potential for secondary/vicarious trauma and its impact on you and your team.

Visit the FAC

You may want to visit the FAC to speak to victims and family members, check on the operation of the FAC, and liaise with victims' services professionals. Request a briefing from FAC officials when you arrive. Expect to meet in a private area with victims and family members who have agreed to speak with you. Do not expect photo or video opportunities with them.

²⁹Visit www.lakecountyil.gov/5211/Family-Assistance-Center.



Visit the Hospital

All the mayors we interviewed visited victims in the hospital. Here are a few best practices:

- Contact the hospital's media relations department or office of community outreach to inform them of your visit and determine which victims you will visit (this may involve obtaining informed consent from patients).
- Your staff should coordinate with the hospital's media relations department about press coverage resulting from your visit, including compliance with patient privacy laws and hospital policies. Families and victims should be informed ahead of time about potential press coverage so that they are not taken by surprise.
- Press coverage of hospital visits should be limited to noting your visit but should not include live coverage that may be viewed as exploitative. As at the FAC, hospitals are not appropriate opportunities for photos or videos, out of respect to victims and families. (Remind visiting VIPs of this concern as well.)

Check on First Responders

Contact your police and fire chiefs to confirm that responding officers and dispatchers are receiving appropriate behavioral/mental health support. Consult with American Red Cross and OVC consultants, and local behavioral/mental health providers, for recommendations on first responder care, especially if your agency has not yet established a wellness program. See **Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders**.

Sidebar: Perspective of a Columbine Family Member

“My dad was an ordinary man in the best sense of the word—a man of few words, with a strong moral compass, who loved coaching and helping kids who were struggling to find a way forward. He'd come home from practice to watch *Days of Our Lives* with his miniature poodle and a rum and Coke. He lived quietly, but he lived for his students. And on his last day, he gave his life for them.”

On April 20, 1999, Coach Dave Sanders saw the armed shooters approaching Columbine High School and ran into the cafeteria, jumping on tables to shout for students to get out. He raced toward the library, where he encountered the shooters, and was shot multiple times. He fell into a science room with more than 40 students and spent his final hours with them. Despite his injuries, he saved hundreds of lives that day. Yet he bled to death while help was only yards away.

For more than 12 hours, his family did not know what had happened. Officials knew he was dead, but no one told his family. Instead, the first confirmation came from a reporter at the Rocky Mountain News: “Your husband has been shot and killed. Do you have a comment?” Earlier, they had rushed to a hospital after hearing he was wounded, only to be refused any information because of HIPAA, even the fact that he was not there. They continued to hope long after hope was gone. The next morning, the sheriff arrived and handed Coni's mother a photograph so graphic—perhaps of his body—that she collapsed, vomiting.

Sidebar continued:

In the days after the shooting, Coni and her sister pushed to walk through Columbine High School after learning that the governor, or possibly the mayor, planned to tour the scene. They felt that if officials could go in, the families should have the same right. What they saw was haunting—cafeteria chairs melted to the floor from a cafeteria bomb, shattered glass, ceiling panels gone, alarms still blaring, standing water on the floors, and the acrid smell of fire. It brought no answers, only shock.

Coni now urges mayors to handle requests to view the scene of the attack with great care. First, understand what the family hopes to gain, and explore whether there are other ways to meet that need. If they seek to better understand what happened, perhaps photos are enough. If they want to be in the place where their loved one was last alive, perhaps a visit with eyes covered will suffice. If the visit proceeds, fully prepare them for what they will see, hear, and smell, and ensure a trusted support person is present. Above all, avoid publicizing officials' access to the scene in a way that makes families feel excluded or secondary.

There were also acts of compassion and leadership, Coni remembers President and Mrs. Clinton personally raised money for the Columbine Memorial. Leaders from both political parties spoke with empathy. Colorado's governor created college funds for each of Dave's grandchildren, possibly from his own pocket. First responder protocols changed after the Columbine shooting, so that today victims with survivable wounds have a better chance of being reached and saved.

When asked what she needed most in those first hours, Coni's answer was simple: information. Mayors should remember that accurate, timely information, delivered with compassion, is as critical as any other service.

For school safety, Coni urges school leaders to focus on connection, empathy, and prevention, starting in early childhood. Teach empathy as deliberately as reading. Avoid labeling kids as "troublemakers"—most are traumatized children who can be reached before they harm others. Pair prevention with practical measures to reduce lethality, such as placing tactical medical kits in every classroom and training staff and older students on Stop the Bleed® techniques.

Dave Sanders's legacy lives on in the lives he saved, and in his daughter's career working with people convicted of violent crime. She believes she is carrying forward her father's work of helping those on the brink. "Even the people who have done bad things," Coni says, "deserve hope and the tools to live a better life." The key to preventing tragedies like Columbine, she believes, is to intervene early — before victimization occurs.



Recovery

Transition from the FAC to the Resiliency Center

Most survivors of a public mass shooting show resilience over time. However, others experience ongoing behavioral/mental health problems. Experts say providing a place for collective healing does the most to strengthen families and communities during the recovery phase.³⁰ For this reason, they recommend establishing a Resiliency Center. For more information on the impact of trauma on survivors, see **Chapter 10, Mental Health**.

While the FAC is still operational, plan what will happen when the national partners pull out. Engage local partners to begin planning a Resiliency Center to connect victims and families to ongoing services. Cities that established a Resiliency Center after a public mass shooting or bombing include Orlando (see below), El Paso, Aurora, Newtown, Las Vegas, Parkland, Highland Park, and Boston. The OVC TTAC consultants can help you write a grant proposal for OVC's AEAP funding, which can help fund the Resiliency Center.³¹

Given the long-term effects of trauma, Resiliency Centers often operate for years following a mass shooting. For example, the Resiliency Center in Orlando is still operating nine years after the Pulse shooting. There are currently 25 resiliency centers that participate in the NMVC monthly Resiliency Center Directors' Forum.

Finally, NMVC provides a virtual Resiliency Center, a customizable website where communities can create webpages to share information with victims and affected community members after a mass shooting.³²

Leaders in Action: Resiliency Center

Orlando launched the Orlando United Assistance Center immediately after the FAC closed. The Center was a collaboration with the City of Orlando, Orange County Government, and the Heart of Florida United Way. Services available at the Center included case management, referrals to counseling services, and connections to community resources and services, including housing assistance, emergency financial assistance, employment, training, and educational opportunities.



Renamed the OURS Center in 2022 when it came under the umbrella of the Center Orlando, it continues to provide individualized care to those impacted by the Pulse tragedy. It has expanded its services to include people who are victims of crime or otherwise in need of healing.³³

³⁰Novotney, Amy. "What Happens to the Survivors?" *Monitor on Psychology* 49, no. 8 (September 2018): 36.

³¹U.S. Department of Justice. "Antiterrorism and Emergency Assistance Program | OVC." Office for Victims of Crime. Accessed July 15, 2025. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/aeap/overview>.

³²National Mass Violence Center. "Virtual Resiliency Center." Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://massviolence.help/>.

³³Visit <https://thecenterorlando.org/ours/>.

Additional Long-Term Support Strategies

Consider advocating for the creation of a state-funded long-term care fund for the victims of mass violence before an incident happens.

Following advocacy by survivors' families of the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech mass shooting—which claimed 32 lives and injured 23 others—and with the support of victims of other mass shootings, Virginia established the Mass Violence Care Fund, a permanent, state-managed endowment to provide sustainable, long-term financial assistance to current and future victims of mass violence. The mission of the fund is to remove financial barriers to recovery when state victim compensation funds are insufficient or discretionary.

Seeded with a \$10 million appropriation from the Virginia General Assembly in 2023, the fund invests its principal and uses only the earnings (estimated at about \$400,000 annually) for support for victims of mass casualty incidents, ensuring that resources are available in perpetuity. The model, promoted by VTVCare, an advocacy organization established by the Virginia Tech survivors and families, has also been adopted in Maine.

Victim Services During a Trial

In cases in which a shooter is prosecuted, victims and their family members will need support services throughout the legal proceedings. These proceedings may take place years after the incident and may re-traumatize the families and the wider community. Support for families can be coordinated by victim service professionals connected to the prosecuting office (District Attorney/Prosecutor or U.S. Attorney). Your office can collaborate with partners and agencies to ensure that these services are comprehensive. OVC recommends establishing “safe havens” (physical locations) where families and victims can receive coordinated services. Also, you can develop a media plan to limit press contact with the families. You should also consider providing security for victims and families who attend trial proceedings.

Key Resource: Supporting Families During a Trial



Planning and Implementation Guide for Comprehensive, Coordinated Victim Assistance for Mass Violence Incident Trials: The NMVC and the U.S. Attorney from the District of South Carolina published this guide in 2022. It offers step-by-step guidance for supporting victims and survivors throughout the criminal justice system.³⁴

Crime Victim Compensation

Both federal and state agencies provide financial support to victims of crime, including victims of a public mass shooting. The FAC team (or your staff) can connect victims to state crime victim compensation. Note that state crime victim compensation programs are not the only source of financial assistance to victims and their families. Public donations supplement these programs. However, it is important to understand that families' use of donations may impact their eligibility for crime victim compensation.

³⁴Rheingold, Alyssa A., Clarissa W. Whaley, Anne Seymour, and Aurelia Sands Belle. *Planning and Implementation Guide: Comprehensive, Coordinated Victim Assistance for Mass Violence Incident Trials*. National Mass Violence Center, 2022.



A summary of crime victim resources is provided in **Appendix C, Funding Sources**. See also **Chapter 5, Managing Donations and Volunteers** for more information about establishing a victims' fund, which can impact the ability to access victim compensation.

Leaders in Action: Victim Compensation

In Dayton, a state victim compensation fund made available through the Ohio Attorney General's office paid out \$102,731 to 29 victims of the shooting.³⁵ However, at least 19 victims were denied state assistance.³⁶ Victims were denied assistance because of prior felony charges unrelated to the mass shooting, or because they had drugs in their system when they were shot.³⁷ The legislature later enacted reforms to address these victims' difficulties by expanding the definition of "victim" to cover more affected individuals, increasing the maximum claim for grief counseling, and lowering barriers to receiving compensation.³⁸ Mayor Nan Whaley advocated for these changes.



Ongoing Engagement with Family Members

Continue to meet with victims and families as appropriate or if requested to ensure their needs are being met and to solicit their input for vigils and permanent memorials. See **Chapter 9, Commemorations**.

El Paso Mayor Dee Margo recommended following up with victim's families every few months for the first year to inquire how they are doing. In El Paso, a caring staff member made the regular check-in calls and advised the mayor when he needed to make a personal call. Five years after the shooting, Mayor Margo, who is no longer in office, continues to advocate for the recovery of his community.

Seek Compensation for Victim Services

During the recovery phase, you will want to apply for all available funding to defray the cost of the response, which can be enormous. AEAP funding has historically helped defray the expense of providing victim services. OVC TTAC counselors can help your staff prepare the application needed for federal reimbursement. The City of Orlando reportedly received \$9 million in AEAP funding. Note, however, that many cities report that AEAP funding can take years to receive. In addition, federal budget cuts in 2025 may adversely impact the availability of federal funds for victim services, victim compensation, and other federal resources. For more information on AEAP grants and other sources of state and federal funding, see **Appendix C, Funding Sources for Cities**.

³⁵Sweigart, Josh, and Laura A. Bischoff. "State Leaders Looking at Victim Compensation Reforms after Dayton Daily News Investigation." Dayton Daily News, August 17, 2020. <https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/state-leaders-looking-at-reforms-after-dayton-daily-news-investigation/AG6MO3NH4ZESBFY2GN76QSXHAU/>.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ohio S.B. 36. Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/134/sb36>.

VICTIM AND FAMILY ASSISTANCE CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Ensure first responder agencies are trained to provide tactical medical care.
- Develop a plan to transport victims to the nearest medical facility.
- Convene a team to develop a plan to deliver victim and family services.
- Identify potential locations for the Notification Center and FAC.
- Identify mental health service providers.
- Develop a death notification protocol based on best practices and train on it.
- Encourage the creation of a robust wellness and peer support program for first responders.

Response

- Deploy the American Red Cross and the FBI Victim Service Division.
- Establish the Notification Center and FAC, ensure they are separate from the Joint Information Center, and a secured perimeter.
- Communicate Notification Center and FAC locations and services in press briefings and social media channels.
- Visit victims and family members at the FAC and hospital.
- Consider establishing an official victim fund and communicate details to the public.
- Begin planning the Resiliency Center.
- Identify local resources that can address unmet needs of victims and families, such as translators, victim service providers, attorneys, and faith leaders. Help connect them to the FAC.

Recovery

- Work with partners to establish the Resiliency Center.
- Confirm first responders are receiving appropriate post-incident support.
- Ensure victim services are provided if there are court proceedings related to the incident. This may include providing victims security and protection from the press.
- Work with state and federal agencies to ensure all available funding is provided to victims (directly) and to victim assistance providers.
- Consider advocating with state officials to establish a long-term care fund for survivors and victims' families.
- Apply for funding to cover unreimbursed expenses.



Chapter 4: Collaborating with First Responders

“Your role is to gather information, support the chief, and stay out of the way.”

— Mayor Buddy Dyer, Orlando FL

Chapter Summary

Law enforcement officials—which may include local police, sheriff, the FBI, and mutual aid partners—are responsible for the initial response to a mass shooting. Their top priority is to stop the killing. Fire officials and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) work in partnership with law enforcement to stabilize injured victims and transport them to medical facilities. Law enforcement officials also usually establish the Notification Center, where victims are reunified with family and friends, and death notices are given.

Ensuring your first responders are properly trained and equipped to perform these crucial services is essential. In the **preparedness** phase, build strong, trusting relationships with your police and fire chiefs. Ensure your police force has adequate “active violence incident” (AVI) training and the equipment needed to effectively respond to a mass shooting. Work with your first responder agencies to plan trauma care and medical transport for injured victims. And request a multi-agency, multi-jurisdiction active shooter exercise to ensure your agencies and mutual aid partners are prepared to provide a coordinated response.

While the law enforcement **response** to a mass shooting is taking place, your primary role will be to obtain the information you need from law enforcement to provide the answers the public will demand from you. There is an oversight aspect as well: you may need to intervene if significant problems emerge, such as the failure of law enforcement officials to promptly engage the shooter. Otherwise, as Orlando Mayor Dyer said, your role with law enforcement is to “stay out of the way.”

During the **recovery** phase, work with your public safety executives to ensure that the officers involved in the response receive the mental health services they will need. Commission an after action review (AAR) to evaluate the emergency response by all agencies and partners. The focus should be on learning and improvement, not assigning blame. Finally, ensure your first responder agencies have the resources needed to make the changes recommended in an AAR.

Preparedness

Know Your First Responder Leaders

Develop strong relationships with your police and fire chiefs. Mayors told us their relationships often strengthened when partnering on other initiatives, such as addressing the opioid crisis in their communities, responding to natural disasters, and preventing “everyday gun violence.” Mayors and their chiefs later relied on this trust to present unified leadership during a mass shooting.¹

Likewise, encourage your police and fire chiefs to build a strong working relationship with each other—something that does not always happen on its own. Ensure their departments train together regularly. These partnerships are essential to saving every possible life during a mass shooting.

Best Practice Tip



“Mayors should take the time to understand modern policing, including the threat environment, training, and equipment needs.”

— *Dayton Chief of Police Richard Biehl*

Ensure Police Have Active Violence Incident Training

The school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, on May 24, 2022, revealed a security vulnerability facing our communities: many law enforcement agencies lack the specialized training and equipment needed to respond effectively to a mass shooting. This “active violence incident” (AVI) training is essential to save lives, including the lives of law enforcement officials. For more information about the Uvalde shooting, please see **Sidebar: The Lessons of Uvalde for Mayors and Civic Leaders**.

You should ensure your law enforcement agency requires AVI training for all officials, including new recruits, veteran patrol officers, and the Chief.² According to experts, the training should include, at a minimum: (1) the tactical skills needed to immediately stop an active shooter, (2) the basics of incident command and building a unified command structure, (3) tactical emergency casualty care to stabilize injured victims until they can be transported to a medical facility, and (4) a staging area plan to manage self-deployed law enforcement agencies so that staffing and assets are deployed efficiently and roadways are kept clear to ensure emergency ingress and egress. These training elements promote accountability and reduce the probability of “friendly fire” incidents.

The recommended minimum length and frequency of AVI training is 16 hours for every officer every other year. Additionally, experts recommend interim training (e.g., an hour a month) to hone critical skills and build muscle memory.³

¹“88th Winter Meeting: Lesson Learned - Preventing, Preparing for, and Responding to Mass Shootings,” 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hijqn9q1rQg>.

²As of February 2025, only two states have laws requiring AVI training for their law enforcement agencies: Texas and Michigan.

³John Curnutt, Associate Director of the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training Center at Texas State University. For more information about AVI training, ICMA published a three-part Voices in Local Government podcast series entitled, “*Stop the Killing. Stop the Dying.*” <https://icma.org/podcast/2024/stop-killing-stop-dying>.



Key Resource: Active Violence Incident Training

Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT): ALERRT is a federally funded training and research organization based at Texas State University.⁴ ALERRT trainers provide AVI training to law enforcement agencies across the country at no charge. Other organizations offer similar training, often with ALERRT Certified trainers.



Sidebar: The Lesson of Uvalde for Mayors and Civic Leaders

The mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX, shows the loss of life that can result when first responders are unprepared or unable to act immediately to stop an active shooter.

The Tragedy of Uvalde: Lack of Preparedness

Following the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, law enforcement protocols were updated to require the first officers on scene to engage an active shooter immediately, using the weapons and personnel available, rather than waiting for backup or SWAT. The delay at Columbine, where law enforcement waited outside while the shooters killed 13 and injured 21, contributed to this shift. (The Sidebar in Chapter 3 provides the perspective of a family member of a Columbine victim.)

In Uvalde, officers failed to follow that updated protocol. Police arrived at Robb Elementary even before the shooter entered the school but did not stop him. The shooter entered through an unlocked door, found an unsecured classroom, and began firing on children and teachers. Officers remained outside the classroom for 77 minutes before a Border Patrol tactical team intervened. Nineteen children and two teachers were killed. Seventeen others were injured.

Multiple failures contributed to the tragedy. School security protocols were not followed. Known problems with the classroom door lock had gone unrepaired. But the most consequential failure was that officers did not engage the shooter immediately. A January 2024 U.S. Department of Justice review identified systemic problems, including inadequate training, poor incident command, and lack of coordination between agencies.^{5,6}

⁴Visit <https://alerrt.org>.

⁵U.S. Department of Justice. *Critical Incident Review: Active Shooter at Robb Elementary School*. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, January 2024. <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-r1141-pub.pdf>.

⁶Ceballos, Juanita, dir. "Inside the Uvalde Response." *PBS Frontline*, 2023. Documentary, 54 mins. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/inside-the-uvalde-response/>.

Sidebar continued:

Nashville: A Model of First Responder Readiness

Less than a year after Uvalde, an active shooter entered the Covenant School in Nashville, TN. Police fatally shot the attacker within three minutes of entering the school. Six people were killed, but the swift response was widely praised and likely prevented further loss of life.⁷

Nashville's response was the result of deliberate planning. After Uvalde, Nashville city and police leaders took concrete steps to improve readiness:

- Officers were trained to engage an active shooter immediately, even if acting alone.
- Active shooter training is required for every officer, starting at the academy and continuing through annual in-service training.
- Police, fire, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) conducted joint Rescue Task Force drills to speed medical response.
- School safety upgrades included bullet-resistant glass, card access controls, and a dedicated school SWAT response team.
- All school staff received active shooter training.
- Chief Drake reprioritized school-related calls and increased police presence around schools.
- Mayor Cooper supported these efforts through budgets and policy, including organizing preparedness training for senior city officials.

For more information, see the Nashville case brief.

Key Takeaway for Mayors

The lesson of Uvalde is clear: your officers may want to do the right thing, but may lack the training, equipment, or clarity to act. Do not assume that your agencies are ready. Your role is to ask questions of your chief. Support funding for AVI training, protective gear, and joint exercises. Your leadership—before a crisis—can save lives.

Develop a Plan to Provide Tactical Medical Care

The most frequent cause of preventable death from an injury is serious bleeding. According to the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, an injured person with a compromised artery can bleed out in under five minutes. Traditionally, EMTs⁸ are trained to wait until an emergency scene is safe before providing medical assistance. As a result, many victims die before an EMT reaches them.

⁷Young, Ryan. "A Sense of Pride' Swells across US Police Ranks as Officers Hail the Quick, Heroic Nashville School Massacre Response." CNN, March 31, 2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/31/us/police-response-nashville-school-shooting/index.html>.

⁸Many firefighters are trained EMTs. EMTs may also be employed by a public ambulance service, municipal EMS agency, or medical facility.



Law enforcement officials should therefore be trained to provide tactical medical care, such as applying tourniquets and covering chest wounds, to stabilize severely injured victims until they can be transported to a medical facility.⁹ This basic, but critical, medical care has saved lives. Similar Stop the Bleed[®] training can also be provided to teachers and other community members.

Key Resource: Stop the Bleed[®] Training

American College of Surgeons Stop the Bleed[®] program: This program has reportedly prepared nearly four million people worldwide on how to stop bleeding in a severely injured person. The website includes information and training and tactical medical kits.¹⁰



Meet with your Police Chief to discuss training to provide tactical medical care for law enforcement officials (usually part of AVI training), and the need to stock significant quantities of Stop the Bleed[®] supplies (e.g., tourniquets, pressure dressings, and exam gloves) in all police and fire vehicles.

Additionally, discuss whether to establish a Rescue Task Force for your community. A joint Rescue Task Force composed of police and EMTs (sometimes, but not always, part of your fire agency) can be deployed to provide point-of-injury wound care to victims in the “warm zone” (i.e., when there is an ongoing threat). EMTs treat, stabilize, and remove the injured under the protection of law enforcement. Understand your community’s fire/EMT protocol, and modify it as necessary, to ensure that police and fire officials/EMTs work and train together to provide these basic, but critical, medical services.

Highland Park’s Rescue Task Force evacuated 24 victims to definitive care in under 30 minutes—a timeline that saved lives. The team was able to move quickly due to clear protocols, cross-agency training, and well-established mutual trust between fire and police personnel. This underscores the importance of joint Rescue Task Force training and having clearly assigned operational roles.

Plan Victim Transport and Medical Surge Capacity

A key tenet of trauma care is reducing time from point of injury to initial medical care to improve the survival rate of severely injured patients. Some experts believe the time limit for surviving serious injuries without trauma care may be as short as 30 minutes. Therefore, the coordinated efforts of multiple partners, including first responders, local health facilities, and regional trauma centers, will be required to ensure injured victims receive trauma care within this “golden” window.

⁹Greene, Jan. “Shooting Episodes Prompt Cooperation Between EMS and Police, With an Assist From Emergency Medicine.” *Annals of Emergency Medicine* 67, no. 5 (May 1, 2016): A13–15 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annemergmed.2016.02.016>.

¹⁰“Stop the Bleed.” Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://www.stopthebleed.org/>.

While most police vehicles are not designed for transporting severely injured victims to trauma care centers, situations may arise in which police transport—sometimes called “scoop and run”—offers the best possible chance for patients to survive their injuries. Several recent studies support this finding.^{11,12} Therefore, your police force should train for the possibility of transporting victims in their vehicles.

Your community may be located in a “trauma care desert” (i.e., a rural area, on an island, or other geographically hard-to-reach place where the nearest trauma center is more than 30 minutes away). In trauma care deserts, alternative systems must be put in place to shorten the time between injury and critically needed medical interventions. Local hospitals may become the receiving facility for mass shooting victims by default and therefore should prepare for mass casualty events. Their role will be to stabilize and transfer these patients to higher levels of care.

Even urban areas with Level 1 and 2 trauma centers can be a “desert” if hospitals lack the surge capacity to handle a large number of seriously injured victims.

To plan, determine where victims in your community will go for trauma care and how they will be transported. This may vary depending on the location of the incident within your community. Precision coordination with multiple medical facilities (possibly across state lines) may be required to save the lives of multiple victims. Therefore, consider discussing hospital destinations and capabilities with your local medical command and control system. Another resource is the hospital emergency preparedness manager for your state.

Include all agencies that may be involved in victim transport in these discussions, as these first responders do not interact with medical command as readily as emergency medical systems.

To ensure the medical facilities you have identified have the capacity to treat multiple victims, consider directly initiating conversations and public-private partnerships with them to encourage the development of surge capacity. These relationships, though complicated because of the public-private sector divide, should be established before you are faced with a mass casualty incident.

Provide Life-Saving Equipment

In addition to AVI training, every officer in your law enforcement agency requires proper equipment. This includes officer-fitted bullet-resistant vests (which need to be replaced every five years), an appropriate rifle for every officer, radios that are inter-operational with the local fire and emergency medical response agency, breaching tools, and tactical medical kits. Note that portable rifle-rated shields are also considered a valuable piece of protective equipment, but they are expensive and require additional training. Ask your police and fire chiefs what they need and then work with your staff and city council to deliver it.

¹¹Inaba, Kenji, and Gregory J. Jurkovich. “Police Transport for Penetrating Trauma—Lessons From Patients in Philadelphia.” *JAMA Network Open* 4, no. 1 (January 25, 2021): e2035122. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.35122>.

¹²Taghavi, Sharven, Zoe Maher, Amy J. Goldberg, Elliott R. Haut, Shariq Raza, Grace Chang, Leah C. Tatebe, et al. “An Analysis of Police Transport in an Eastern Association for the Surgery of Trauma Multicenter Trial Examining Prehospital Procedures in Penetrating Trauma Patients.” *The Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery* 93, no. 2 (August 1, 2022): 265–72. <https://doi.org/10.1097/TA.0000000000003563>.



Best Practice Tip

“Ensure all first responders are equipped with tactical medical kits and Stop the Bleed® supplies.”

— Highland Park Fire Chief Joe Schrage



Schedule a Tabletop with First Responder Agencies

Schedule a tabletop exercise with your first responder leaders, including your police and fire chiefs, the FBI special agent in charge (SAC), and a representative from the U.S. attorney’s office. Use this initial meeting to understand their respective roles and resources, determine training and equipment needs, and confirm they are engaging in active shooter exercises together. Identify areas for future planning, including protocols for the Notification Center for victim and family reunification, crisis communications, and first responder wellness and peer support programs.

For more information, see **Chapter 2, Emergency Operations** and **Appendix A, Readiness Toolkit**.

Request a Multi-Agency Training/Active Shooter Exercise

Unified command can be difficult to achieve if police, fire, and EMS agencies do not regularly train together. Interoperability challenges, such as incompatible radio systems, can further complicate the response to a mass shooting. To improve coordination and readiness, mayors should ask their chiefs to conduct periodic active shooter exercises that include both multi-agency (police, fire, EMS) and **multi-jurisdictional (neighboring municipalities and mutual aid partners) participation**.

The goal of these exercises is not only to test tactics, but to build relationships, strengthen communication, and clarify expectations. Exercises should evaluate the ability of responders to establish a unified command structure, coordinate with mutual aid partners, and manage challenges such as self-deployed personnel. These trainings also provide an opportunity to assess radio interoperability, casualty collection protocols, rescue task force integration, and training and equipment needs.

El Paso Mayor Dee Margo emphasized the importance of elected officials attending an active shooter exercise organized by first responders to appreciate the magnitude of a law enforcement response.

Leaders in Action: Regional Training Preparedness in Lake County

Prior to the Highland Park shooting, Lake County hosted a large-scale, multi-agency active shooter training at the Ravinia Festival. The drill helped strengthen relationships between agencies, clarify mutual aid protocols, and reinforce rescue task force procedures. Fire Chief Joe Schrage emphasized that this advance training directly contributed to the rapid and coordinated response of more than 100 agencies on July 4, 2022.



Negotiate Mutual Aid Agreements

Most cities negotiate mutual aid agreements to provide additional emergency response resources, such as law enforcement and trauma care services. If you are the mayor of a large city, your police department likely provides law enforcement services to smaller communities and rural areas in your region. Note, however, the support can go both ways. Smaller cities can assist by providing surge capacity when needed, including law enforcement support to cover the shifts of your officials after an incident.

As explained in **Chapter 8, Legal Considerations**, your legal counsel should review and update mutual aid agreements on an annual basis (at minimum). Participate in the review to ensure your first responder agencies have the resources and support they need to respond to a mass shooting. According to one police chief, regional responses are becoming more common in the current threat environment, so it is vital that elected officials understand the nuances of mutual aid agreements. Also, you may need to weigh in on how to resolve issues that could arise when a mutual aid agreement is activated, such as how to resolve different protocols, police union policies, police conduct policies and standards, and funding issues. As mentioned above, mutual aid partners should be encouraged to have the same AVI training as your police force, and train regularly with your first responder agencies.

Key Resources: Mutual Aid Agreements



Department of Justice, Multijurisdictional Partnerships for Meeting Regional Threats: Department of Justice resource on planning mutual aid agreements.¹³

FBI: Building Regional Police Collaboration: FBI article on building regional law enforcement collaboration.¹⁴

Understand FBI Resources

Establish a working relationship with your regional FBI SAC. The FBI may be the lead law enforcement agency if the mass shooting is a violation of federal law, such as in the case of a terrorist attack or hate crime. Even if the FBI does not take the lead, it can provide significant resources for the response and investigation far beyond what could be provided by local law enforcement. Two key FBI resources are the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) and the Victim Services Division (VSD). Note that you must affirmatively request these resources to receive them during an emergency.

¹³International Association of Chiefs of Police. *Mutual Aid: Multijurisdictional Partnerships for Meeting Regional Threats*. U.S. Department of Justice, September 2005. <https://www.policinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Bureau-of-Justice-Assistance-2005-Mutual-Aid-Multijurisdictional-Partnerships-for-Meeting-Regional-Threats.pdf>.

¹⁴Masterson, Mike, and Eugene Smith. "Building Regional Police Collaboration: A Different Perspective Based on Lessons Learned." *FBI: Law Enforcement Bulletin* (blog). Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/building-regional-police-collaboration-a-different-perspective-based-on-lessons-learned>.



Critical Incident Response Group

The Critical Incident Response Group coordinates FBI assets for the immediate response, including a Hostage Rescue Team, command post vehicles that can be used as Emergency Operations Centers, aircraft for surveillance and transport, and evidence response resources. If the case involves major evidence response, the local field division of the FBI can quickly access and provide resources from around the country to support the effort.

FBI Victim Services Division

The FBI Victim Services Division coordinates more than 170 victim specialists located throughout the country. These trained specialists serve as liaisons to the victims and families and can support local police even if FBI does not take the lead. The Victim Services Division's resources are unmatched when it comes to the task of analyzing personal effects and assessing which are evidence and which may be returned with care and dignity to grieving family members.

FBI victim specialists can also help establish the Family Assistance Center, as discussed in Chapter 3. They can coordinate meals, pass information to the families, and activate local victim service providers with whom they already have relationships. They also serve as a buffer between investigators and victims and their families so that investigators can focus on the investigation and remain impartial.

While the Victim Services Division's resources can be invaluable, your staff should be aware of certain limitations. For example, Orlando staff were not permitted to access victim information obtained through intake forms processed by the Victim Services Division at the Family Assistance Center due to a FBI protocol intended to protect the privacy of the victims. As a result, the city had to generate a parallel intake process that required families and victims to sign in twice. In some cases, the city was unable to obtain the names of people processed by the FBI, making it impossible to provide follow-up services to them. These bureaucratic pitfalls might be avoided through advance planning and a memorandum of understanding with your FBI SAC or victim specialists.

Key Resources: FBI Services

How We Can Help You: An overview of the services provided by the FBI Victim Services Division.¹⁵



¹⁵FBI Victim Services Division. "How We Can Help You." FBI. Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/victim-services>.

Advocate for First Responder Wellness and Peer Support Programs

Responding to a mass shooting leaves lasting emotional impacts on first responders—impacts that, if unaddressed, can affect not only their long-term well-being, but also their ability to perform in future emergencies.

Dayton Police Chief Richard Biehl has described the lack of accessible mental health support for first responders as a national crisis. Officers, firefighters, EMTs, dispatchers, 911 operators, and crime scene investigators all carry the weight of what they witness—and too often, that burden goes untreated.¹⁶ Left unaddressed, trauma can manifest in burnout, isolation, or impaired decision-making under stress.

The good news: There is growing awareness among public safety leaders of the importance of wellness, and a shift toward building dedicated support systems. More departments are implementing peer support teams, embedding mental health professionals, and offering trauma-informed training.

Work in collaboration with your chiefs and mental health providers to ensure first responders have access to the support they need and deserve, not just in the aftermath of a critical incident, but as an integrated part of their professional lives.

A comprehensive wellness program should include:

- Routine access to culturally competent mental health care
- Appropriate post-incident debriefing and support options
- Peer support team development and training
- Confidentiality protections to encourage help-seeking behavior

For more detail, see the recommended resources listed below. Additional guidance on post-incident mental health support is provided in the Recovery section at the end of this chapter.

Key Resources: First Responder Mental Health Programs



U.S. Department of Justice and National Alliance on Mental Illness, Preparing for the Unimaginable: This report describes ways to safeguard officers' mental health, promote resilience, and prevent secondary trauma. It includes information on finding appropriate mental health professionals, recommended ways to conduct post-incident briefings, and unique practices, such as assigning "angel chiefs" to support a chief after a traumatizing incident.¹⁷

¹⁶Hanover, Mel, Danielle Crimmins, Jonathan McGrath, Jillian Barnas, and Christina Harris. "Officer Wellness Is Not Enough." *Police Chief Magazine* (blog), November 20, 2024. <https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/officer-wellness-not-enough/>.

¹⁷Usher, Laura, Stefanie Friedhoff, Maj. Sam Cochran, and Anand Pandya. *Preparing for the Unimaginable: How Chiefs Can Safeguard Officer Mental Health before and after Mass Casualty Events*. U.S. Department of Justice and National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2016. <https://www.nami.org/support-education/publications-reports/public-policy-reports/preparing-for-the-unimaginable/>.



International Association of Chiefs of Police Peer Support Guidelines: These guidelines provide information and recommendations on forming and maintaining a peer support structure for sworn and civilian personnel in law enforcement agencies.¹⁸

Florida State Resources for First Responders: The 2nd Alarm Project, supported in part by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration funding, is a nonprofit organization that offers comprehensive, evidence-based resiliency programs and services to support the mental health of first responders. The site includes a behavioral health toolkit, which was developed in collaboration with first responder leaders following the Parkland mass shooting. The toolkit can be used to establish and maintain a robust behavioral health program for first responders in Florida and beyond.¹⁹

Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office Resource Center, Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Programs: Eleven Case Studies: The COPS Office publishes materials for law enforcement and community stakeholders to address crime and disorder challenges. This link features a book entitled *Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Programs: Eleven Case Studies*, which describes agencies' programs that protect the mental and emotional health of law enforcement officers, their non-sworn colleagues, and families.²⁰



COPS Resource Center, Best Practices and Professional Standards for Peer Support Counseling Programs for First Responder Agencies: Report to Congress 2024: This report outlines programmatic approaches to promoting officer wellness and highlights important considerations, such as confidentiality. It includes suggested resources and a bibliography.²¹

First Responder Peer Support Programs: This article summarizes the collaborative efforts of a university psychology department and a sheriff's office to create an effective peer support program. It offers guidelines for departments wishing to implement their own peer support programs.²²

¹⁸IACP Police Psychological Services. *Peer Support Guidelines*. International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2021. <https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/Psych-PeerSupportGuidelines%20-%204.11.2022.pdf>.

¹⁹Second Alarm Project. "BHAP Toolkit," 2023. <https://2ndalarmproject.org/bhap-toolkit/>.

²⁰Copple, Colleen, James Copple, Jessica Drake, et al. *Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Programs: Eleven Case Studies*. Community Oriented Policing Services, 2019. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-J36-PURL-gpo138203/pdf/GOVPUB-J36-PURL-gpo138203.pdf>.

²¹U.S. Department of Justice. *Best Practices and Professional Standards for Peer Support Counseling Programs for First Responder Agencies*. No. E112322072. Community Oriented Policing Services, 2024. <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-r1176-pub.pdf>.

²²Cnapich, Emily, Samantha Rodriguez, Bailee Schuhmann, Judy Couwels, Vincent Van Hasselt, and Jessica Blalock. "First Responder Peer Support Programs." *FBI: Law Enforcement Bulletin*, April 6, 2022. <https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/featured-articles/first-responder-peer-support-programs>.

Response

Your Role During the Critical Incident Response

During an active law enforcement response, your role is to support law enforcement operations, stay informed, and share updates with the public and victims' families.

To stay informed and effectively support the response, a best practice is to request that a designated law enforcement liaison be assigned to the Emergency Operations Center to provide consistent briefings for the mayor, city manager, and other civic leaders. Establishing strong relationships with your police chief and FBI SAC in advance of a crisis will help ensure open and timely communication when it matters most.

Otherwise, as Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer advised after the Pulse nightclub shooting, the role for a mayor during an active law enforcement response is to “stay out of the way”—to trust your professionals and avoid interfering with tactical operations.

At the same time, civic leaders have a responsibility to understand the broad contours of the law enforcement response. In rare but high-profile incidents, such as the school shootings in Parkland and Uvalde, investigations found that delayed action by law enforcement officials may have contributed to preventable loss of life. While those circumstances are uncommon, they underscore the importance of situational awareness.

One city manager noted that elected officials should be prepared to monitor the response. This does not mean interfering in operations, which will be chaotic. But if actions being taken do not align with the established protocol (e.g., officers are not entering the building), it is appropriate to discreetly consult with your police chief or the senior law enforcement official on scene. As one law enforcement leader explained: “If you saw a medical team preparing to operate on the wrong limb, a quiet intervention would be expected and appreciated.”

In the course of briefings, it is appropriate to ask:

- Who has assumed incident command and unified command roles?
- What tactical posture has been taken (e.g., has the shooter been located, contained, or engaged)?
- Are outside mutual aid agencies being integrated into the command structure?

The answers may not always be available in real time, but these questions help establish a shared understanding of the situation and demonstrate your support for a coordinated, effective response. Building mutual respect with your law enforcement leaders before a crisis occurs is the most reliable way to enable that communication in a high-pressure environment.

Best Practice Tip



Encourage critical thinking during emergencies to ensure strategies are adapted to novel circumstances. In Highland Park, Fire Chief Joe Schrage and Emergency Manager Dan Eder both highlighted the importance of empowering responders to make situational decisions based on training and on-the-ground realities, rather than rigid adherence to protocol when novel challenges arise.



Leaders in Action: Engaging with Law Enforcement

In the case of the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh, multiple law enforcement agencies responded. The FBI SAC, the local district attorney, and the U.S. attorney were at the scene, and discussed which level of government should lead the investigation. The U.S. attorney convinced the district attorney that the incident fit the definition of a federal hate crime. Once a decision was made to prosecute at the federal level, the FBI SAC took charge of the law enforcement response. Establishing the chain of command early on helped coordinate the law enforcement response.



Once Mayor Peduto was informed of the jurisdiction decision, he focused on communications with the public and dignitaries who were visiting Pittsburgh that day. He also ensured that the gathered dignitaries remained “outside the tape” of the crime scene and appropriately distanced from the mobile command unit where law enforcement was engaged in tactical operations.

You and your police chief share communications and victim services responsibilities. You should plan press conferences together to define roles and ensure unified messaging, as described in **Chapter 1, Crisis Communications**.

Confirm that police have established the Notification Center in a secured, scalable location, as described in **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance**. If additional support is needed for victim and family assistance, contact the FBI SAC in the field division that covers your jurisdiction. This agent can activate national resources from the FBI Victim Services Division and support local law enforcement.

Key Resource: The Role of Police in Assisting Victims of Mass Violence

Police Executive Research Forum, the Role of Police Executives in Assisting Victims of Mass Violence: Lessons from the Field: Based on interviews with police executives who responded to mass shootings, this report provides practical advice designed to help police executives understand the tasks and strategies involved to respond to the needs of victims following a mass shooting.²³



²³Police Executive Research Forum. *The Role of Police Executives in Assisting Victims of Mass Violence: Lessons from the Field*. Police Executive Research Forum, September 2020. <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/AssistingVictimsMassViolence.pdf>.

Recovery

Support First Responders

Check in with your police and fire chiefs to ensure the officials who responded to the shooting are receiving the mental health care and peer support they will need. They will require immediate support, relief from shift duties, group counseling sessions, recognition and support from leadership, paid leave as needed, referral to a trained therapist, peer support, and ongoing crisis support services in some cases. Confidentiality, flexibility, and compassion are hallmarks of an effective recovery program.

Key Resources: Mental Health Services for First Responders

Disaster Distress Hotline: This toll-free, multilingual, crisis support service is available 24/7 to all residents in the United States and its territories—including first responders—who are experiencing emotional distress related to mass violence or natural or human-caused disasters.²⁴

NC-PTSD, Psychological First Aid (PFA) Manual: This manual describes the basics of psychological first aid for victims.²⁵

Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act: This act requires the COPS Office to publish case studies of programs and other resources to help agencies address officer psychological health and well-being. Funding may be available to improve the delivery of and access to mental health and wellness services for law enforcement through training and technical assistance, demonstration projects, and implementation of promising practices related to peer mentoring programs.²⁶

See the **Preparedness** section above for additional resources to establish a wellness and peer support program.



Similarly, in the event of a serious injury or death of an officer, there are concrete actions you can take to ensure that the officer is recognized for their heroism. In addition to advocating on behalf of the officer's family for the services and benefits they will need, you can use an existing 501(c)(3) charitable entity operated by the city to receive public donations intended for the officer's family.

For more information, see **Chapter 5, Managing Donations and Volunteers.**

²⁴Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Disaster Distress Helpline. Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/helplines/disaster-distress-helpline>

²⁵National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide*. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2006. https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/type/psych_firstaid_manual.asp.

²⁶Community Oriented Policing Services. "Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEMHWA) Program." U.S. Department of Justice. Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/lemhwa>.



Key Resource: Benefits for First Responders

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program: This program provides death and educational benefits to the survivors of fallen law enforcement officers, firefighters, and other first responders, and disability benefits to officers catastrophically injured in the line of duty.²⁷



Police Overtime Pay

The cost of overtime pay for police departments that have responded to a mass shooting can be significant. Overtime will be accrued providing services for the response, investigation, traffic control, and security needs for dignitaries, vigils, funerals, and the Notification and Family Assistance Centers. For example, in response to the Las Vegas shooting, police overtime costs exceeded \$3.5 million.

During the recovery phase, work with law enforcement to ensure that overtime costs are carefully documented so they can be reimbursed. For information about sources of funding that may cover the cost of police overtime pay, mental health benefits for first responders, and death and educational benefits for the survivors of fallen first responders, see **Appendix C, Funding Sources**.

After Action Review

Consider commissioning an after action review (AAR) to evaluate the emergency response by your community's agencies and partners. The focus should be on learning and improvement, not assigning blame. Although law enforcement agencies often initiate this review, Chief Frank Straub, who led the AAR team for the Pulse, San Bernardino, and New Zealand mass shootings, recommends that mayors or city managers initiate the AAR process to ensure it is objective. Following the review, your key responsibility is to ensure your first responder agencies have the resources needed to make any changes recommended in the AAR. For best practices, see **Appendix G, After Action Review**.

²⁷Bureau of Justice Assistance. "Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program." Accessed February 10, 2025 <https://bja.ojp.gov/program/psob>.

FIRST RESPONDER CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- With your public safety executives, schedule a training or tabletop exercise to define your respective roles during the response.
- Ensure the police force has adequate training, funding, and equipment to adequately respond to a public mass shooting.
- Meet with the FBI SAC, local law enforcement agencies, and community-based organizations to understand the victim services they provide.
- Plan tactical medical care and transport to trauma facilities for victims.
- Ensure adequate mutual aid agreements are in place.
- Request a multi-agency, multi-jurisdiction active shooter exercise and attend it.

Response

- Establish communications channels to obtain regular law enforcement updates.
- If needed, activate FBI resources through the SAC.
- Monitor the response to ensure law enforcement officials are following their protocol.

Recovery

- Work with your chiefs to ensure first responders receive the support and benefits they require.
- Ensure appropriate documentation of police overtime pay; seek reimbursement.
- Commission an AAR. Ensure public safety officials have the resources needed to implement recommendations.



Chapter 5: Managing Donations and Volunteers

“It’s about the community having a place to put their pain.”

— Mayor Nan Whaley, Dayton, OH

Chapter Summary

After a mass shooting, people want to help. Financial donations pour in from across the country and around the world. Community members show up to lend their support to the victims and families. People donate food, teddy bears, and other items, and leave flowers and letters at makeshift memorials to remember the victims. Despite the generous intent, these acts of support can pose a substantial burden on your community.

To be fully **prepared**, develop a strategy to manage donations and volunteers. Doing so will ensure you are able to direct funds, donations, and resources to people when they need them most. A donation and volunteer strategy has other benefits, including preventing fraud, ensuring people support the response in ways that are helpful (such as by donating blood), and possibly limiting liability to the city.

During the first hours of the **response**, you will be under intense pressure. Yet mayors recommend that you prioritize establishing a fund for donations for the benefit of the victims and families. Whether the fund is managed by the city or trusted partners, your leadership will ensure donated funds are properly managed and distributed.

Tell the public where they can safely direct their donations. Mayors offered the following lessons learned: (1) create a fund immediately, (2) establish a community oversight board for it, (3) encourage the public to give only to the established fund to avoid scams, and (4) determine a protocol (in advance, if possible) to guide the distribution of donations to victims and families.

Managing volunteers and non-financial donations will be another challenge. For example, after the shooting in Las Vegas, the local public health agency had to provide food inspectors to handle donations of perishable items, which posed potential food safety concerns. After the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, organizers had to ask the public to stop donating teddy bears after they filled a warehouse with more than 60,000 stuffed animals.¹ Yet some of the items left at the scene or other memorial sites may have value for future commemorations and historical purposes, so you may need to coordinate with community partners to document and catalog items left by the public.

In the long-term **recovery**, your staff may continue to coordinate donations and volunteers for events, including one-year remembrance events and permanent memorials. While community organizations and foundations often take the lead, city staff may serve on community boards or oversee key events.

¹Kix, Paul. “65,000 Teddy Bears for Newtown, and One Man to Sort the World’s Grief.” The Trace, December 13, 2015. <https://www.thetrace.org/2015/12/sandy-hook-shooting-donations/>

Preparedness

Ensuring donations reach victims and families quickly and transparently is critical to community recovery. To be fully prepared, develop a strategy to manage monetary and in-kind donations. The strategy should be included in the city's emergency preparedness plan.

Develop A Victims' Fund Strategy

The best practice is to establish a victims' fund as quickly as possible following a mass shooting. Fraud is a real concern, and there could be serious implications if the fund is mismanaged. Establishing a victims' fund may also limit liability to the city. Therefore, it may be in the best interest of the city to take the lead on establishing the victims' fund rather than leaving this critical responsibility to private individuals.

Determine who will establish the victims' fund (e.g., the city or a trusted partner), who will manage it, and how the funds will be distributed. Determine whether you will need authorization to establish a fund. For example, in Pittsburgh, the mayor's office had to seek permission from the city council to establish a special trust fund in which donations could be deposited.

Best Practice Tip



Plan how you will manage a victims' fund *before* a mass shooting happens.

– Heather Fagan, Chief of Staff: “Distributing the funds is a major process that required multiple community meetings and translation services. We established a board to manage the process. I think mayors in other cities need to consider how they would approach the establishment and management of a victims' fund ahead of time.”

Donation Platforms to Consider

As part of your strategy, determine the funding vehicle that will receive donations. In Orlando, the city already had a 501(c)(3) charitable entity for managing donations for events. With a few tweaks, the city was able to use that entity to accept donations for the Pulse victims right away. A city-managed fund was a requirement by one major corporate donor.

However, there are other good options. Partnering with trusted platforms can prevent confusion, protect against scams, and maximize the impact of public generosity. Dayton relied on a relationship with a community foundation to establish a fund. San Bernardino used a crowd-funding website (GoFundMe).

El Paso worked with the National Compassion Fund, a national organization that provides pro bono services after mass shootings. The National Compassion Fund offers a centralized, victim-centered approach. The Fund now works with GoFundMe to help communities to mobilize a legitimate fund immediately in response to a tragedy.



Plan Victims' Fund Management and Oversight

As part of your strategy, determine who will manage the fund, how funds will be distributed, and who will provide oversight. To ensure compliance and transparency, consult with experts to understand required authorizations, tax implications, and potential liability. Experienced organizations like the National Compassion Fund can provide critical guidance in navigating these legal and procedural considerations.

Several mayors consulted with Attorney Kenneth Feinberg for help setting up their funds and determining protocols for distributions. Attorney Feinberg has advised on various high-profile cases involving multiple victims, including 9/11 and the Boston Marathon bombing.

See **Chapter 8, Legal Considerations** for guidance on establishing a victims' fund.

Key Resources: Establishing the Victims' Fund

Law Offices of Kenneth R. Feinberg: Attorney Kenneth Feinberg can help cities develop a victims' fund strategy or establish a victims' fund following a mass casualty incident.²

National Compassion Fund: Provides a transparent, victim-centered process for distributing funds directly to survivors and families of mass casualty events. It ensures tax deductibility for donors, no administrative fees, and pro bono technical support.³



Plan In-Kind Donations and Volunteer Management

Your strategy should include protocols for managing in-kind donations and volunteers. Collaborate with potential partners, including businesses, faith leaders, and organizations that can provide trained volunteers. Understand the distinction between trained volunteers and unaffiliated, spontaneous volunteers. Determine where food and other types of donations might be stored, which staff will be trained to accept and inspect donations, and which staff will manage volunteers. Consider offering Stop the Bleed® training to members of volunteer organizations.

See **Chapter 7, Community Partnerships** for more information.

²"The Law Offices of Kenneth R. Feinberg, PC." Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://feinberglawoffices.com>.

³"National Compassion Fund." Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://nationalcompassionfund.org/>.

Key Resources: Volunteer Management

Federal Emergency Management Agency, Managing Spontaneous Volunteers in Times of Disaster: The Synergy of Structure and Good Intentions: This publication offers a basis for developing a strategy to work with unaffiliated, often spontaneous, volunteers.⁴



National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD): This link provides information about VOAD, a coalition of 70+ national organizations (faith-based, community-based, and other nonprofit organizations) and 56 state/territory VOADs. VOAD members often partner with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and provide trained volunteers to respond to disasters.⁵

HandOn Network, Top 15 Things to Know When Managing Volunteers in Times of Disaster: This short list outlines the basic steps needed to manage volunteers during a disaster.⁶

Response

Establish a Victims' Fund Right Away

Establish the victims' fund as quickly as possible, in consultation with your C4 team. Mayor Whaley established the Dayton Oregon District Tragedy Fund the day after the shooting. Mayor Dyer used a pre-existing city-owned 501(c)(3) to establish the OneOrlando Fund.

It is important to ensure there is only one fund. This will help prevent confusion, promote transparency, ensure consistency in the distribution of the money, and limit the opportunity for scammers to capitalize on the public's grief. For these reasons, Mayor Dyer and his staff convinced other groups that had established their own funds to merge them with the OneOrlando Fund.

Best Practice Tip



Ensure that the establishment of the fund is transparent.

– *El Paso Mayor Dee Margo*: “Once the Fund was set up, I provided weekly status updates for city council members and the public. Every two weeks I brought members of the oversight committee to the council to answer questions and encourage eligible victims and family members to apply for funds.”

⁴Federal Emergency Management Agency. *Managing Spontaneous Volunteers in Times of Disaster: The Synergy of Structure and Good Intentions*. FEMA, 2008. Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://www.fema.gov/pdf/donations/ManagingSpontaneousVolunteers.pdf>

⁵“National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.” Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://www.nvoad.org/>.

⁶“15 Volunteer Management Strategies for Times of Disaster.” Points of Light (blog), December 6, 2022. <https://www.pointsoflight.org/blog/15-volunteer-management-strategies-for-times-of-disaster/>



Keep the Public and City Officials Informed About the Fund

As soon as the fund is established, make regular announcements at press conferences to inform the public how to make donations and warn of potential scams. Provide information about how victims can apply to receive compensation from the fund. Include the information in social media channels and in the languages most likely to reach the affected community.

Leaders in Action: Victims' Fund Management

In the immediate aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting, donations began arriving from around the world. Initially, city officials expected an outside organization to manage the funds, but after receiving calls from major donors, including Disney and Universal Studios, the City of Orlando needed a mechanism to accept and manage contributions directly. In consultation with Mayor Buddy Dyer, Chief Financial Officer Chris McCullion opted to use the city's existing nonprofit entity, Strengthen Orlando, as the repository. To ensure funds would be segregated, the city obtained a "doing business as" (DBA) license specifically for the Pulse response.

City staff quickly registered a web domain, enabled credit card processing and text-to-donate tools, and began coordinating logistics. Although the city had no prior protocols for managing large-scale donations, staff applied general principles of transparency, fraud prevention, and recordkeeping. Chief Financial Officer McCullion sought guidance from Boston Marathon bombing officials and Attorney Kenneth Feinberg, who agreed to help design a distribution protocol pro bono.

Multiple local and national organizations had also launched fundraising campaigns. These organizations agreed to partner with the city to merge the funds into the OneOrlando Fund, "to ensure all funds collected for victims [were] disbursed in a unified process that [would] expedite funds, ensure transparency and safeguard against fraud."

Mayor Dyer appointed a distribution board that included representatives from the LGBTQ+ and Hispanic communities, local philanthropic leaders, and Orlando Magic Chief Executive Officer Alex Martins. After public input and consultation with survivors and family members of other mass shootings, the board chose to allocate 100 percent of the donations—more than \$31 million—directly to victims and families. Payments were made according to the severity of loss or injury. All administrative services were donated, and credit card fees were waived.



Direct Volunteers to Where They Can Help

The American Red Cross and the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program can provide trained volunteers after a disaster, including a mass shooting. As mayor, you can recommend that these organizations be contacted immediately to help guide the establishment of the Family Assistance Center. The Red Cross can advise on the services needed by the victims and provide skilled volunteers trained in psychological first aid, grief counseling, and other first responder skills. The CERT program can provide trained volunteers to assist with crowd control, traffic management, and logistical support. They can also provide first aid and triage. These volunteers can be coordinated through the Emergency Operations Center or through the Family Assistance Center.





Image 1: Los Angeles Fire Department CERT Unit volunteers organized in Sylmar, CA in response to an earthquake. (LAFD Photo by Cody Weireter)

Leaders in Action: Highland Park CERT Program



The Highland Park CERT program has been in place for over 20 years. In 2022, CERT volunteers were managing crowds and traffic for the Fourth of July parade when the mass shooting occurred. Despite live gunfire, CERT members, still in their T-shirts and riding bikes, headed into the hot zone to assist victims. Drawing on first aid training they had recently completed, they provided tactical medical care. Their quick response and bravery certainly saved lives.

While volunteers should be discouraged from entering unsafe areas, medical training can empower volunteers to save lives in many contexts when it is safe to do so. Highland Park later offered free Stop the Bleed® training to CERT volunteers and other members of the community.

Find a Way to Manage Unaffiliated Volunteers

Community members and people from around the country may appear at the site of the shooting or the Family Assistance Center offering to help. It can be challenging to properly manage these untrained volunteers. To the extent possible, they should be directed to where they can provide the most benefit and have the least chance of inadvertently interfering with the investigation and efforts of first responders. In the past, untrained volunteers have helped set up public spaces for a vigil or public event, helped process in-kind donations such as food and flowers, and delivered food to first responders. See the resources listed in the Preparedness section for suggestions on managing volunteers.

Tell the Public How They Can Help

In your press conferences and on social media, tell the public how they can help, including by directing volunteers to where they are needed. You may need to announce that volunteers are *not* needed, and that people can best help by staying home, avoiding the area, or making a financial donation.

An important way the public can help is by donating blood. In Orlando, people began donating blood within hours after the Pulse shooting, with blood banks working overtime to ship the blood collected from other cities to Orlando.⁷ The response was so great that the need was met the following day.

El Paso Mayor Dee Margo spoke of blood donors standing in long lines for hours under the hot sun, which required the distribution of bottled water by volunteers to those waiting in line. Consult with the American Red Cross or your local blood bank to ensure the safety of blood donors.

Recovery

Oversee Fund Distribution to Victims and Families

Developing the distribution protocol for the victims' fund will be time-consuming. Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto emphasized the importance of consulting with family members of victims when determining how the funds will be distributed. Other mayors echoed his recommendation.

Mayors told us they did not get involved in the actual distribution of funds to victims and families. However, they took actions to ensure the process was transparent. In some cases, a member of the mayor's staff participated on the board that oversaw these distributions. That allowed them to keep the mayor apprised of the process, liaise with victim services organizations to ensure victims were heard throughout the process, and keep the city council, local agencies, and the public informed on the process and timeline of distributions.

⁷Brinkmann, Paul. "How blood banks handled Pulse shooting, 28,000 donors." *Orlando Sentinel*, July 1, 2016. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/2016/07/01/how-blood-banks-handled-pulse-shooting-28000-donors/>

Leaders in Action: Fund Distribution Protocol



In Dayton, the victims' fund established by the city distributed more than \$3.8 million to victims and their families (47 applicants) in an initial payout⁸ and around \$150,000 in a second payout.⁹ Approximately 70 percent went to families of the deceased, 20 percent went to injured victims who were hospitalized for 48 hours or more, and 10 percent went to victims who were treated and released in less than 48 hours.

Most of the funds researched for this Playbook distributed 100 percent to the victims and their families (as recommended by families of previous mass shootings). However, not all of them did. For example, in Pittsburgh, \$6.3 million was raised according to press reports. Most of the money, \$4.8 million, was distributed to victims and family members. However, \$500,000 was provided to injured police officers and their families, \$450,000 went to the Tree of Life congregation to rebuild the severely damaged building, and some funds went toward memorials and education connected to the massacre.

Although 100 percent of the donations to the OneOrlando Fund were distributed to the victims and their families (see above), Orlando Mayor Dyer recommends that distribution boards consider withholding a small percentage of the donations to pay for ongoing mental health services, not only for the victims and their families, but also for other members of the community who were not directly affected but are traumatized.

The best practice is to closely consult with the survivors, families of the victims, and members of the affected community and use their input to establish a distribution protocol that is appropriate for your community. Although every case is different, consulting with civic leaders who have established a victims' fund may help you avoid re-inventing the wheel.

Manage Donations Long Term

Documenting and archiving items left at the scene is a monumental task. For guidance and resources, see the Recovery section of **Chapter 9, Commemorations**.

⁸Richardson, Joshua. "Tragedy Fund distributes \$3.8 million to Oregon District shooting victims." WKEF, November 25, 2019. <https://dayton247now.com/news/local/tragedy-fund-distributes-38-million-to-oregon-district-shooting-victims>

⁹Bedell, John, and WHIO staff. "Disbursements of money in ODS Tragedy Fund to end Sept. 30." WHIO TV 7 and WHIO Radio, September 30, 2020. <https://www.whio.com/news/disbursements-money-ods-tragedy-fund-end-sept-30/L4IY5NNDV5AKTFKU4VTCHUIBOE/>



DONATIONS AND VOLUNTEERS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Develop a donations strategy and include it in your Emergency Operations Plan.
- Plan the funding vehicle needed to accept donations for a victims' fund. Meet with your local community foundation or establish a nonprofit for this purpose.
- Establish a victims' fund protocol to manage the fund.
- Consider offering Stop the Bleed® training to volunteers, schools, and community groups
- Develop a plan for unaffiliated volunteers and in-kind donations.

Response

- Establish a victims' fund right away, ideally the day of the shooting.
- Communicate with the public about the fund and warn about possible scams.
- Direct volunteers as appropriate, understanding the distinction between trained volunteers and unaffiliated (i.e., spontaneous, untrained) volunteers.
- Work with the American Red Cross and local blood banks to direct blood donors and volunteers for blood drives.

Recovery

- Consult with experts and the families of the victims to develop a distribution protocol.
- Promote transparency. Consider appointing a member of you staff to serve on the community oversight board for donations management.

Chapter 6: School Shootings

“We’re going to need a lot of support to help those who’ve been affected by this tragedy get through it.”¹

– Mayor Christine Hunschofsky, Parkland FL

Chapter Summary

The best practices described throughout this Playbook apply to a mass shooting that takes place in a school. However, school shootings merit special attention because, although exceedingly rare, they present unique challenges for mayors. Schools are usually governed and regulated by entities not under the control of a mayor, making it difficult to collaborate on safety planning. Also, school shootings can occur in smaller cities that lack the resources larger cities have to devote to the response and recovery. Most importantly, school shootings target children. The community may experience heightened anguish and outrage due to the age of the victims.

Preparedness is essential to ensure first responder agencies, school officials, and city leaders have a coordinated plan to respond to a school mass shooting. Ensure your first responder agencies have the specialized training needed to stop a school shooter immediately. Meet with school officials to promote school safety best practices and plan victim assistance. Schedule a tabletop exercise so that first responders and key stakeholders, including school officials, understand their roles. Finally, consider applying for federal funds available for school-based threat assessment programs and mental health service providers.

Your role during the **response** to a school shooting may include speaking at the first press conference; facilitating the flow of information between school officials, parents, and law enforcement; ensuring victims and their families receive the support they need to recover; and shielding families from the media. If a mass shooting happens elsewhere in the community, you can alert school partners to activate “lockout” procedures (i.e., bring everyone into the building, secure the perimeter) to keep students safe.

In the **recovery** phase, consult with school leaders to determine how your office and city agencies can best support the school community. It may also help to consult with child trauma experts, and mayors and groups of family members who have been affected by a school shooting in the past.

¹“Parkland Mayor Speaks About Shooting at Florida High School.” National Public Radio, February 14, 2018, 4:09. <https://www.nhpr.org/2018-02-14/parkland-mayor-speaks-about-shooting-at-florida-high-school>.

Preparedness

The following section provides suggestions and resources to help your community prepare a coordinated, whole-of-government response to a mass shooting at a school.

Ensure First Responder Agencies are Prepared

No mayor wants to imagine a school shooting unfolding in their community—but responsible leadership means preparing as though it could. Work closely with your police and fire chiefs to ensure their teams have the training, equipment, and readiness needed to respond decisively to an active shooter in a school setting. For details, see **Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders**.

Leaders in Action: Challenges Working with Law Enforcement



In Parkland, FL, the city did not have its own police department and instead relied on the Broward County Sheriff’s Office for law enforcement and the Coral Springs Fire Department for fire and EMS services. This arrangement meant the emergency response to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting was led by two agencies with different protocols and tactical approaches—a mismatch that created coordination challenges. Although the school resource officer and sheriff’s deputies arrived quickly on scene, they did not immediately enter the building to confront the shooter. This delay has been the subject of intense scrutiny and raised serious concerns about whether a more immediate response could have saved lives.²

Because no communication protocol had been established in advance between city public information officers and their law enforcement counterparts, the mayor, the city commission, and city staff struggled to access timely information about the response. According to press reports, officials at city hall refrained from reaching out to law enforcement during the incident out of concern they might add to the confusion. As a result, city leaders were left relying on television coverage for updates—a situation that underscored the need for clear communication channels in a crisis.³

Cultivate Relationships with School Officials

Even if you do not have direct authority over local schools, it is important to build strong relationships with school leaders in your community. This includes school board members, the county superintendent, parent associations, college presidents, and organizations that provide school-based services. These relationships can serve as the foundation for collaborative efforts to promote school safety and preparedness across the city.

²Press Room. “The Atlantic’s March Cover Story: Jamie Thompson on the ‘Coward of Broward’ and What It Would Take to Stop Mass Shootings.” *The Atlantic*, January 29, 2024. <https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2024/01/atlantics-march-issue-coward-broward/677278/>.

³Straub, Frank, Blake Norton, Jennifer Zeunik, et al. *Recovering and Moving Forward: Lessons Learned and Recommendations Following the Shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School*. National Police Foundation and Center for Mass Violence Response Studies, 2019. <https://www.policinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Broward-Final-.pdf>.



The next section offers school safety resources and guidance that may be helpful to you and your staff and can be shared with school district officials as appropriate. We recommend reviewing these materials in advance so that you are well-prepared to engage in productive discussions with school leaders.

Support School District Violence Prevention Planning

The U.S. Secret Service recommends that every school district develop a comprehensive violence prevention plan.⁴ Such a plan should include mechanisms to identify threats, establish a central reporting system, and outline risk management strategies. While mayors are not responsible for creating these plans, you may want to ensure that one exists in your district and that you are familiar with its contents.

- Law enforcement agencies often partner with schools in developing and implementing prevention strategies. In Pittsburgh, for example, police provide training to school-based Community Resource Officers on threat assessment and active shooter response. In coordination with the FBI, Pittsburgh police also conduct walk-throughs with school officials to assess campus security, recommend technology upgrades and emergency preparedness measures, and establish clear communication protocols to be used in the event of a shooting.
- In Nashville, the police chief worked closely with school officials to strengthen security protocols, expand the presence of officers in schools, and provide active shooter training to school staff. The chief later credited those staff members' prompt reactions during The Covenant School shooting with keeping students out of harm's way. Nashville has also established the site of a Notification Center for every school in the district.
- A Michigan police officer assigned to school safety recommends the following: Stop the Bleed® training for teachers and older students, tactical medical kits (with tourniquets) in every classroom; and a "go-bag" for each school, with maps, keys, security plans, and names and contact information for school leaders.
- In some communities, school officials have expressed reluctance to allow law enforcement on campus. While these concerns may be understandable, the absence of a working relationship between schools and police could have serious consequences during a crisis. Consider initiating a meeting with school leaders to hear their concerns and work toward a mutually acceptable solution.

Best Practice Tip

Keep maps and security plans of schools and municipal buildings on file. Ensure they can be accessed electronically by law enforcement authorities and other authorized officials.



— *Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer*: "Florida has state legislation relating to school resource officers. We have plans and documents for all school locations that you can just pull up on your computer in the event you're having to respond to a school shooting."

⁴Meloy, J. Reid, and Jens Hoffmann, eds. "Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Chapter for Preventing Targeted School Violence." In *International Handbook of Threat Assessment*, by Lina Alathari, Ashley Blair, Catherine Camilletti, et al. Oxford University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1093/med-psych/9780190940164.003.0025>.

Offer to Provide Victim Services if Needed

Help school district officials understand that the city can provide much-needed support to victims, family members, faculty, and the rest of the school community in the aftermath of a mass shooting. Providing victim services is a major undertaking that requires specialized knowledge, and coordination between law enforcement and other agencies, the city, the community, and the school.

For comprehensive information on how your city can prepare to deliver victim services, and the resources that are available to assist, please see **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance**.

Best Practice Tip



Designate a reunification site (aka Notification Center) for every school in advance.

— *Nashville Police Chief John Drake*



Key Resource: Establishing a Notification Center

I Love You Guys Foundation: Provides technical assistance in planning the center where students will be reunified with their families in the aftermath of a school shooting⁵

Schedule a Tabletop Exercise Focused on a School Shooting

Consider organizing a tabletop exercise to plan the city's response to a school shooting. Include key stakeholders, including leaders of first responder agencies likely to respond, the school superintendent, local public health officials, and a representative of the American Red Cross. This effort can help ensure each school has a violence prevention plan in place, and that school leaders, first responder agencies, and city and county agencies understand their role when responding to a school shooting.

For information on organizing a tabletop exercise, please see **Chapter 2, Emergency Operations, Appendix A, Readiness Toolkit**, and your state's Department of Education website.

School Safety Planning Considerations

Mental Health Services

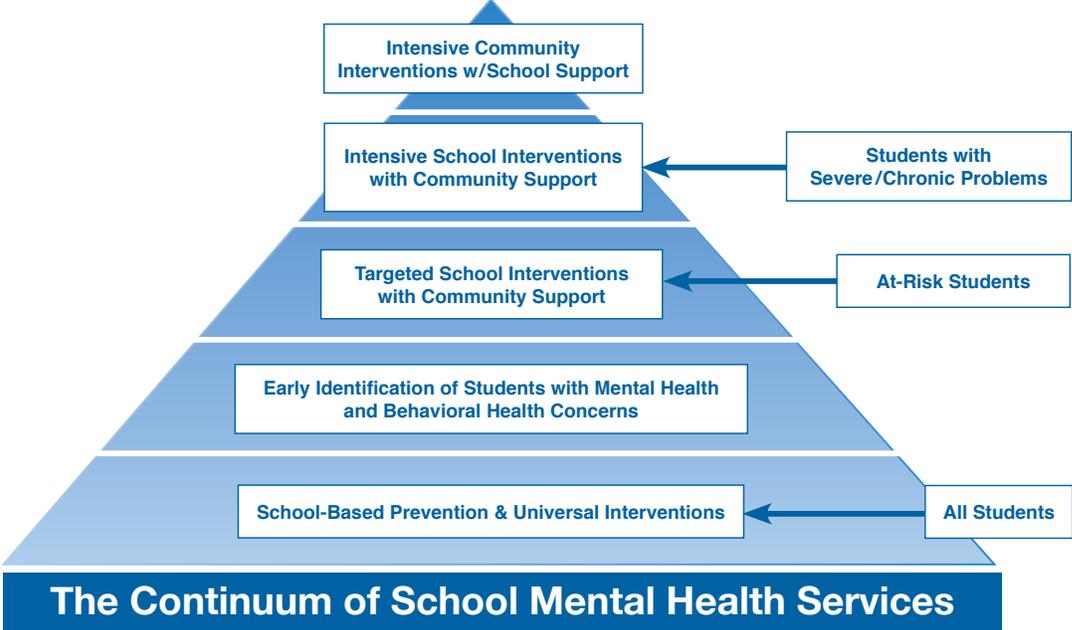
In many cases, school shooters left behind evidence that they were in crisis—often struggling with suicidal thoughts or the effects of bullying.⁶ Appropriate mental health support might have reached them during a critical moment and, in some instances, may have helped prevent a tragedy. That is why, in addition to preparing for external threats, schools need resources to identify and address the mental health needs of their students.

⁵Visit <https://iloveguys.org/>.

⁶Alathari, Lina, Diana Drysdale, Ashley Blair, et al. *Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence*. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019. https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf.



As the diagram in Image 1 highlights, the community has a role in developing appropriate mental health services for schools. For example, in Washington D.C., the Department of Behavioral Health and the Department of Health collaborated on a behavioral health plan for school-based services in the District’s schools. The plan coordinated clinical care from both agency clinicians and other local resources.⁷



Adapted from “Communication Planning and Message Development: Promoting School-Based Mental Health Services” *Communique* 35, no. 1 (2006). National Association of School Psychologists, 2006.

Image 1: Role of Community in School Mental Health Services⁸

Consider asking the school district to prepare an assessment of its mental health system. Use this as a starting point for conversations with school leaders and mental health professionals to identify ways the city can support and strengthen the district’s efforts. For example, you may be able to connect the district to additional resources and expertise or assist in securing funding for school-based mental health services. School nurses also play a critical role and should be included in student wellness planning.

One organization worthy of the district’s attention is Sandy Hook Promise, established by families of children who were killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. This nonpartisan nonprofit helps students and school officials recognize the warning signs of a student in crisis and take action to ensure they receive help. Sandy Hook Promise also trains students to identify signs of a potential attack—most school shooters “leak” their plans in advance—and encourages them to share concerns with a trusted adult. As of 2024, Sandy Hook Promise programs have been implemented in more than 23,000 schools nationwide. The organization estimates its violence prevention programs have averted at least 15 planned school shootings and hundreds of suicide and self-harm incidents.⁹

⁷Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services. “School Mental Health Program and School Health Services Program.” Accessed July 16, 2025. <https://dmhhs.dc.gov/publication/school-mental-health-program-and-school-health-services-program>.

⁸Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Ready, Set, Go, Review: Screening for Behavioral Health Risk in Schools*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019. <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/ready-set-go-review-mh-screening-schools.pdf>.

⁹Visit <https://www.sandyhookpromise.org/>.

Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management

Some school districts have established a Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management program (BTAM). BTAM is a proactive, multidisciplinary approach used to identify and manage potential threats in schools before they escalate into violence. The goal is two-fold: to mitigate the student's crisis and to maintain a safe, supportive learning environment.

For example, following the Parkland shooting, Florida developed standardized Behavioral Threat Assessment policies in coordination with the State's Office of Safe Schools.¹⁰ Districts must establish multidisciplinary threat assessment teams trained in the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines. These teams assess potential threats, document incidents, and work closely with local law enforcement to respond to safety concerns. In addition, schools collaborate with mental health services to ensure students receive appropriate interventions.

For more information about BTAM, see **Appendix D, Strategies to Prevent Mass Shootings**.

Lockdown Drills for Students

Most states require schools to engage in safety training, which includes some form of lockdown drill. The specifics of such drills are often left to school districts. Despite their good intentions, child mental health experts warn that drills can traumatize children if they are too realistic or unannounced. For this reason, the nation's two largest teachers' unions have called for an end to realistic drills.¹¹

Lockdown is used when the threat is inside a given location. Experts advise that lockdowns should be avoided unless absolutely necessary (e.g., students and staff are in imminent danger of physical harm). These procedures will be implemented by school personnel based on the school's security plan.

Consider reviewing any of the resources cited below with school district officials to help them plan safe and effective lockdown drills.

¹⁰Florida Department of Education. "Behavioral Threat Management." Florida Department of Education, March 11, 2025. <https://www.fldoe.org/safe-schools/threat-assessment.stml>.

¹¹Associated Press, and Elizabeth Chuck. "Two Largest Teachers Unions Call for Schools to Revise or End Active Shooter Drills." NBC News, February 13, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/two-largest-teachers-unions-call-schools-revise-or-end-active-n1136271>.



Key Resources: Lockdown Drills

Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools: The National Association of School Psychologists, the National Association of School Resource Officers, and Safe and Sound Schools have partnered to provide updated guidance for lockdown drills.¹²

Lockdown Drills: An authoritative resource on planning and implementing lockdown drills effectively without causing harm.¹³

Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services report provides resources to help schools develop age-appropriate drills.¹⁴

Participation of Children and Adolescents in Live Crisis Drills and Exercises: Research published by the American Academy of Pediatrics.¹⁵

The Impact of Active Shooter Drills on Student Health and Wellbeing: A 2025 report published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine explores how these drills are conducted and how to reduce potential harm while supporting school safety.¹⁶



Secure Storage

Depending on the source, as many as 80 percent of K–12 school mass shootings, including the Sandy Hook school shooting, involved a firearm that belonged to a family member or neighbor.¹⁷ This fact highlights the importance of promoting secure firearm storage to parents with school-age children to prevent youth suicide (which is on the rise) and school shootings of every kind.¹⁸

School districts can reduce the risk of school mass shootings by encouraging parents to store firearms securely at home. Since 2019, numerous districts—including LA Unified (Los Angeles, CA), Clark County (NV), Atlanta Public Schools (GA), Phoenix Union High School District (AZ), Anchorage School District (AK), and Little Rock School District (AR)—have passed resolutions requiring the annual distribution of secure firearm storage information to families. Notably, Phoenix Union High School District also requires parents to sign and return a firearm safety acknowledgment form. For more information on this and other mass shooting prevention strategies, see **Appendix D, Strategies to Prevent Mass Shootings**.

¹²<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/systems-level-prevention/best-practice-considerations-for-armed-assailant-drills-in-schools>

¹³<https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262544160/lockdown-drills/>

¹⁴School Safety Working Group. Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2020. <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-w0891-pub.pdf>.

¹⁵Schonfeld, David J., Marlene Melzer-Lange, Andrew N. Hashikawa, et al. "Participation of Children and Adolescents in Live Crisis Drills and Exercises." *Pediatrics* 146, no. 3 (2020): e2020015503. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-015503>.

¹⁶<https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/the-impact-of-active-shooter-drills-on-student-health-and-wellbeing>

¹⁷<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2812306>

¹⁸American Psychological Association. "APA Adopts Resolution on Secure Firearms Storage to Prevent Suicides." American Psychological Association, February 29, 2024. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2024/02/securing-firearms-storage-prevent-suicides>.

A Word About the School Security Industry

According to press reports, the school security industry is now a \$3 billion market, offering a range of products that may or may not increase the security of students in your school district.¹⁹ Some experts argue most of these “security” systems are not worth the investment and may have negative effects on the school population.²⁰ Moreover, most school shootings are *not* mass shootings, and most take place *outside* school buildings. This reality highlights the limitations of relying on external security measures to prevent violence. Research has shown that investing in properly trained social workers and mental health professionals does more to create a healthy and safe school environment.²¹

Key Resources: Planning and Funding School Safety

Department of Justice, Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety: In 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) released a report detailing 10 essential actions for schools and law enforcement to prevent and respond to school shootings.²²

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center: The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Supportive Schools administers the REMS Technical Assistance Center. It builds the capacity of schools to prepare for and respond to emergencies. REMS is the primary source of information on emergency management topics.²³ REMS has also developed guidance for developing an emergency operations plan for institutions of higher learning.²⁴

SchoolSafety.gov: A compilation of federal resources relating to mass shootings and threat assessments for schools.²⁵

32 National Campus Safety Initiative: This program is offered through a partnership between NASPA (a national organization for student affairs professionals) and the VTV Family Outreach Foundation (created by family members of victims of the Virginia Tech shooting) that helps college and university campus communities make informed decisions about campus safety.²⁶



¹⁹Caffrey, Michelle. “Spending on School Security Tops \$3 Billion, With Focus on New Surveillance and Tech.” Marketbrief, July 26, 2022. <https://marketbrief.edweek.org/education-market/spending-on-school-security-tops-3-billion-with-focus-on-new-surveillance-and-tech/2022/07>.

²⁰Fox, James Alan, and Aviva M. Rich-Shea. “Don’t Defund All Police, but Keep Police out of Schools. Kids Will Do Better without Them.” *USA Today*, June 12, 2020. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/06/12/defund-school-police-obstacles-to-student-success-column/5336791002>

²¹U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and U.S. Department of Homeland Security. *Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety*. U.S. Department of Education, 2018. <https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/school-safety/school-safety-reportpdf.pdf>.

²²School Safety Working Group. *Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety*. Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2020. <https://portal.cops.usdoj.gov/resourcecenter/content.ashx/cops-w0891-pub.pdf>.

²³Visit <https://rems.ed.gov/>.

²⁴<https://rems.ed.gov/IHEGuideIntro.aspx>

²⁵Visit <https://www.schoolsafety.gov/targeted-violence>.

²⁶Visit <https://www.naspa.org/project/32-ncsi>.



Bipartisan Safer Communities Act: When passed in 2022, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act provided \$4.5 billion to fund gun violence reduction programs, including threat assessment and school-based mental health providers. For more information, see the Mayor’s Guide to the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.²⁷



Response

Lockout and Lockdown

If a mass shooting happens elsewhere in the community, you can alert school partners to activate “lockout” (also called SECURE), which is used to bring everyone into the building, secure the perimeter (make sure all exterior doors are locked), and continue business inside as usual while increasing situational awareness. In contrast, “lockdown” is activated when the threat is inside a given location, as described above.

Crisis Communications

In the case of a school shooting, you will likely serve as a trusted source of accurate information for parents and the school community. You will need to coordinate with school officials and law enforcement officials to plan a communications strategy for press briefings. Prewritten messages can reduce the likelihood of misinformation spreading. For more on this, see **Chapter 1, Crisis Communications**.

Leaders in Action: Nashville Press Strategy

Police held multiple press briefings starting within hours of the shooting at The Covenant School in Nashville. The public information officer coordinated statements from law enforcement, city officials, and church leadership. Chief Drake provided operational updates. Mayor Cooper emphasized community support and recovery. Church leadership provided messaging appropriate to their faith-based school community. The media strategy included proactive preparation for anticipated questions. In the days following the incident, city officials collaborated with an external public relations firm brought in by the school, ensuring consistency in public messaging. At the recommendation of the public information officer, body camera footage was released the next day to demonstrate the professionalism of the law enforcement response.



²⁷Thompson, Sarah. “A Mayor’s Guide to the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act.” 2022. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6532bd0da3b9227dacd21a9e/t/653fdcb0ede3383deb430eae/1698684081030/A-Mayors-Guide-final-version.pdf>.

Victim Services

School crisis teams can easily be overwhelmed, both because of limited resources and expertise, and because school officials may have personal relationships with the victims and their families.

As mayor, you can help by encouraging school officials to accept outside assistance, especially in the area of victim services. Offer to establish services for victims and families in partnership with local mental health providers and national resources, such as the American Red Cross, the FBI Victim Services Division, and victim service providers.

For comprehensive guidance and resources, please see **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance**.

Leaders in Action: Nashville Victim Services



Following the Covenant School shooting in Nashville, the notification site—called the Family Assistance Center—was established at a nearby church, with separate floors for parents and children. Parents were verified by matching identifying information before reunification with their child. Families of deceased victims were separated discreetly before general reunification occurred. The Metropolitan Nashville Police Department Family Intervention Program led the initial victim services effort, supported by the state’s mass violence victim protocol. Over 40 victim services personnel—including the FBI Victim Services Division and local nonprofits—assisted children and their families at the site.

In the days following the tragedy, The Covenant School and its affiliated church expressed a desire to lead their own recovery. Respecting this, city officials focused on providing support for the broader community, promoting the 988 hotline and behavioral health services available through the Mental Health Cooperative.

Recovery

Mental Health and Recovery Needs

As in all mass shootings, the recovery phase is focused on helping victims, families, and the affected community heal from trauma. In the aftermath of a school shooting, however, unique issues can arise.

You may be dealing with traumatized children or teenagers whose futures may be drastically altered. The emotional toll of a shooting on children can be extreme. The community may experience heightened anguish and outrage due to the age of the victims. Parents may be unwilling to send students back to the school where the shooting took place. Students may even become suicidal. Conspiracy theorists may emerge and torment family members. Your community may become divided on their views of how politicians should respond to school shootings.

You may know many of the affected families personally, so your compassionate leadership will be needed to help guide your community through the difficult grieving process. Working closely with the parents and school community, look for trauma-informed ways to honor the victims and comfort the survivors.



Consult with Experts

For guidance on managing these issues, recommended approaches include:

- Consult with child trauma experts.
- The National Mass Violence Center provides comprehensive resources for victims.²⁸
- The REMS Bereavement Fact Sheet explains the specific needs of school communities.²⁹
- To navigate political and community-related challenges, seek advice from mayors who have responded to a school shooting.
- Family members who lost children in a previous school shooting will likely contact you. It is well worth your time to meet with them.³⁰
- Consider initiatives used successfully by other communities. For example, in Nashville, a standout initiative was the deployment of “Sergeant Bo,” a service dog whose presence comforted the children. Community support for Bo was so strong that a community member produced a Bo-lookalike stuffed dog that was widely distributed to students and the school community.

Establish a Resiliency Center

You may need to establish a Resiliency Center to meet the ongoing recovery needs of the victims, family members, and the wider community. For more information, see **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance**.

Host Vigils to Honor the Victims

Working closely with the parents and school community, look for trauma-informed ways to honor the victims and comfort the survivors. Hosting vigils and memorials and providing opportunities for grieving community members to volunteer and serve others are good starting points. The first annual remembrance event in Parkland was by all accounts a moving and healing event that included a variety of avenues for people to grieve. See also **Chapter 9, Commemorations**.

²⁸Visit <https://nmvrc.org/>.

²⁹Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools. “Bereavement, Memorials, and Anniversaries: Developing a Recovery Annex for K-12 Schools.” Accessed July 16, 2025. https://rems.ed.gov/docs/BereavementFactSheet_508c.pdf.

³⁰Luscombe, Belinda, and Haley Sweetland Edwards. “‘The World Moves On And You Don’t.’ Parents Who Lost Children in School Shootings Find Comfort in a Group No One Wants to Join.” Time, November 29, 2018. <https://time.com/5465744/school-shooting-parents/>

Leaders in Action: Parkland Remembrance Events

Parkland community members and city staff organized events centered on unity and volunteerism for the first annual remembrance of the Parkland shooting. The “Day of Service and Love” offered “something for everyone,” recognizing that people process grief in different ways.

Notably, events were intentionally free of political messaging at the behest of the mayor, who wrote a letter inviting elected officials to attend, but not to speak, at the city’s remembrance ceremony on February 14, 2019.³¹



Throughout the day, there were activities for students and community members, including painting stones for an outdoor memorial, playing with therapy dogs, and packing meals for children experiencing food insecurity. The Broward County School Board hosted community service projects at a local park. The Coral Springs Museum of Art sponsored outdoor music, art projects, and a petting zoo. The school opened for a half day. Some students attended school events, participated in a moment of silence, or performed a community service project. Others chose to stay home. There was a breakfast for first responders.³²

The City of Parkland partnered with Coral Springs in a Bloomberg Philanthropies-funded art project called the “Temple of Time.” This popular project was designed and constructed by the artist in collaboration with community members. It was completed on February 14, 2019, in time to be viewed during the first remembrance event and later burned in a ceremony symbolizing turning darkness into light. Communal prayer vigils and candlelight ceremonies were held throughout the day.

Seek Funding for School Recovery

Local governments can apply for the Antiterrorism Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP) funding to support community relief. Eligibility for most other funding opportunities, such as Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV), is limited to local educational institutions. If needed, work with schools to determine whether the city can help them identify resources to meet specific needs. See **Appendix C, Funding Sources**.

³¹Luscombe, Belinda, and Haley Sweetland Edwards. “‘The World Moves On And You Don’t.’ Parents Who Lost Children in School Shootings Find Comfort in a Group No One Wants to Join.” *Time*, November 29, 2018. <https://time.com/5465744/school-shooting-parents/>

³²Held, Amy. “‘We Live With It Every Day’: Parkland Community Marks 1 Year Since Massacre.” *Parkland School Shooting, One Year Later*. NPR, February 14, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/14/694688365/we-live-with-it-every-day-parkland-community-marks-one-year-since-massacre>.



SCHOOL SHOOTINGS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Support school security planning in your school district.
- Schedule a tabletop exercise with law enforcement and school officials to determine roles.
- Plan the location of a Notification Center for each school in the district.
- Ensure law enforcement agencies, including school resource officers, are properly trained and equipped to respond to a school mass shooting.
- Suggest an assessment of school district mental health systems.
- Advocate for age-appropriate lockdown drills in schools.
- Advocate for tactical medical kits and Stop the Bleed® training in every school.
- Learn more about school-based behavioral threat assessment programs for schools.
- Learn more about Sandy Hook Promise, which helps schools identify children in crisis

Response

- Establish communications channels with school officials and law enforcement.
- Plan a press briefing strategy with school officials and law enforcement.
- Offer to provide victim services to victims, families, and the school community.
- Promote mental and behavioral health resources to the entire community.

Recovery

- Work with school officials to determine the role of the city in supporting the school's recovery and supporting student mental health and resilience.
- Consult with child mental health experts and leaders who have responded to a mass shooting.
- Support the establishment of a Resiliency Center to help with long-term recovery.
- In consultation with families, offer to assist with planning vigils, commemorations, and memorials.
- Research funding opportunities to help defray the costs of school recovery and student services, improved security, etc.

Chapter 7: Community Partnerships

“Existing partnerships is what matters on that day.”

— Chief of Staff Heather Fagan, Orlando FL

Chapter Summary

Mayors told us existing partnerships matter in a crisis. You cannot call someone in the middle of the night if you do not already have a contact established. This chapter describes some of the partnerships you may want to cultivate.

During the **preparedness** phase, identify partners that may be needed during the response and recovery phases of a mass shooting. They may include businesses, which can provide funding and services; mental health providers and hospitals, which can provide appropriate health care; and leaders of faith groups and minority communities, who may be able to provide support for victims and their families. These groups could be targeted, so it is also important to understand their security, cultural, and language needs.

Establish contact with local representatives of the national partners you will need to mobilize during the response to a mass shooting, such as the American Red Cross and the FBI Victim Services Division. They can help you identify the local partners you will need.

Then arrange a tabletop exercise, or a series of planning exercises, with these essential partners to explore the support they could provide in the event of a mass shooting.

During the **response**, call on your partners to help establish and operate the Notification and Family Assistance Centers. Consult with mental health experts to help you shape your messaging and provide psychological first aid. Ask for help arranging vigils, managing the funds raised for the victims and families, and comforting affected communities.

During the **recovery**, work with partners to establish a Resiliency Center to ensure that the long-term needs of families and the affected community are met.

Preparedness

Identify Community Partners Needed to Respond to a Shooting

Mayors told us relationships with community leaders mattered in significant, and sometimes unexpected, ways when a mass shooting happened in their communities. Cultivate these relationships and consider who else you may need to meet. Engage with key community leaders from time to time to discuss their security needs and understand the services they could provide in the event of an emergency. You may want to include some of them in a tabletop exercise to explore the role they could play after a shooting.

Examples of partnerships that may be important during the response include:

- Mental and behavioral health professionals
- Religious communities and faith leaders
- Minority and underserved populations
- School communities and district officials
- Local business community
- National organizations (American Red Cross, National Compassion Fund, United Way)
- Victims' advocacy groups
- Hospitals and blood banks
- Community organizations
- Local bar association

Key Resource: OVC Resources for Partnership Planning



The Office for Victims of Crimes (OVC): The “Partnerships and Planning” checklist in the OVC Mass Violence Toolkit can help you identify essential partners and local resources in your community.¹

OVC Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC): Technical assistance is available to help your community plan victim services through the OVC Training and Technical Assistance Center. Contact TTAC@ovcttac.org or 1-866-682-8822.

¹ Office for Victims of Crime. “Partnerships and Planning Checklist.” U.S. Department of Justice, 2015. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/pubs/mvt-toolkit/PartnershipsPlanningChecklist.pdf>.



Mental and Behavioral Health Experts

Several mayors told us they lacked existing relationships with mental health providers. Take the time to cultivate relationships with the county public health department, mental health and behavioral health services experts, and victims' advocates working in the district attorney's office. Your staff should have regular contact with the state agency providing Victim of Crimes Act (VOCA) support for victim service agencies and advocacy for victims in your state. In the aftermath of a mass shooting, these organizations can advise on effective messaging to alleviate the impact of trauma and provide mental health services (or make timely referrals to services) to the families of the victims.

Be aware that not all mental health service providers are qualified to counsel a victim or witness to a mass shooting. In the immediate aftermath, psychological first aid—not talk therapy—is needed to stabilize emotions and prevent post-traumatic stress. See **Chapter 10, Mental Health** for more information about psychological first aid.

Faith-Based Organizations

Religious groups and faith-based organizations are key partners, not only because they may provide services to victims and families in the aftermath of a mass shooting, but also because they are potential targets for hate crimes. Your engagement with them should include:

- Safety planning: Arrange for law enforcement officials to help these organizations with threat assessment, building security, and alert systems.
- Support services: Discuss the services faith-based organizations can provide to the community after mass violence, such as meeting space, volunteers, and spiritual guidance.
- Cultural understanding: Seek information about the community's cultural norms, death and burial practices, and language needs.

Faith leaders play a crucial role in providing comfort and support to victims and families in the aftermath of a mass shooting. They can offer a compassionate presence, spiritual guidance, and a safe space for grief, helping individuals and communities navigate unimaginable loss. For example, Rev. Mel Kawakami was the pastor of Newtown United Methodist Church in Sandy Hook, CT, during the tragic events of December 14, 2012. On that day, a mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School resulted in the loss of 26 lives, including 20 children under the age of eight. In the aftermath, Rev. Kawakami provided crucial support to the grieving community, offering comfort and counseling to those affected. His efforts exemplify the vital role faith leaders play in helping communities heal after such tragedies.

Importantly, remind faith-based organizations that provide services as part of the city's official response, such as at the Family Assistance Center, that they must offer their services to all victims and families, regardless of religious affiliation. There is no such requirement if they are offering services to their congregation or privately on their own.

Leaders in Action: Faith-Based Partnerships in Pittsburgh



Before the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting, the Pittsburgh police department performed threat assessments with the Jewish community and knew the phone numbers and locations of every synagogue in the city. Because the shooting took place on the Sabbath, other synagogues could not be reached by phone. Due to their pre-existing relationship with the Jewish community, police were able to go to every synagogue and warn them of the threat during the law enforcement response.

Key Resources: Preventing Hate Crimes



Department of Justice, Preventing Hate Crimes in Your Community: A list of recommended actions you can take, including establishing a hate crime task force to help coordinate law enforcement personnel, assist victims, and strengthen law enforcement-community partnerships.²

Department of Justice, Protecting Places of Worship: Upon request, the Department of Justice's Community Relations Services convenes subject matter experts to provide an overview of hate crime laws, statistics and case studies, and physical security. The program also facilitates dialogue and improves partnerships between law enforcement and faith communities.³

Minority and Underserved Communities

Meet with leaders of minority communities to understand their security concerns. Identify language translation services where needed. Understand the cultural norms of these communities. Document the locations of their schools, community centers, and places of worship.

A pre-existing relationship with community leaders based on trust is vital in the aftermath of a racially motivated hate crime or officer-involved shooting. These leaders can play an important advisory role and serve as credible messengers to their communities to help prevent social unrest.

Black, Hispanic, and other minority neighborhoods often experience higher levels of gun violence. Yet these crimes rarely receive the level of attention or resource allocation that public mass shootings do. Partnering with leaders from these neighborhoods can help you develop effective violence interrupter programs and other evidence-based programs to reduce "everyday community gun violence." For more information, see **Appendix F, A Note About Community Gun Violence**.

²U.S. Department of Justice. "Preventing Hate Crimes in Your Community," November 4, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/hate-crimes-prevention>.

³U.S. Department of Justice. "Protecting Places of Worship." Accessed July 18, 2025. https://www.justice.gov/d9/crs_ppow_brochure_0.pdf.



Leaders in Action: Community Partnerships in Orlando

In the case of the Pulse shooting, the mayor's office had longstanding relationships with organizations serving the LGBTQ+ and Hispanic communities. The ability to work with these groups to host vigils and provide services in English and Spanish to the affected communities would not have been possible without these relationships built on trust and respect.



Key Resources: Fostering Trust in Minority Communities

Department of Justice, Strengthening Police and Community Partnerships (SPCP)

Program Fact Sheet: The one-day SPCP program engages law enforcement and community leaders in a dialogue to solve problems collaboratively. The SPCP program can be facilitated as a proactive effort or in response to a critical incident. The program can also help local leaders address longstanding community distrust and other historical barriers that hinder police-community partnerships.⁴



Cities United: This non-profit organization takes a holistic public health approach to reduce gun violence and create better lives for young Black men and boys, their families, and their communities.⁵

School Communities and Districts

Build relationships with the broader school community, including the school board, parent groups, and leaders of local schools and universities. Meet regularly with your school superintendent to review the district's violence prevention plan and security needs. See **Chapter 6, School Shootings**.

Business Community

As the Walmart shooting in El Paso illustrates, businesses and workplaces can be targeted. Urge businesses to develop their security protocols in partnership with local law enforcement agencies.

Additionally, the business community may play a vital role during the recovery by providing resources, raising money for victims and families, and planning events. Therefore, include local business leaders in preparedness planning. Examples of this include:

- **Orlando:** In response to the Pulse shooting, the Walt Disney Company donated \$1 million to the OneOrlando Fund, established by Mayor Buddy Dyer to support victims and their families. Additionally, Disney matched eligible employee donations, increasing the total financial support. The company also collaborated with local agencies to provide further assistance, such as coordinating blood donation drives and offering complimentary accommodations for victims' families and friends.

⁴U.S. Department of Justice. "Strengthening Police and Community Partnerships." Accessed February 25, 2025. https://www.justice.gov/d9/crs_spcp_brochure.pdf.

⁵Cities United. Accessed February 11, 2025. <https://www.citiesunited.org>.

- **El Paso:** Following the mass shooting at its store, Walmart announced a donation of \$400,000 to support the victims, their families, and the broader community. Walmart funded a permanent memorial called the “Grand Candela” in consultation with the families of the victims. This memorial, located near the store, features a tall, golden structure resembling a candle, symbolizing hope and remembrance for the 23 victims. Additionally, Walmart stopped selling ammunition for handguns and assault rifles in the United States and requested that customers refrain from openly carrying firearms into their stores. Walmart also provided substantial support to its employees. These actions were part of Walmart’s efforts to assist those affected and to address concerns related to gun violence.
- **Dayton:** In the aftermath of the mass shooting in Dayton’s Oregon District, local businesses played a significant role in fundraising to benefit the victims and families. For instance, multiple Miami Valley businesses, ranging from bakeries to restaurants to a candy company, organized events and promotions to raise money for the victims and surviving family members. The Little York Tavern, Salar Restaurant and Lounge, La Puf Sweets bakery, El Meson restaurant, and others donated portions of their sales or hosted benefit events to support the fund.

National Partners

This chapter is focused on community partners, but you should also engage national partners directly, through state agencies or through their local chapters. Obtain the name and contact information for the local representative of each organization should you need to reach them during a crisis.

The FBI, especially the Victim Services Division and Critical Incident Response Group, can provide significant law enforcement and victims assistance resources. You should take the time to meet your regional special agent in charge. Beyond its tactical and law enforcement capabilities, the FBI may also be able to leverage other partnerships that you do not have the ability to activate. For instance, FBI agents with victim services expertise are likely already connected to community-based victim service providers in your community and can activate them if you do not have your own relationships in place.

The American Red Cross can provide significant resources for the victims and families, including help establishing the Family Assistance center. However, the American Red Cross can only respond to incidents if it is invited, so, when needed, you will need to make a call to activate its resources. The American Red Cross has psychological first aid expertise. It can provide “just in time” training to other victim service providers and mental health service providers on psychological first aid and related topics such as stabilizing victims and witnesses. The American Red Cross may be able to mobilize volunteers from other networks, such as the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, a network of over 5 million volunteers.⁶

The National Compassion Fund and the OVC also bring significant resources to the response and recovery. Initiate contact with each of these national organizations to discuss the services and funding they can provide, and to learn how to contact them when you need them.

⁶Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. Accessed February 11, 2025. <https://www.nvoad.org/>.



The United Way is another important partner when planning a response to a mass shooting. As a national network of local community organizations, the United Way plays a critical role in mobilizing resources, coordinating support services, and assisting victims, families, and communities in the aftermath of a tragedy. In Orlando, for example, the United Way helped operate the Resiliency Center following the Pulse shooting, providing essential mental health counseling, financial assistance, and long-term recovery support. The United Way's ability to rapidly connect local organizations with national resources makes it an important asset in crisis response and community healing.

Additional information on national partners is provided in **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance** and **Chapter 5, Managing Donations and Volunteers**.

Response and Recovery

Direct Partners Where They Are Needed Most

Partners can help you manage the chaos that follows a mass shooting. Decide first whether to invite the FBI, the American Red Cross, or other national partners to join in the response. Then activate your local partners and direct them to where they can be most helpful. For example, partners can be directed to provide services at the Notification Center in accordance with any protocols you may have. Others may be directed to help plan a vigil. Still others can manage the items left to honor the victims or deliver food to first responders.

Examples of the roles community-based partners have played in previous mass shootings include:

- **Mental health:** Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services of Montgomery County, OH, provided coordination of service delivery and helped shape Dayton's messaging.
- **Family and victim assistance:** In El Paso and Orlando, over 40 community-based organizations were present at the Family Assistance Center to serve the needs of victims, families, and first responders.
- **Spiritual healing:** A local Imam amplified Orlando's message of unity and healing. Faith leaders united in San Bernardino to host vigils and services in the immediate aftermath of the attack.
- **Organizing events and donations:** As described above, the business community organized vigils, donated to victim assistance funds, and helped fund permanent memorials in many cities.
- **Victim fund management:** Community foundations have provided fund management and oversight in many cities.
- **Legal services:** in Orlando, the local bar association provided a range of pro bono legal services for victims and their families.
- **Memorials:** In El Paso, the city conducted focus groups with the families to understand how they wanted to memorialize the shooting. With that input, Walmart partnered with the city to establish the "Grand Candela" memorial.



Image 1: Grand Candela memorial at the Ciela Vista Walmart in El Paso. (TomStar81)

Leaders in Action: Community Partner Support in El Paso

The El Paso United Family Resiliency Center continues to operate, providing ongoing support to those affected by the Walmart mass shooting in 2019. A coalition of local, state, and federal agencies, along with community organizations, collaborated to establish the Resiliency Center to aid victims and families in their recovery. The center is managed by the United Way of El Paso County, with funding from the Texas Office of the Governor and support from various community partners.

The Resiliency Center serves as a centralized hub, disseminating information and connecting individuals to services offered by nearly 40 community-based organizations.⁷ These services include personalized case management, counseling referrals, financial planning, legal guidance, and spiritual care, tailored to meet specific needs. The active involvement of community partners has been crucial in meeting the evolving needs of the community, implementing programs for specific populations, and reducing the stigma associated with mental health care through outreach and education.



One Fund El Paso also relied on collaboration with multiple community-based partners. While administered by the National Compassion Fund,⁸ it was established in partnership with the City of El Paso, the Paso del Norte Community Foundation, and the El Paso Community Foundation. To ensure accessibility, communications about the fund were provided in both English and Spanish, and at least seven community organizations assisted victims and families in applying for compensation. A task force of local leaders from government, health care, and nonprofit sectors helped oversee the donations and develop the final distribution protocol. Ultimately, the fund disbursed \$11.8 million to 363 victims and family members.⁹

⁷El Paso United Family Resiliency Center. "What We Do." Accessed February 11, 2025. <https://www.elpasounitedfrc.org/what-we-do>.

⁸National Compassion Fund. "One Fund El Paso." Accessed February 11, 2025. <https://nationalcompassionfund.org/fund/one-fund-el-paso/>.

⁹Kolenc, Vic. "\$11.8M El Paso Mass Shooting Fund Makes Last 2 Payouts; Audit Is Next." *El Paso Times*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/2020/07/21/el-paso-mass-shooting-fund-makes-last-two-payouts-audit-next/5453190002/>.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Identify community partners that may be needed in the response to a shooting. Identify and fill gaps.
- Meet with leaders of faith groups and minority neighborhoods that might be targeted in hate crimes.
- Initiate contact with national partners, such as the FBI, the American Red Cross, the National Compassion Fund, and the United Way.
- Using a tabletop exercise or other form of planning, engage with partners to discuss their role in responding to a mass shooting or similar crisis. Include partners that can provide mental health services for the recovery phase.
- Work with community groups and law enforcement to improve community policing and build trust.

Response

- Affirmatively request the support of the American Red Cross and the FBI Victim Services Division.
- Contact community partners to request help establishing the Family Assistance Center to meet the needs of families and victims.
- Ask how faith communities can offer comfort and provide services to impacted communities.
- Meet with members of the business community to explore ways they can support your community, including by offering services or in-kind support at the Family Assistance Center, contributing to the victim fund, hosting vigils, or helping to plan a memorial.
- Decide whether and how your community will establish the victim fund. Consider contacting the National Compassion Fund for assistance.

Recovery

- Work with state officials, OVC, and community partners to establish a Resiliency Center to ensure the long-term needs of families and the impacted community are met, and for help securing funding.



Chapter 8:

Legal Considerations

**“We obtained legal advice right away.
As it turned out, the legal work was extensive.”**

— Chief of Staff Heather Fagan, Orlando FL

Important: This chapter does not offer legal advice, nor is it a comprehensive legal resource. Instead, it identifies some of the legal issues you may wish to discuss during your consultations with counsel and provides useful resources.

Chapter Summary

If a mass shooting takes place, litigation against the city may be inevitable. The grounds for lawsuits may include negligence, code enforcement, access to information, and a flawed police response. As of this writing, courts have not held city governments or local law enforcement liable for injuries or deaths in connection with mass shootings, but the cost of responding to lawsuits is potentially high. In addition, cities must respond to public records requests from the media, potential litigants, and the public. There are steps you may consider taking, in consultation with counsel, to potentially reduce the city’s legal risk.

During the **preparedness** phase, consult with your legal counsel to understand and minimize legal risks. Counsel should form a crisis team that includes the city’s counsel, the city administrative officer, the mayor’s chief of staff, and the city’s chief financial officer. This “C4” crisis team should meet for “extreme emergency” planning, as detailed below. The team can ensure that the necessary mutual aid agreements, protocols, and charitable entities are negotiated and in place and that all governing statutes relevant to an extreme emergency have been identified. In the case of smaller communities, the county’s chief administrative officer should be included to discuss how the county will be involved in the response to a mass shooting.

During the **response**, this C4 team should be called immediately. They can help activate “mutual aid” agreements that will provide additional resources, guide the decision of whether to declare an emergency, and ensure the city’s primary administrative functions are coordinated. They can also play a support role in establishing the victims’ fund, managing the public records request process, and ensuring the city’s response to the crisis complies with applicable law.

During the **recovery** phase, your legal counsel, in consultation with the C4 team, will oversee the resolution of any legal action filed after the shooting.

Preparedness

Assemble a Crisis Leadership Team (C4 Team)

While courts have generally not held cities liable for the response to a mass shooting, the legal costs incurred from defending the city or law enforcement from claims brought by affected parties can be significant. In addition, cities and other entities have reached settlements with victims and their families to avoid public pressure and scrutiny—even if not legally required to pay damages. For example, in 2024, the City of Uvalde reached a \$2 million settlement with victims' families using city insurance following the school shooting there. The Broward County school district settled for \$26 million with the Parkland families.

Therefore, consult with your legal counsel to understand and minimize legal risks to your city.

Counsel should form a crisis team (e.g., the city's legal counsel, the city administrative officer, the mayor's chief of staff, and the city's chief financial officer, or the functional equivalents). The role of this C4 team is to ensure that the city has mitigated areas of potential liability, and that the city's response to a mass shooting complies with applicable law and is coordinated across all agencies.

Recommendations to help the C4 team prepare for a mass casualty incident are summarized below.

Create a Mass Shooting Legal Documentation File

The C4 team should assemble a file that contains, at a minimum:

- The names and contact information of key people and organizations that should be contacted immediately in the event of a mass shooting. The list should include the local U.S. attorney, the State's attorney general, the coroner, the senior operations officials at local trauma center and nearby hospitals, and the in-house counsel of local press outlets.
- All applicable statutes relevant to a mass shooting, including statutes concerning victim privacy (identify laws that provide authority to seal victims' home addresses and withhold sensitive law enforcement bodycam footage), emergency declarations, victim compensation, police overtime, public records requests, code compliance, and disposition of unclaimed personal property of deceased victims (such as phones, purses, backpacks, etc.).
- Mutual aid agreements with surrounding communities, county and state law enforcement agencies, the FBI, trauma centers, etc., that govern mutual assistance provided in the event of an emergency.
- Protocols to govern the operations of the coroner's office during a mass casualty event, the Notification and Family Assistance Centers, and the victims' fund, among others.
- A draft executive emergency declaration order.



Conduct an Internal Review

The C4 team should conduct an internal review to ensure the necessary mutual aid agreements, protocols, and charitable entities are negotiated and in place, and all governing statutes relevant to a mass shooting have been identified. In the case of smaller communities, the county's chief administrative officer should be included in the review to discuss how the county will be involved in the response. At a minimum, the internal review should include the following actions:

- Evaluate mutual aid agreements
- Assess and minimize legal risks
- Schedule tabletops and active shooter exercises
- Review coroner office protocol
- Establish a 501(c)(3) charitable entity
- Plan response to public records requests
- Consult with a risk management expert
- Review state preemption laws

Evaluate Mutual Aid Agreements

Most cities have mutual aid agreements to ensure that additional emergency response resources, such as law enforcement, dispatch, and trauma care services, are available in the event of a mass shooting (see **Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders** for more on this topic). Mutual aid agreements can also be negotiated to provide administrative support. The C4 team should evaluate these agreements in view of projected resource needs during an extreme emergency to ensure these agreements will meet the city's needs without posing undue legal risk.

It may be possible to negotiate other types of agreements to provide on-demand services when needed. For example, Orlando's chief financial officer mentioned the value of negotiating an agreement with the city's private contractor that provides security for city hall to provide security for a Family Notification Center or Assistance Center, if needed. Consider whether similar agreements (or lack thereof) expose the city to additional risk and how that risk can be properly managed.

Assess and Minimize Legal Risks

The C4 team's legal review should ensure city agencies, including law enforcement and fire, have procedures in place to protect the city from potential liability. Previous claims against local governments or law enforcement after a mass casualty incident include:

- Failure to follow up on identified threats, assess threats, or activate an extreme risk protection order against a perpetrator¹
- Failure to inspect a building or property where a mass shooting occurred, such that victims are trapped inside or the event is more fatal than it would have been otherwise²

¹Chen v. Cty. of Santa Barbara, 2015 WL 1262150 (C.D. Cal. 2015) (alleging law enforcement "created a dangerous condition" by failing to reasonably investigate the shooter as part of "wellness check" despite being aware of his online postings and violent intentions) (paywall). https://www.americanbar.org/groups/tort_trial_insurance_practice/publications/the_brief/2019-20/winter/liability-mass-shootings-are-we-a-turning-point/

²McLaughlin, Elliott C. "Ghost Ship Lawsuits Call Warehouse a 'Death Trap.'" CNN, December 26, 2016 <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/26/us/ghost-ship-fire-lawsuits-oakland/index.html>.

- Failure to properly train law enforcement for active shooter events or provide the right equipment³

Other areas of potential liability include code infractions involving the exits of buildings, the management of off-duty police officers, the response to public records requests, and the unofficial actions of well-meaning city employees who act in their individual capacity during a crisis and inadvertently create legal problems. The C4 team may recommend steps to remediate any liability identified, which should be implemented as quickly as possible.

Schedule Tabletops and Active Shooter Exercises

The C4 team should ensure the mayor's office is scheduling tabletop exercises and first responder agencies are scheduling active shooter exercises. The C4 team should attend these preparedness exercises to ensure an actual response complies with applicable laws and existing protocols.

Note that city officials should provide advance notice of active shooter exercises to all participants and community members who might be impacted by the exercises to prevent trauma and avoid potential lawsuits.

Likewise, lockdown drills should always be announced in advance. In 2024, an unannounced lockdown drill at Oakland County Children's Hospital caused panic and psychological harm to the young patients and hospital staff. A lawsuit alleging emotional distress was settled for \$13 million. This incident highlights the importance of advance notice for active shooter exercises and lockdown drills.⁴

Best Practice Tip



Provide advance notice of planned active shooter exercises to community members who might be impacted to prevent unnecessary trauma and lawsuits. This recommendation should be shared with law enforcement officials and your school district.

Review Coroner Office Protocol

Family members should be notified as soon as possible that their loved one is deceased. However, existing regulations governing the responsibilities of your coroner's office could have the unintended effect of delaying death notifications. Your C4 team should meet with the coroner to review the current regulations and determine whether a supplemental protocol is needed to speed the release of information in the case of a mass casualty incident. It may be necessary to advocate for legislative change.

³Sheets, Tess. "Appeals Court: Court Was Right to Dismiss Pulse Nightclub Victims' Lawsuit against City, Police." Police1, April 8, 2020. <https://www.police1.com/legal/articles/appeals-court-court-was-right-to-dismiss-pulse-nightclub-victims-lawsuit-against-city-police-D7sKXU2LK7wunByK/>.

⁴Drew, Karen, and Dane Kelly. "Court Approves \$13M Settlement for Unannounced Active Shooter Drill at Northville Township Children's Hospital." WDIV, October 15, 2024. <https://www.clickondetroit.com/news/investigations/2024/10/15/court-approves-13m-settlement-for-unannounced-active-shooter-drill-at-oakland-county-childrens-hospital/>.



Establish a 501(c)(3) Charitable Entity

Consider establishing a 501(c)(3) charitable entity as part of your city's preparedness planning. The cost is minimal (the cost of retaining tax counsel is an estimated \$5K). While formation is straightforward, the process can be time-consuming. It can take months to obtain the necessary certification from the Internal Revenue Service. Therefore, it is best to form the 501(c)(3) early in your planning, before an emergency. Once established, the 501(c)(3) entity can be quickly structured to receive donations for a victims' fund, as Orlando did to receive substantial corporate donations following the Pulse shooting. Importantly, the charitable entity can also be used for other important functions, such as to receive funds donated for the families of fallen officers, victims of natural disasters, and for city initiatives such as parks or events.

Establishing separate bank accounts for the 501(c)(3) entity also ensures financial transparency and safeguards against misallocation of funds. These accounts should be overseen by designated members of the C4 team to maintain accountability.

Best Practice Tip

Consider establishing a 501(c)(3) charitable entity before you need one.



Prepare to Respond to Public Records Requests

After a mass shooting, there will be extensive public records requests from the media and potential litigants. Therefore, the C4 team should review the state's public records statute. The team should develop a protocol for handling public records requests after determining what the law requires, whether there are deadlines or penalties for failure to promptly respond, and whether deadlines may be suspended in the case of an extreme emergency. The City of Orlando posted all public records related to the Pulse shooting online and then directed all requesters to the website. This approach complied with applicable law and substantially reduced the compliance burden. See the Leaders in Action box in the Response section below for more information.

Your C4 team should also evaluate the city's document destruction policy and ensure that the systems used to maintain public documents are up to date and accessible. The city's staff should be briefed on the public record request protocol.

The C4 team should be familiar with the differences between the Federal Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and the state public records law. FOIA applies only to federal records, such as law enforcement documents generated by the FBI, but there may be times when it is unclear whether FOIA or state law applies (e.g., local law enforcement bodycam footage generated during a response led by the FBI).

Issues unique to a mass shooting may require the C4 team's urgent attention. For example, sensitive items like photos of the dead and recordings (audio and video) of their deaths could be subject to public records requests. It is generally desirable to withhold these records if the law permits, as their release risks traumatizing the families of the victims and the public. If state law would require the release of these records, the C4 team may consider advocating in advance for an amendment to the law to prevent the release. Additionally, victims' home addresses may need to be immediately sealed by the county's property assessor as soon as names are released to protect victims' privacy and shield them from the news media and people who would seek to harm them.



Insurance: Consult with a Risk Management Expert

The C4 team should meet with an official from the city's risk management agency or office. In light of the complex liability issues, unusual risks, and potential for dramatic damages, risk management experts should proactively explore ways to mitigate potential liability in connection with a mass shooting. Their assessment should consider applicable state law governing sovereign liability and personal liability exposure for you and your staff. They should report their recommendations to you and the C4 team.

In addition to liability coverage, it is worth noting that a policy can provide coverage for services the city may need in an emergency. For example, one city's liability insurance provided coverage for the cost of engaging a crisis communications consultant (e.g., a public relations expert with the appropriate expertise) during an emergency. As the need to manage large amounts of information can be overwhelming after a shooting, this coverage may benefit your city.

One additional point related to limiting liability: There is no guarantee that establishing a victims' fund will reduce the risk of a lawsuit against the city. However, because there *may* be a liability reduction component to such a fund, the city should take the lead establishing a victims' fund rather than waiting for another entity to establish one.

Review State Preemption Laws

Following the Tree of Life shooting, Mayor Peduto urged the Pittsburgh City Council to pass local regulations relating to firearms. These actions were met with lawsuits that exposed the city and the Mayor to liability. During the preparedness phase, your city's C4 team can review your state's preemption laws to help you understand the limits to your ability to regulate firearms before or after a shooting.

Consult with Experienced Legal Experts

The experience of others can help your C4 team assess the legal issues outlined above. After the Pulse shooting, the Orlando C4 team contacted the legal counsel of 10 cities that had recently responded to a public mass shooting or mass casualty event to solicit their guidance.

Pack A "Go-Bag"

The C4 team members should understand that they are always "on call" and should carry a cell phone at all times so that they can be reached immediately. See **Chapter 1, Crisis Communications** for a best practice tip on preparing a "go bag."



Response

Contact the C4 Team

Involve your C4 team immediately. They should meet daily to ensure the city's primary administrative functions are coordinated and that the city's response to the crisis complies with applicable law. They can help you activate mutual aid agreements to provide additional resources, advise on your decision to declare an emergency, and help you implement applicable protocols. They can also play a support role in establishing the victims' fund, managing the public records request process, and managing outside counsel. Orlando City Counsel Mayanne Downs said her C4 team spoke at 6:30 every morning after the Pulse shooting to discuss urgent issues. This prescheduled call promoted efficiency and helped coordinate the response across city offices. As a result, the daily C4 call is now part of the city's standard emergency protocol.

Consider Whether to Make an Emergency Declaration

Consider whether to declare a local emergency or local disaster. According to Attorney Downs, there is no downside to making the declaration immediately. Declaring an emergency may protect the city from some of the legal risks described above and has the potential to defray costs relating to police overtime costs. The implications of the declaration vary state by state, but the declaration may authorize you to:^{5,6}

- Activate local emergency response plans and mutual aid agreements with nearby jurisdictions, trauma centers, and the FBI.
- Activate the local emergency operations center and the National Incident Management System.
- Suspend or temporarily waive union rules or other labor laws and deploy first responders for longer work shifts.
- Activate immunities and liability protections for staff who respond.

Local declarations of emergency may require you to assess whether local emergency response resources would be exhausted before allowing the declaration of an emergency or requesting state aid. Make this determination in consultation with your C4 team. You may also ask the governor to declare a statewide emergency if state resources are needed.

Highland Park Mayor Nancy Rotering immediately issued an Emergency Declaration to ensure that the city had the legal authority to take emergency decisions as needed and that the necessary authorizations were obtained.⁷ A best practice is to ask your counsel to prepare a draft Emergency Declaration in advance, which can be quickly edited and issued when needed.

⁵Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. "Emergency Declarations and Authorities." 2012. <https://www.astho.org/globalassets/pdf/legal-preparedness/04-emerg-dec-authorities.pdf>.

⁶Hodge, Jr., James G. "Emergency Declaration Authorities." Network for Public Health Law (blog), March 15, 2016. <https://www.networkforphl.org/resources/emergency-declaration-authorities/>.

⁷City of Highland Park. "City of Highland Park Declaration of Emergency - July 14 2022." July 14, 2022. <https://cms6.revize.com/revize/highlandparkil/City%20of%20Highland%20Park%20Declaration%20of%20Emergency%20-%20July%2014%202022.pdf>.

A state or federal emergency declaration for an incident that meets the criterion of a “major disaster” may provide access to federal funding, including Small Business Administration disaster loans and Federal Emergency Management Agency funding authorized by the Stafford Act.⁸ However, to be eligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency funding, a city must provide evidence of extensive property damage, such as damage caused by fire or an explosion, or demonstrate exhaustion of local resources. The State of Illinois requested and obtained Small Business Administration relief for small businesses and community organizations impacted by the shooting.⁹ See **Appendix C, Funding Sources** for more information.

Respond to Open Government and Public Records Requests

Your staff may need to assist with responding to public records requests from the media and potential litigants. One best practice is to post all public records relating to the shooting on a city website to reduce the need to respond to repetitive requests. Outside counsel may need to be retained during the response phase to form the policy for meeting the intense demand for information and to manage litigation, if any.

Leaders in Action: Public Records Requests



After the Pulse shooting, Orlando created a dedicated webpage that hosted all producible public records, including police reports and 911 transcripts. The city coordinated closely with legal counsel and the FBI to ensure sensitive information was redacted and released responsibly. This approach promoted transparency and efficiency, and allowed staff to focus on recovery efforts. The website created by Orlando is still available for viewing.¹⁰

Establish a Victims' Fund

This topic is covered in **Chapter 5, Managing Donations and Volunteers**. However, it is worth noting here that your counsel should be involved in the establishment of the victims' fund. Once the city establishes a fund (using a pre-existing 501(c)(3) entity or in collaboration with another organization, such as the National Compassion Fund), the best practice is to combine all victims' funds into one. This will help prevent fraud and ensure transparent and equitable distributions to the victims and their families. If other funds were established, your counsel can assist by contacting competing funds (ideally, within a week) to urge them to transfer funds they raise to the city's designated fund. Counsel can explain to these operators that they lack both the necessary 501(c)(3) status to accept tax-deductible charitable donations and a process for making the distributions.

⁸Congressional Research Service. “Stafford Act Assistance and Acts of Terrorism,” March 1, 2023. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/R44801.pdf>.

⁹Illinois.Gov. “Gov. Pritzker Announces SBA Disaster Declaration Approval for Highland Park Shooting.” July 29, 2022. <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.25237.html>.

¹⁰City of Orlando. “Pulse Tragedy Public Records.” Accessed February 6, 2025. <https://www.orlando.gov/Our-Government/Departments-Offices/Executive-Offices/City-Clerk/Pulse-Tragedy-Public-Records>.



Engage the Local Bar Association

Victims and their families will need legal services. You or your legal counsel should contact your local bar association. They can identify qualified attorneys willing to volunteer their time to help victims and family members handle the probate, immigration, and other legal issues triggered by the shooting. They can even find mediators to help resolve intrafamily disagreements that can arise.

Recovery

Litigation and Trial Considerations

Depending on circumstances unique to the shooting and to the city's response, lawsuits will likely be filed by victims, media outlets, or advocacy groups against the city, the venue, the police department, or you. Preventative measures, such as ensuring legal readiness through clear communication protocols and proactive records management, can reduce litigation risks and demonstrate goodwill.

Additionally, if the shooter is arrested and prosecuted, there could also be legal considerations relating to a trial. An ongoing criminal case could limit what you can say about the attack. Your counsel will advise you on these legal matters and manage the services of outside counsel retained to defend the city.

Key Resources: Potential Claims Arising from Mass Shootings

American Bar Association: Survey of legal actions stemming from a mass shooting.¹¹

Sherman Howard: Analysis of insurance coverage issues related to mass shooting incidents.¹²



¹¹Steinlage, Michael J. "Liability for Mass Shootings: Are We at a Turning Point?" American Bar Association, February 7, 2020. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/tort_trial_insurance_practice/resources/brief/archive/liability-mass-shootings-are-we-turning-point/.

¹²Steinlage, Michael, Timothy Thornton, Christopher Mosley, Will Reed, and Francine L. Semaya. "Mass Shootings and Insurance Coverage." International Risk Management Institute, Inc., May 2019. <https://grayduffy.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IRMI-Mass-Shootings-and-Insurance-Coverage-July-2019.pdf>.

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Establish a C4 team and ask them to engage in “extreme emergency” planning.
- Ensure the necessary mutual aid agreements, protocols, and funding entities are negotiated and in place, and that all governing statutes are identified.
- Draft an Emergency Declaration that can be revised and issued quickly if needed.
- Assess the need for enhanced liability protection.
- Understand the limits to regulatory action imposed by state laws.
- Establish a public records request strategy and, if needed, advocate for a change in state law to prevent the release of records that could cause trauma.

Response

- Consider whether to declare a local or state emergency.
- Activate mutual aid/interagency agreements to meet additional resource needs.
- Contact people or entities that have established a victims’ fund and urge them to merge with the official fund.
- Respond to public records requests; consider posting public records online.
- Engage the local bar association to provide volunteer services for victims.
- Request Small Business Administration grant authorization, if needed, to help small businesses.

Recovery

- Work with city legal counsel and the C4 team to manage litigation and trial issues.



Chapter 9: Commemorations

"People need to grieve."

— Mayor William Peduto, Pittsburgh PA

Chapter Summary

After a public mass shooting, community members will want to gather for many reasons: to show support for victims and families, thank first responders, process their grief and anger, and demand change. These feelings can be especially raw in the immediate aftermath and may linger for years beyond the tragedy.

Mayors told us that nothing will **prepare** you for the grief caused by a public mass shooting. The best you can do is include the hosting of a vigil in your preparedness planning so that you and other city agencies know what to expect. Meet with mental health experts for guidance on how to promote community healing. Strengthen relationships with faith groups and other community partners who can help you quickly organize a vigil should the need arise.

During the **response**, community gatherings often begin with impromptu memorials and vigils shortly after the shooting occurs. Your staff or community partners may host a vigil within a few days of the shooting. Here, your compassion and connection to the community will guide your planning. Note that police security may be required for large gatherings, which could delay when the first vigil can be scheduled.

During the **recovery**, as the community takes stock of the loss, other events—benefit concerts, community meetings, religious gatherings, political assemblies, and other forms of remembrance—will be planned. Mayors and their staff say that one-year remembrances are particularly difficult because some members of the community have returned to a sense of normalcy while others are still very much traumatized by the shooting. Thus, it is important to consult with mental health experts and the families of the victims when planning or participating in these events.

Mayors offered the following advice for these gatherings: (1) take steps to avoid politicizing the shooting at remembrances, as it can re-traumatize the families, (2) consider scheduling a variety of events that offer different avenues for people to grieve (including by staying home if that is what they need), and (3) speak from your heart.

Preparedness

No amount of preparation can diminish the grief you will experience and witness after a mass shooting. The best you can do is include the hosting of a vigil in your preparedness planning so that you and other city agencies know what to expect. Consider potential venues for vigils and other commemorations and develop protocols for managing in-kind donations. Learn about messaging to traumatized communities. Plan to provide security, possibly using mutual aid services provided by neighboring communities. Finally, meet with faith groups, mental health experts, and other partners who can offer their guidance on how to promote community healing.

Response

Vigils

Vigils may be organized by the city, the business community, local organizations, or faith groups, or they may happen spontaneously shortly after the shooting. Whether or not the city hosts the vigil, the city may need to provide police security and designate the event's location. Issues to consider for planning a vigil are those you would address for any large public gathering: traffic control, security needs, crowd control, parking, and issuing the necessary permits for use of public spaces, among others.



Image 1: Vigil and memorial following the Walmart shooting in El Paso (Ruperto Miller).

If the city is involved in organizing a vigil, consider whether any elected officials (including yourself) should be authorized to speak at the event. At one event, one mayor decided to prevent elected officials from speaking to avoid politicizing the tragedy. Other mayors have addressed this concern by advising elected officials and dignitaries to deliver a coordinated message of healing and unity.

When planning a vigil, seek input from the victims and families (through victim advocates) and from mental health experts. If the shooting targeted an ethnic or religious community, consult with leaders from that community for help crafting culturally appropriate messages of loss and to understand appropriate dress and customary practices. Determine whether interpreting services are needed at the vigil.

Timing may be an important consideration. Although the community will want to have a vigil as soon as possible, law enforcement officials may still be working overtime on the investigation. The vigil may need to be delayed until sufficient police staffing is available to provide adequate security.

Leaders in Action: The First Vigils

Faith communities organized a vigil the afternoon after the mass shooting in Dayton. A candlelight vigil was held that evening, organized by the “Downtown Dayton” business community group and several city commissioners. The mayor said she asked the commissioners for help planning the vigil so that they could demonstrate their concern for the victims and their families in a concrete way. Their support also allowed the mayor to concentrate on other aspects of the response. These vigils allowed the community to come together to safely “reclaim” the Oregon District, where the shooting took place. Dayton police provided security for the candlelight vigil in the business district.

In Orlando, city staff coordinated with faith leaders and organizations that serve the LGBTQ+ community to host an interfaith vigil. Because the event was declared a terrorist attack after the shooter swore allegiance to the Islamic State, Mayor Dyer felt it necessary to invite a respected imam to speak out against the attack to prevent retaliation against the local Muslim community. At the vigil, Imam Muhammad Musri declared the support of the Muslim community for the victims of the tragedy and condemned the ideology of hate and death expressed by the shooter.¹



Following the Covenant School shooting, the school community requested space to mourn privately. Understanding that the broader city was also in mourning, Mayor John Cooper led a separate candlelight vigil in Nashville’s Public Square Park. He offered words of unity and comfort to the grieving community, saying, “Just two days ago was our city’s worst day. We stand by you and support you, today and always.” The event provided a public space for collective healing while honoring the wishes of those most directly affected.

¹“Orlando Shooting: Vigils Held Around World to Honour Victims.” BBC News, June 14, 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36524095>

Funerals

All the mayors we interviewed told us they attended as many funerals as they could. In some cases, they were invited to speak. Familiarize yourself with any faith and cultural traditions that may be part of the funerals you attend. In some cases, state and community-based partners may offer to pay for funerals. Your office can ensure that victims' families are connected with these resources.

Security may also be needed at funerals, especially if the shooting was a hate crime and the affected community is gathering at a large funeral or memorial service. One mayor mentioned that police also provided security for family members' homes while they were at funerals to protect against potential theft while they were away from their homes. These security needs must be balanced with ongoing demands for law enforcement personnel at the scene, at the Notification Center, and at vigils or other events.

Victims' home addresses may need to be sealed by the county's property assessor as soon as names are released to protect victims' privacy and prevent people from going to the homes of victims and family members during the funerals.

Recovery

First Annual Remembrance Event and Commemorations

Mayors and their staff told us that the one-year mark is one of the most difficult times in the recovery from the shooting. Right after the shooting, you will be working around the clock to attend to the urgent demands of the response, and you may sense that the community is united in its shared feelings of grief and loss. A year later, those feelings may have changed. The community may become divided over issues such as pending litigation, a criminal trial for the shooter, payouts from funds and foundations, and political views. The first annual remembrance event is therefore both a terrible reminder of an event that is still raw for many, as well as a time to heal for others.

Many mayors told us their city took the lead in planning that first remembrance event (or series of events). They called it a "remembrance" rather than an "anniversary" because the latter is a word with happy connotations. Some families wanted to participate in planning and tell their stories, while others did not. The mayors recommend consulting with victims' advocates and mental health professionals.

It is important to prevent the event from becoming politicized to avoid re-traumatizing family members and the community. That may involve requiring elected officials to use messaging focused on healing or not inviting elected officials to speak.

The National Mass Violence Center recommends planning a series of events that encourage the community to come together and rebuild social connections. Encouraging people to share their stories about what happened and what it meant to them helps honor the victims and is an important part of healing. The Center has provided a helpful tip sheet with suggestions for remembrance events.



Key Resource: Tips Sheet for Remembrance Planning

National Mass Violence Center: Excellent checklist for civic leaders to use when planning vigils, memorials, and other remembrance events after a mass casualty incident.²



Image 2: Location of the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando (WalterPro).

²“Tips for Community Leaders: Supporting Your Community’s Remembering of Mass Violence Victims.” National Mass Violence Center, 2004. <https://nmvrc.org/media/4txj0x2q/community-leaders-supporting-your-community-mvi-remembrance.pdf>

Leaders in Action: Highland Park Approach to Memorials

The City of Orlando worked with Orange County and the onePULSE Foundation to host Orlando United Day on June 12, 2017, one year after the shooting. Buildings throughout Orlando and central Florida were lit in rainbow colors. Events were also hosted by the University of Central Florida and other colleges. Community members were invited to Lake Eola Park Amphitheater for an evening of prayer, live music, inspirational dance, and a moment of reflection for the victims. There were tens of thousands of attendees. The city was involved in planning and provided security for the event.



In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic made it difficult to organize vigils and remembrance events in Dayton and El Paso. Dayton Mayor Whaley told us that a “virtual event is not the same, people need to come together.” Nevertheless, the city found ways to engage mourners. #DaytonShines events included physical activities, such as a memorial tree placed in the Oregon District on which notes of remembrance could be placed along with seed packets, and an online event that featured a photo mosaic and nine minutes of silence.

Parkland’s first remembrance event following the Majorie Stoneham Douglas High School shooting provided a range of activities for students, families, and the community to foster healing. It was intentionally apolitical. See **Chapter 6, School Shootings** for a description of the event.

Memorials

Immediately following a mass shooting, impromptu memorials will spring up at the scene. Members of the public leave flowers, candles, cards and letters, photographs, teddy bears, and items of personal significance and sentimental value. These impromptu memorials will require a team to maintain, protect, and remove (when appropriate) these items. Ultimately, they will need to be archived for future viewing. (See below for archival considerations for these items.) These memorials may require security.

The National Mass Violence Center recommends that you allow flowers, notes, and gifts at the site for a few days and then find a place where non-perishable items can be displayed for a few weeks. Keep condolence notes indefinitely for survivors and families to read at a later date.

In the short term, the location of impromptu memorials may prove unsuitable if nearby homes or businesses are disrupted. In such cases, it may make sense to designate a temporary site where mourners can grieve undisturbed while others resume their normal activities. A temporary memorial can help lay the groundwork for a permanent memorial site (if the families express a desire for one).





Image 3: Temporary memorial in Highland Park.

Leaders in Action: Highland Park’s Approach to Remembrance

Following the Highland Park mass shooting, three spontaneous memorials were established by community members at locations close to the site of the shooting. Although the memorials were comforting to many, the locations were also emotionally overwhelming because they served as visual reminders of the tragedy to those working and living in the heart of the downtown. In response, Mayor Nancy Rotering and City Manager Ghida Neukirch made the difficult decision to relocate the memorial to a more private space.

They worked closely with victims’ families, community members, and grief counselors to design a temporary memorial that served as a peaceful gathering space. The memorial featured personalized tribute markers for each victim, floral arrangements, and benches for reflection. It was placed in a central location and maintained by city staff and volunteers. City leaders clearly communicated the location of the memorial and the plan to eventually remove it, ensuring a smooth transition to a permanent remembrance project.

The city also partnered with the local library to archive letters, artifacts, and tributes, ensuring the history of the incident was preserved with care and professionalism.

Rather than rushing to announce the location of a permanent monument, city leaders deliberately slowed the process, drawing on national guidance to allow the community time to heal and reflect. The temporary site is now expected to become a permanent place of remembrance—not just for those who were killed, but for all who were injured or traumatized. Highland Park’s approach offers a model for cities seeking to balance grief, inclusion, and long-term community memory.



Considerations for a dedicated space to grieve:

- Identify a central, secure location that is not disruptive to daily life and that can be maintained without excessive cost.
- Consult with victims' families, faith groups, and local leaders to ensure the site reflects community needs and cultural sensitivities.
- If possible, provide a place at the site where people can leave messages, flowers, and symbolic items without creating a safety hazard or obstructing public spaces.
- Assign a team to maintain the site. Coordinate with city departments and volunteers to remove deteriorating items, prevent vandalism, and ensure the space remains dignified.
- Communicate the plans to transition to a permanent memorial or archival site. Transparency helps manage expectations and build trust with the community.

Permanent Memorials

Permanent memorials honor the victims and testify to the community's united response. When planning a memorial, mayors recommended the following:

- Engage victims and families, community partners, and local businesses. Consider forming an independent board or commission with stakeholders committed to advancing a shared vision.
- Consult with mental health partners.
- Recognize that the process will take time.

Memorials may take years of planning due to the need to find an appropriate site, address the wishes of the families (some may express a desire not to be reminded daily of their loss), and coordinate with partners who can realize the community's vision (such as architects and donors).

- In San Bernardino, the groundbreaking ceremony for a memorial honoring the victims took place five years after the tragedy, with the Curtain of Courage memorial unveiled in 2022.
- In Newtown, planning took longer, with voters approving a referendum to construct a memorial pond nearly a decade after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012.³ The memorial was completed in December 2021.
- Planning for a memorial to honor the Pulse victims is ongoing. In 2021, then President Biden signed legislation creating a permanent memorial and reflecting pool at the site.⁴ Orlando officials issued a request for proposals in March 2025 to solicit a design-build firm for the design and construction of the permanent Pulse memorial. The goal is for the memorial to reflect the collective vision of the victims' families, survivors, and the broader Orlando community to honor the 49 "angels," to be constructed by the end of 2027.⁵

⁴Williamson, Elizabeth. "A Search for Remembrance After the Sandy Hook Massacre." *The New York Times*, May 1, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/01/us/politics/newtown-sandy-hook-elementary.html>

⁵Karni, Annie. "Biden Signs Bill Creating National Pulse Memorial and Commemorates Pride Month." *The New York Times*, June 25, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/25/us/politics/biden-national-pulse-memorial.html>

⁶"Memorial Engagement Process." Pulse Orlando. Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://www.pulseorlando.org/Memorial/Participate>.





Image 4: Rendering of the Sandy Hook permanent memorial reflecting pool (Courtesy of SWA San Francisco)

Archival Considerations

Documenting and archiving items left at the scene is a monumental task. These items may include flowers, candles, notes, teddy bears, art, and items of personal significance and sentimental value. In Orlando, this massive effort involved a large number of staff working against the clock to prevent items from being soaked by rain.

Deciding when and how to preserve these items can be a challenge. One approach is to partner with a local museum or historical society to properly archive them. One mayor recommended informing the public about these preservation efforts to prevent confusion when they are removed from the site. Consider reaching out to other cities that have endured a mass shooting to make connections with staff who have expertise in this area.

For example, Pamela Schwartz of the Orange County History Center in Florida has developed best practices for museums and historical centers to curate and display art and artifacts from impromptu memorials assembled after a mass shooting.⁶ She has reached out to historians in other cities to offer archival guidance after mass shootings.

⁷Peddie, Matthew. "Intersection: Pulse Memorial Plans; Gun Safety Activism; Curating Pulse Items; Former Pro Surfer CJ Hobgood." Central Florida Public Media, June 11, 2019. <https://www.cfpublish.org/podcast/intersection-podcast/2019-06-11/intersection-pulse-memorial-plans-gun-safety-activism-curating-pulse-items-former-pro-surfer-cj-hobgood>

Depending on the volume of items received, you may need to get creative. Newtown received 65,000 teddy bears after the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting and thousands of letters, origami paper cranes, and other items. Storage capacity and staff were overwhelmed. Stuffed animals had to be diverted to recipients such as children’s hospitals and orphanages across the country.⁷ First Selectman Patricia Llodra suggested “cremating” letters and other items for use as “sacred soil” for a permanent memorial—staff simply could not read all the letters received from around the world.

It may not be possible, or even desirable, to save every item. Newtown converted many of the tons of teddy bears, letters, and ephemera that were donated into bricks that could be used when a permanent memorial was built.⁸

Key Resources: Permanent Memorials and Archiving

Los Angeles Times, Archiving Grief: Museums Learn to Preserve Memorials Left at Mass Shootings: Article on the challenge of archiving the thousands of tributes left at impromptu memorials after mass shootings, and the value these items have to survivors and future researchers.⁹



Lisa M. Moore, (Re)Covering the Past, Remembering Trauma: The Politics of Commemoration at Sites of Atrocity: scholarly article on the role archiving evidence plays in promoting recovery and justice after atrocities and genocide. Cases include 9/11, the Holocaust, Rwanda, and Cambodia.¹⁰

Memorial Museums: Memorial museums are willing to share best practices in archiving, planning, and funding memorials and museums. Excellent resources include the Oklahoma City Memorial Museum¹¹ and the 9/11 Memorial Museum.¹²

⁸Kix, Paul. “65,000 Teddy Bears for Newtown, and One Man to Sort the World’s Grief.” *The Trace*, December 13, 2015. <https://www.thetrace.org/2015/12/sandy-hook-shooting-donations/>

⁹“Newtown Finds a Way to Dispose of Victim Mementos.” *WCVB*, December 26, 2012. <https://www.wcvb.com/article/newtown-finds-a-way-to-dispose-of-victim-mementos/8176565>.

¹⁰Montero, David. (2018, February 25). “Archiving Grief: Museums Learn to Preserve Memorials Left at Mass Shootings.” *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-museums-mass-shootings-20180225-story.html>

¹¹Moore, L.M. (2009). (Re) Covering the past, remembering trauma: The politics of commemoration at sites of atrocity. *Journal of Public and International Affairs*. 20.

¹²“Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum.” Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://memorialmuseum.com/>

¹³“National September 11 Memorial & Museum.” Accessed May 2, 2025. <https://www.911memorial.org/>



COMMEMORATIONS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Include commemorations in emergency management or victim assistance planning.
- Develop protocols for donations management.
- Learn about how communities heal from trauma.

Response

- Designate a public space for gatherings
- Activate partners to begin documenting and cataloguing items left at the scene.
- Begin removing perishable items (flowers, etc.) within a short time, but preserve letters.
- Activate partners for help in planning a vigil and other remembrance events.
- Cultivate partnerships that are lacking as you move to the recovery phase.

Recovery

- Attend funerals when invited, and plan security for the families of the victims.
- Consult families when planning vigils, remembrance events, and a permanent memorial.
- Plan a variety of ways to honor the victims, as the process of healing is different for everyone.
- Make staff available to assist with archival and documentation needs.
- Find ways to harness the energy, creativity, and resources of community partners and volunteers.
- Consult with archival experts.

Chapter 10: Mental Health

“When something like this happens, people feel vulnerable. They feel unsafe. They worry, their children worry, grandparents worry, and it has a mass effect. We can’t send in equipment to help fix that. We can just give our support.”

— Mayor William Peduto, Pittsburgh PA

Chapter Summary

Widespread trauma is the invisible impact of a mass shooting, starting with survivors, their families, and first responders, extending to you and your staff, and reaching deep into the community. As one mayor said, every person in the city on the day of the shooting will be affected in some way. Evidence shows that those watching media coverage from afar are also emotionally affected. Your role is to ensure mental health resources are available to the community in the days, months, and years that follow.

In the **preparedness** phase, consider mental health in every aspect of emergency planning. Identify mental health resources that local, county, and national organizations can provide during the response and recovery phases. Consult mental health and behavioral health experts when developing your protocols. Work with your police and fire chiefs to ensure your first responder agencies have a robust mental health program for responding officers.

Consider establishing a Community Crisis Response Team (CCRT), a multidisciplinary group of volunteers (including mental health professionals) that can be mobilized in response to a shooting.

Also consider the mental health needs of students in your planning. You may request an assessment of the school district’s mental health resources for students. Find out if your school district has a Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) program. These multidisciplinary programs mitigate potential threats before they result in violence.

During the **response**, move quickly to establish mental health services for the victims and family members, and for the broader community. Shape your messaging in consultation with mental health experts. Representatives from the American Red Cross, the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), and the FBI Victim Services Division can help you identify community-based mental health resources and share their own considerable expertise.

Finally, your focus during the **recovery** phase should be to ensure that the long-term mental health needs of the victims and the wider community are met. This may involve establishing a Resiliency Center and finding funding to support its operations. In addition, urge first responders, your staff, and others directly affected by the shooting to seek help (including yourself).

Preparedness

Consult Mental Health Experts in Preparedness Efforts

Mayors told us their emergency planning did not focus on the recovery phase. Some lacked relationships with local mental health experts and victims' services organizations. To aid your planning, identify and cultivate relationships with these experts now. Invite them to your tabletop exercises and discuss the mental health services that will need to be offered at the Notification Center (where families will gather to find their loved one and possibly receive death notifications) and the Family Assistance Center (where mental health support and a range of other services will be offered).

Death Notifications

Some victims' families have reported that the way they were informed of their loved one's death added to their trauma. As part of your preparedness planning, consult with the coroner's office, victim advocates, and law enforcement to review best practices and establish clear protocols for death and trauma notifications. Make sure your team is trained to deliver this information promptly, professionally, and with compassion.

Also, work with the coroner or medical examiner to develop a streamlined process for victim identification following a mass casualty event. Delays in confirming and sharing this information can compound the suffering of affected families.

Key Resource: Death Notifications



OVC Resources: Training¹ and resources² to deliver death notifications with compassion.

FBI “We Regret to Inform You” death notification training: Training program developed by Penn State University and the FBI.³

For additional resources, please see **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance**.

First Responder Peer Support and Mental Health

Work in collaboration with your chiefs and mental health providers to ensure first responders in your community have access to the mental health support they need and deserve—not just in the aftermath of a critical incident, but as an integrated part of their professional lives. See **Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders** for more information and resources.

¹Office for Victims of Crime. “Death notification.” Accessed February 12, 2025. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/taxonomy/term/death-notification>.

²Office for Victims of Crime. “Trauma Notification Training.” April 23, 2024. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/events/trauma-notification-training>.

³FBI. “Trauma Notification.” Accessed August 25, 2025. <https://le.fbi.gov/trauma-notification-training/launch-course-instructor-resources>



Understand the Traumatic Impact of a Mass Shooting

Learn about the traumatic impact of a mass shooting on different populations. The exposure levels below, adapted from *The Wiley Handbook of The Psychology of Mass Shootings*,⁴ illustrate how widespread the traumatic impact can be:

- Survivors (extreme exposure): witnessed shooting, saw others injured or killed or wounded, maybe were wounded but survived
- Indirectly exposed: physically present at location, heard gunfire, etc.
- Others who are members of the community that was targeted but did not witness the shooting firsthand
- Bereaved family members who lost someone in the shooting
- Law enforcement, fire officials and EMTs, and other first responders, including dispatchers
- Journalists covering the issue (can experience both acute stress and long-term occupational health impacts)
- Broader public (exposed through media coverage or knowing victims and their families)
- You and your staff

Establish a Community Crisis Response Team

Consider establishing a CCRT. The CCRT model involves inviting a variety of community partners to form a crisis response team that can be mobilized after a mass shooting. The CCRT's role is to analyze a request, identify gaps in resources, design and implement a culturally appropriate response, and evaluate the response that was delivered. The CCRT can also assist in the response to natural disasters and everyday mental health crises in your communities.

The following professional affiliations are represented on most CCRTs:

- Law enforcement representative
- Licensed mental health professional
- Victim services professional
- Member of the clergy
- Member of a medical profession
- Child counselor or teacher
- Representatives of grassroots organizations serving diverse sectors of the community
- Person experienced with media relations
- Multilingual translators, depending on the needs of the community

Consider who else might be included in your CCRT. For instance, artists and art organizations often volunteer to help affected community members give expression to pain, outrage, and a search for justice and healing.

⁴Wilson, Laura C. "Mental Health Outcomes Following Direct Exposure." *The Wiley Handbook of the Psychology of Mass Shootings*. 1st ed. Wiley, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119048015>.

The difference between CCRT and CERT

The focus of a local Community Crisis Response Team (CCRT) is trauma mitigation, mental health recovery, and community resilience. The Community Emergency Response Team is a national program that educates volunteers about disaster preparedness for the hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations.

A Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) offers a consistent, nationwide approach to volunteer training and management that professional first responders can rely on during disaster situations, allowing them to focus on more complex tasks. (See <https://www.ready.gov/cert> for more information.) Your community may establish both to offer opportunities for residents to serve their community and to leverage their expertise.

Key Resources: Community Crisis Response



National Organization for Victim Assistance, Crisis Response Team Training:

Ideally, all members of a CCRT should be trained in trauma mitigation, psychological first aid, and education protocols so that they are prepared to deliver or coordinate the delivery of these services if a mass shooting occurs.⁵

National Organization for Victim Assistance and OVC, Community Crisis Response Training Manual:

This free training manual is for individuals and organizations interested in responding to crisis. It provides an overview of trauma responses, crisis intervention techniques, media management techniques, and a discussion of organizational roles in crisis preparedness, response, and recovery.⁶ An updated edition is also available for purchase.

Advocate for Student Mental Health Services

Ask school leaders and mental health experts for their recommendations on ways the city can support their efforts to provide mental health services to students.

Suggest a school-based BTAM program for your school district. BTAM programs in schools can help identify threats early and provide needed support to students in crisis, potentially preventing suicide as well as school-based violence and mass shootings. For more information, see **Appendix D, Strategies to Prevent Mass Shootings**.

Finally, encourage school officials to consult with the American Red Cross as part of their security planning to understand the mental health resources the Red Cross can provide in the event of a school shooting. For more information and resources, see **Chapter 6, School Shootings**.

⁵National Organization for Victim Advocacy. "NOVA CRT: Building Skills for Effective Crisis Intervention." NOVA. Accessed July 18, 2025. <https://trynova.org/training-programs/crisis-response-team-training/>.

⁶<https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/community-crisis-response-team-training-manual>



Response

Ensure Appropriate Mental Health Services are Available

In the immediate aftermath of a mass casualty incident, victims and their families will need psychological first aid—a counseling approach developed by the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (NC-PTSD). Psychological first aid emphasizes non-intrusive support and rapid assessment of needs, similar to medical triage. Unlike traditional therapy, it does not delve into the traumatic event itself.

Counselors working in the Notification and Family Assistance Centers should be trained in psychological first aid. The American Red Cross, OVC, and the FBI Victim Services Division can help you identify local providers with this training.

First responders and others interacting with victims can also be trained in psychological first aid so that they can apply these techniques to help reduce immediate distress, support adaptive coping, and lower the risk of long-term trauma.

Key Resource: NC-PTSD Psychological First Aid Manual

NC-PTSD Psychological First Aid Manual: This manual can be used to assist victims and family members in the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting to reduce initial distress and to foster their long-term recovery. It can be used by first responders, incident command systems, health care providers, school crisis response teams, faith-based organizations, disaster relief organizations, Community Emergency Response Teams, Medical Reserve Corps, and the Citizens Corps in diverse settings.⁷



You may need to consult mental health experts to ensure that a range of mental health services are made available to meet the needs of the broader community, which will change over time. Also, provide virtual services for people who face barriers to seeking mental health services at these centers, such as childcare obligations, limited time off from work, stigma, language barriers, unemployment, or anxiety.

Share information about mental health resources available and encourage people to seek help if they need it, and to lend a hand where they can. You can let everyone know “it’s okay to not be okay.” Community members should know that their initial reactions and feelings (whatever they are) are a predictable response to a shocking and disruptive tragedy. This message is not only important for the public, but also for first responders and your own staff and colleagues.

⁷National Child Traumatic Stress Network. “Psychological First Aid: Field Operations Guide.” U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2006. https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/type/psych_firstaid_manual.asp.



Leaders in Action: Mental Health Providers in Highland Park FAC

At peak operation, Highland Park's Family Assistance Center hosted 100 volunteer counselors. With the assistance of the Lake County Emergency Management Agency, counselors were recruited from the local Medical Reserve Corps and trained in psychological first aid. A grant awarded after the incident allowed dozens of local therapists to pursue advanced trauma certification and remain deployable for future incidents anywhere in the state.

Frame Communications with Mental Health Experts

Consult with mental health experts to craft messages appropriate for a traumatized community. For example, Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley consulted with a countywide mental health services network with whom she had previously partnered to understand how to effectively communicate about the shooting. For more information, see **Chapter 1, Crisis Communications**.

Promptly and consistently announce the location of the Notification Center, so that families know where to gather, and later the Family Assistance Center, so that victims and family members know where to go for mental health support and care.

Include information about mental health resources for community members who will not/should not go to the FAC.

Recovery

Communications: Shift from Response to Recovery

Your messaging will gradually shift from a "response" to a "recovery" frame. As you begin to develop recovery messages, consult with mental health experts to understand how to avoid exacerbating or resurfacing trauma for the community.

Continue to share information about mental health resources available to victims, families, and the broader community. Your communications should include messages to bolster long-term community resilience and restore hope. Your messages will depend on the situation, but common themes to promote resiliency include unity ("OneOrlando") and healing ("Dayton Shines").

Note, however, that some well-intentioned hashtags and messages that organically arise in the wake of a shooting (such as messages that include the word "strong") may be emotionally hurtful to those who were most directly impacted. Some victims and families have shared negative reactions to some of these themes due to the impossibility of feeling strong in the face of unspeakable loss.

Vigils, remembrances, and memorials are important tools for helping your community grieve and increase their psychological well-being. Plan these events in consultation with mental health experts and the victims and their families. For more information, see **Chapter 9, Commemorations**.





Image 1: "Hate and terror will never divide us" poster at Christchurch mosque shooting memorial (Natecull)

Establish a Resiliency Center to Address Ongoing Trauma

Mental health services may be needed for months, and even years, following a mass shooting. The role of a Resiliency Center is to provide these services to survivors and their families. Ideally, the Resiliency Center should also provide referrals to mental health services to the broader community. For more information, see **Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance**.

Support First Responders' Mental Health

First responders often experience significant psychological trauma from witnessing the violence and bloodshed of a mass shooting. Work in partnership with your chiefs and other public safety executives to ensure *all* first responders in your community—including police and fire officials, EMTs, dispatchers, and crime scene investigators—receive the mental health support they need and deserve following an incident. For more information and resources you can share with your chiefs, see **Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders**.

Include Delivery of Mental Health Services in the After Action Review

Information on mental health and victim services is rarely included in after action reviews (AARs), but assessments of the victim service providers and feedback from the victims and families should be included in the AAR. Be sure to include first responder assessments of the mental health services and peer support they received. The lessons learned can be used to improve the community's response to future mass shootings and other critical incidents. For information about AARs, see **Appendix G, After Action Review**.

Key Resource: After Action Review Recommendations



National Mass Violence Victimization Resource Center, Victim-Centric MassViolence Incident AAR: Recommendations and Template: This report provides a checklist and recommendations for including an assessment of mental health services in an AAR.⁸

Mitigate Potential Community Conflict

Be aware of the “dark side of solidarity,” when people feel pressured to participate in shared mourning or collective expressions of unity that may not reflect their own emotional reactions. Although community solidarity provides an opportunity to increase psychological well-being or buffer against mental health symptoms, it may also be undermined by differing views about the “readiness to move on.” Conflict can arise within community groups and in affected workplaces, as people experience grief in different ways, or as the shooting becomes politicized.

You can try to balance these tensions by providing high levels of support and assistance in the immediate aftermath (generally, the first six months), by being a source of credible and accurate information, and by being attentive to the differing needs of various groups as they attempt to “find meaning” in the event.

In the aftermath of a public mass shooting (the focus of this Playbook), communities that deal with daily gun violence (including gang- and drug-related shootings involving multiple victims) are understandably upset that so much more attention and funding is paid to this type of shooting. Please see **Appendix F, A Note on Community Gun Violence**, for guidance on how to address this issue in your community.

Take Care of Yourself and Your Staff

Mayors and their staff have reported that adrenaline carried them through a week or so of the response, as the stress of hosting VIP visits, attending funerals, speaking to the national media, and managing city agencies prevented them from processing their own emotional reactions to the mass shooting. Then many experienced a “crash” once safety was established. Grief haunted them for years after the event.

You and your staff will be affected for months or years, just like other members of the community. You need to practice self-care and encourage others to do so. Mayors spoke of their own coping strategies and emphasized the importance of modeling self-care to other members of the community. For example, El Paso Mayor Dee Margo spoke of taking time for prayer while he was traveling from Austin back to El Paso on the day of the shooting. Other mayors spoke publicly about receiving therapy, thereby modeling self-care for their staff and the community.

⁸National Mass Violence Victimization Resource Center. Victim-Centric Mass Violence Incident After Action Report: Recommendations and Template. 2021. <https://www.nmvrc.org/media/obkbbliid/victimcentricviaarrecommendationsandtemplate-final-07-14.pdf>.



Mayors also described their conversations with other mayors as “therapeutic” and emphasized the importance of reaching out to their social support systems.

Encourage your staff to seek help as well. In the immediate aftermath, look around and notice which staff members are struggling and need to take time away from the response. Encourage staff to take time off to recover. Ensure there are systems in place to document and meet employees’ needs. Some actions mayors have taken to help their staff include:

- Providing time off
- Reassigning them from their response or recovery work
- Checking in personally to see if they need anything you can provide

Note: Group sessions in which first responders or staff are asked to share with others what they have seen is now *contraindicated*, and should not be part of your recovery protocol.

MENTAL HEALTH CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Identify local, state, and national mental health resources.
- Include mental health experts in your preparedness planning.
- Identify therapists and ensure they have the psychological first aid training for crisis response, which is different from “everyday” talk therapy.
- Consider establishing a Community Crisis Response Team (CCRT).
- Work with your chiefs to plan how to meet the mental health needs of first responders.
- Learn about Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) programs for schools.

Response

- Ask the American Red Cross and other partners for help identifying mental health resources; work with them to establish the Notification and Family Assistance Centers.
- Establish access to mental health services for the broader community.
- Seek the guidance of victims’ assistance and mental health experts to develop messaging.
- Encourage school districts to accept help from outside resources.

Recovery

- Focus your messaging on encouraging people to seek help if they need it, bolstering long-term community resilience, and restoring hope.
- Establish a Resiliency Center to provide long-term mental health services.
- Ensure mental health services are available for first responders.
- Include mental health service delivery in your community’s AAR.
- Mitigate potential community conflict.
- Take care of yourself and your staff.



Appendices



Appendix A: Readiness Toolkit

The leaders we interviewed underscored the value of advance preparation. As one mayor put it, “It’s not a matter of if—but when.”

This appendix provides practical tools and resources to help you and your community prepare so that you can respond effectively to a mass violence incident of any kind.

Prioritize Readiness

As your city’s chief executive, you are responsible for ensuring that you and your staff, first responder agencies, and local partners are ready to act immediately when tragedy strikes. We have developed tools to help you assess your city’s current level of readiness and to take action to fill any gaps.

Key Resources: UnitedOnGuns

Preparedness Checklist – Start your planning with this readiness assessment tool. It highlights actions you can take to build a coordinated, multi-agency response team.

Mass Shooting Protocol – Quick-reference guide to the key decisions you must make immediately following a mass shooting. It provides a useful overview of how the response will unfold for planning purposes.

Mass Shooting Playbook – Comprehensive, practical resource outlining your responsibilities across three critical phases of a mass shooting—preparedness, response, and recovery. Each chapter provides recommendations and key resources to build core competency in each phase.

Tabletop Exercise Worksheet – Customizable tool that can be used to plan a tabletop exercise – whether it is an informal discussion or a full-day scenario.

Case Briefs – Short summaries of the eight cities we researched to provide key takeaways for civic leaders. Review them as part of your planning.

Until We Find a Way to Prevent Mass Shootings, Your City Needs to Prepare – Article that summarizes your role in responding to a mass shooting.¹

Uvalde Failures Underscore the Importance of Preparedness – Article that poses questions for you to consider when preparing your community to respond to a mass shooting, with a focus on supporting first responder readiness.²



The **Preparedness Checklist** and **Tabletop Exercise Worksheet** follow this appendix. All resources are available on our website, www.UnitedOnGuns.org.

¹<https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/until-we-find-way-prevent-mass-shootings-your-city-needs-prepare>

²<https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/uvalde-failures-underscore-importance-preparedness>

Invest in Executive Education

While you will rely on trained professionals during many aspects of the response, there are things you can do to prepare yourself to lead during an extreme emergency. Look for executive briefings and forums hosted by professional organizations, such as the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the International City/County Management Association, and state municipal leagues. The Center for Homeland Defense and Security offers education options for elected officials, including customized briefings for your city.

Look for opportunities to benefit from the experience of other mayors. For example, the U.S. Conference of Mayors hosted an excellent panel discussion that featured the insights of mayors who responded to a mass shooting (see link below). Other mayors have written books, such as Mayor Steve Scaffidi, who shared his experience responding to the Sikh Temple shooting in Oak Creek, WI, in 2012.

Key Resources: Lessons Learned from Peers

U.S. Conference of Mayors, 88th Winter Meeting: Lesson Learned - Preventing, Preparing for, and Responding to Mass Shootings, 2020.³

Six Minutes in August: A Story of Tragedy, Healing and Community: Mayor Steve Scaffidi's book tells the story of the murder of six members of a Sikh Temple, and the impact of that day's events on the community of Oak Creek, its newly elected mayor, and the families of the Sikh Temple.⁴

Rochester Hills Mayor Shares Challenges and Lessons in City's Response to Splash Pad Shooting: Mayor Bryan Barnett of Rochester Hills, MI, shared a gripping account of leading his community after the June 15, 2024, Splash Pad attack. Mayor Barnett credits the *Mass Shooting Protocol* and *Playbook* as valuable resources that helped guide his actions.⁵

If a mass shooting takes place in your community, other mayors will immediately contact you to share their advice and condolences. Their advice will be invaluable, but it may be difficult to confer with them in the immediate aftermath. But as time allows, contact experienced mayors to solicit their advice.

Take FEMA Incident Command Training

The Incident Command System (ICS) is a standardized, on-scene, all-risk incident management system used by various agencies to coordinate and manage emergency responses. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) uses ICS as a key component of the National Incident Management System (NIMS), which guides all levels of government, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector in responding to incidents. FEMA offers ICS training for elected officials.

³U.S. Conference of Mayors. "88th Winter Meeting: Lesson Learned - Preventing, Preparing for, and Responding to Mass Shootings." U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2020, 21:40. Accessed April 8, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjqn9q1rQg>.

⁴<https://www.amazon.com/Six-Minutes-August-Tragedy-Community/dp/057816714X>

⁵<https://oaklandcounty115.com/2025/04/02/rochester-hills-mayor-shares-challenges-and-lessons-in-citys-response-to-splash-pad-shooting/>

Key Resource: FEMA Incident Command System Training

G-402 Incident Command System Overview for Executives/Senior Officials: FEMA recommends elected officials complete this course, which covers the basics of the National Incident Management System, Multiagency Coordination Groups, ICS, and Emergency Operations Centers. The course also summarizes the chief elected official's role in emergency preparedness, which may be applied to preparedness for a mass shooting.⁶ The ICS resource center provides links to training position specific training.⁷



Schedule a Tabletop Exercise

Hosting regular tabletop exercises is one of the most important things you can do to prepare yourself and your city for a mass shooting. Use the tabletop to clarify roles, identify training and resource needs, and develop needed protocols (e.g., for crisis communications, victim services, volunteer management, the victims' fund). The **Tabletop Exercise Worksheet** can help you plan a tabletop exercise.

Leaders in Action: Tabletops That Made a Difference

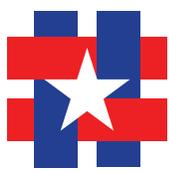
Kristin Wilson, Nashville's Chief of Operations and Performance: Early in her tenure with the city, COO Wilson convened a tabletop exercise involving the mayor's office, police, fire, emergency management, education, communications, and other key departments. She credited that informal discussion with Nashville's life-saving response to the Covenant School shooting.

Heather Fagan, Chief of Staff, Orlando FL: The mayor hosts a tabletop exercise every year (a best practice). The year before the Pulse shooting, the focus was on civil disobedience. Chief of Staff Fagan said the tabletop helped agencies think through how they would respond to a crisis similar to a mass shooting. The city used the social media protocol developed at the exercise during the response to the Pulse shooting.



⁶[https://training.fema.gov/gstate/downloadmats.aspx?rd=1&course=G0402%20-%20ics-402%20-%20incident%20command%20system%20\(ICS\)%20overview%20for%20executives%20and%20senior%20officials](https://training.fema.gov/gstate/downloadmats.aspx?rd=1&course=G0402%20-%20ics-402%20-%20incident%20command%20system%20(ICS)%20overview%20for%20executives%20and%20senior%20officials)

⁷<https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/icsresource/trainingmaterials/>



Mass Shooting Preparedness: Checklist

Preparedness saves lives. Use this Checklist to assess your community's readiness, determine training and resources needs, and guide emergency planning. For guidance and resources, consult the Mass Shooting Playbook.¹

1. Crisis communications

- Develop a communication strategy with your PIO and public safety executives to ensure appropriate, unified messaging.²
- Assess your Emergency Notification System. Develop a policy for its use and request regular testing and operation of the system.³

2. First responder preparedness

- Establish personal relationships with leaders of potential responding agencies (e.g., police, fire, sheriff, FBI, and neighboring first responders agencies).⁴
- Ensure adequate mutual aid agreements are in place.⁵
- Ensure your law enforcement agency is properly trained and equipped. Priorities include:
 - Active Violent Incidence (AVI) training for all officers.
 - Training includes tactical emergency casualty care.
 - Rescue task force established between police and fire/EMT agencies.
 - First responder radio systems are inter-operational.
 - Protocol established for self-deploying law enforcement agencies.
 - Police and fire agencies are training together.
- Request and attend a multi-agency, multi-jurisdiction active shooter exercise.

¹The Mass Shooting Playbook and other resources are available at www.UnitedOnGuns.org.

²See Mass Shooting Playbook, Chapter 1, Crisis Communications.

³See Playbook, Chapter 2, Emergency Operations.

⁴See Playbook, Chapter 4, Collaborating with First Responders.

⁵See Playbook, Chapter 8, Legal Considerations.

3. Victim services

- Consult with public health agencies, the American Red Cross, FBI Victim Services Division, and community partners to plan how your community will provide victim and family services.^{6, 7, 8}
- Develop a protocol for victim assistance centers, including the Notification Center (where families will be reunified or receive death notices) and the Family Assistance Center (where comprehensive services will be provided).
- Meet with school officials to review security planning and discuss how the city can support the school community following a shooting.⁹
- Develop a victims' fund protocol and a plan to manage volunteers.¹⁰

4. Prevention

- Learn how Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management, Extreme Risk Protection Orders, suicide prevention initiatives, and secure firearm storage strategies may reduce the risk of mass shootings.¹¹
- Familiarize yourself with federal funding available for school safety, mental health services, and community gun violence prevention in your community.

5. Support for first responders and city employees

- Encourage leaders of first responder agencies to establish peer support and mental health programs (including for police, fire, EMT, and dispatchers).
- Schedule regular active shooter drills for city staff, provide medical kits in centralized locations in city buildings, and offer Stop the Bleed training.¹²

6. Best Practice: Schedule & Tabletop Exercise

- Organize a tabletop exercise with your team, first responders, and other stakeholders to discuss roles and plan a unified response.¹³

⁶See Playbook, Chapter 3, Victim and Family Assistance.

⁷See Playbook, Appendix E. National Mass Violence Center is an important resource. <https://nmvvc.org>.

⁸See Playbook, Chapter 7, Community Partnerships.

⁹See Playbook, Chapter 6, School Shootings.

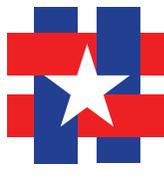
¹⁰See Playbook, Chapter 5, Managing Donations and Volunteers.

¹¹See Playbook, Appendix D.

¹²Stop the Bleed training can save lives. <https://www.stopthebleed.org>

¹³See Playbook, Appendix A, and the Tabletop Exercise Worksheet.





Tabletop Exercise: Worksheet

Use this worksheet to plan a tabletop exercise (or series of exercises) to ensure your staff, police and fire chiefs, public safety officials, education officials, and community leaders understand their respective roles during a mass shooting. Consult the **Preparedness Checklist** to identify gaps in readiness and to guide emergency planning. For more information, review the **Mass Shooting Protocol Playbook** available at www.UnitedOnGuns.org.

1. Who Should Attend?

Key to a tabletop's success is having the city's chief elected official preside over it. This ensures participation from key players in a mass shooting response. Consider inviting:

- The mayor or chief elected official, who will lead the exercise.
- Police and fire chiefs and executives of other public safety agencies
- City manager and department heads responsible for emergency decision-making.
- Public information officer or communications experts.
- The "C4" team (the functional equivalents of the city counsel, chief administrative officer, mayor's chief of staff, and chief financial officer).
- If focusing on a school shooting, invite officials from the local school, school district, and county.
- For planning victims' services, include local public health officials, a representative of the American Red Cross, and victim advocates.
- If support and services from other cities will be needed, invite them.
- A facilitator is recommended to ask questions, observe, and take notes.

2. What Should be Accomplished?

During your tabletop, the participants should accomplish some or all of the following:

- Develop a communication protocol for press briefings and social media messaging.
- Define roles of city agencies and local partners (e.g., volunteers, businesses, faith leaders). Also identify national partners that may be needed during a response and establish relationships in advance. National partners include the American Red Cross and the FBI.
- Review the emergency operations plan and update to include a mass casualty incident, if needed.
- Ensure mutual aid agreements for law enforcement and trauma care are in place.

- Ensure local law enforcement and fire agencies have the necessary training and equipment.
- Plan services for victims and families with experts from the American Red Cross and the National Mass Violence Center.
- Consider preparedness actions for schools, including threat assessment, lockdown drills, and mental health resources.
- Determine how the city will establish the victims' fund and plan follow-up actions.
- Identify potential liability for the city and develop strategies to mitigate exposure.
- Identify training and resource gaps and form a plan to address them.
- Ensure your first responder agencies have a program to support officials who respond.
- Identify key points of contact, distribute contact information, and create a call list.

3. How to Organize a Tabletop?

The tabletop can involve an actual scenario, with each participant making decisions as the event unfolds. Or it can focus on one aspect of the response, such as planning victim services. Or it can be an informal discussion among agency heads to clarify roles and identify training needs. Participants can consult the Mass Shooting Protocol and Playbook in preparation for the tabletop.

Suggested approach for a formal exercise:

- **Plenary session:** Led by the mayor. Make introductions, review the mass shooting timeline, and discuss scenarios. A facilitator guides the discussion.
- **Breakout groups:** Discuss specific issues (e.g., communications, emergency management, victim services, law enforcement training, donations and volunteer management, legal issues, long-term response).
- **Reconvene plenary for debrief:** Breakout groups brief the mayor or city manager on their discussions and decisions. Participants agree on outcomes, discuss lessons learned, and identify next steps.
- The facilitator drafts an after action review.

4. When/How Long Should It Last?

- Schedule a full-scale tabletop once a year and make it a standing practice. Specific issue planning can take place quarterly or as needed.
- A tabletop discussion can last an hour or two. An exercise using a detailed scenario may last half a day.
- The mayor or city manager should lead the exercise and be present for its entirety.



5. Why Host a Tabletop?

A tabletop exercise ensures your community is prepared for an emergency and will help you avoid preventable mistakes. Additional benefits include:

- Help participants perform confidently during an emergency.
- Strengthen relationships with law enforcement partners.
- Make key decisions (e.g., Notification Center locations) in advance.
- Allow participants to ask questions and make mistakes without consequences.
- Hone emergency messaging and communication protocols.
- Manage difficult personalities and avoid political rhetoric.
- Identify key partners and gather their contact information.
- Give the city attorney time to understand and minimize legal risks.
- Ensure cooperation and align communication and response protocols across jurisdictions.
- Strengthen ties with the business community.
- Help city officials understand the scale of support needed by survivors, families, first responders, and the community.
- Reassure key constituents that the city is prepared for an extreme emergency.

Appendix B:

Managing Visits from Elected Officials

This appendix is intended to supplement **Chapter 1, Crisis Communications** by providing best practice tips for managing visiting VIPs.

The mayors we interviewed spoke of the influx of elected officials in the aftermath of a mass shooting. These visitors included the President of the United States (POTUS), U.S. senators, state representatives, governors, local officials from the region, and city counselors. These elected officials often want to speak at press conferences, meet victims, and visit the crime scene. Their arrival may burden your overstretched staff and pose a messaging challenge. Without advance planning, their very presence can politicize the shooting and divide victims and their families when unity is most important. Nevertheless, hosting these visitors is an important part of your role and can provide an excellent opportunity to communicate your city's needs and advocate for action. Directed properly, elected officials can contribute to healing the community.

Advance Planning

As part of preparedness planning for a mass shooting, think about how your city will manage a POTUS or high-level VIP visit. Your planning can include communications, staffing, security, accommodations, itinerary, and advocacy. Consider the messages the VIP could deliver, or actions the VIP could take, that would benefit your community. Engage with community partners (e.g., school officials, victim services providers, and others) to solicit their input for a visit. Evaluate resources, funding, and staffing needs.

Communications

The question of whether visiting VIPs will be permitted to speak to the press should be part of any communication protocol you develop. As elected officials, they will naturally want to speak to the press. As “communicator-in-chief,” you should determine whether that would be appropriate. Above all, your goal is to ensure the remarks of elected officials do not politicize the tragedy. Your communications team can work with the VIP's staff to help set their expectations, coordinate messaging, and identify ways the VIP can serve the needs of your community.

Leaders in Action: Managing VIPs at a Press Conference

Pennsylvania's Governor Tom Wolf, U.S. Senator Toomey, and other senior elected officials happened to be in Pittsburgh on the day of the Tree of Life shooting. Mayor Peduto decided city officials should be the primary speakers at the first press conference. He spoke first, followed by law enforcement officials, who spoke about the response and the investigation. The city public information officer decided when visiting officials could speak at later press conferences. Visiting elected officials were invited to attend the first vigil the next day but were not invited to speak. Mayor Peduto spoke, as did Jewish community leaders and a visiting Israeli dignitary.



The mayors spoke of decisions they made to manage the communications challenges posed by visiting elected officials. These included:

- Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto chose not to allow state and national elected officials to speak at the first press conference and vigil.
- Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer recommended securing the site of press conferences to control the access of local elected officials to the press pool (they can still speak to the press one-on-one).
- Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley recommended that President Trump not visit the site of the shooting because she was concerned his remarks would be divisive.
- After witnessing the distress to family members caused by remarks given by elected officials at the city's first vigil, Parkland Mayor Hunschofsky invited elected officials to the city's first annual remembrance but did not invite them to speak. The mayor explained, "if you let one speak, you have to let everyone speak."
- In Nashville, First Lady Jill Biden attended the vigil for the victims of the Covenant School shooting but did not speak.

Itinerary: Help the VIP to be Helpful

Political polarization around gun violence is a reality in the United States. It is therefore important to consider how to prevent a VIP from sensationalizing the shooting for political gain or inadvertently. Mayor Whaley recommended focusing the VIP's visit on activities that could be healing to the victims or the greater community.

It may be prudent to manage the VIP's expectations before meeting with victims. Deputy Chief of Venues Officer Craig Borkon, who helped establish and operate Orlando's Family Assistance Center, spoke of the importance of preparing officials to meet with families. In Orlando, the American Red Cross briefed VIPs to help them understand what to expect and how to speak appropriately with victims' families.

Managing a POTUS Visit

We heard from several mayors that a Presidential visit poses unique challenges. These visits require massive coordination and logistical support among local government, local law enforcement, the White House Advance Team, and the U.S. Secret Service. This comes at a time when local law enforcement officers are working overtime on the investigation and fulfilling security needs and traffic control related to the shooting. In addition, the arrival of POTUS can be polarizing and bring unwelcome political attention.

If your city has previously hosted a presidential visit, you may have protocols and systems in place. If not, the following checklist summarizes what to expect and offers suggestions on how to manage a visit.

- Appoint a team to manage the visit. Its members should coordinate with White House staffers who are planning the visit. Involve your public safety and citywide emergency management team in the planning process.
- Assign a "control officer" to be the primary point of contact for the city.
- Discuss the city's needs with the White House advance staffer to help set expectations for the visit.

- Propose activities that will be useful to the city's recovery, which could include meeting with families, staging a press conference, visiting the site of the shooting, or meeting with local elected officials, first responders, or community representatives.
- Assess possible venues where meetings or press conferences can take place. Start planning for crowd control, security, traffic planning, and free speech zones for protesters outside any site POTUS will visit.
- If overnight accommodations are required, identify hotels with adequate space and perimeter control.
- Significant police overtime may be required. Ask about reimbursement of security and other costs.
- Your communications team will need to coordinate with the press.
- Brief community leaders about plans for the visit. Ensure meetings with POTUS are as inclusive as possible. Invite victims and family members, representatives of impacted communities, other community leaders, and first responders. But first consult with them to determine whether they wish to meet the President.



Image 1: President Donald J. Trump and First Lady Melania Trump are greeted by Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley and other state and local officials on Wednesday, August 7, 2019, at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

Leaders in Action: Managing a Presidential Visit

During a time of heightened political division, some of your constituents will be angry if you host a POTUS visit. In his first term, President Donald J. Trump visited El Paso and Dayton after the back-to-back mass shootings in those cities in 2019.

El Paso Mayor Dee Margo explained that his choice to welcome the President to El Paso was the “right thing to do” after a tragedy.

Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley’s decision to host President Trump likewise fueled anger from her constituents on both sides of the political spectrum. She explained that the President’s visit posed a challenge because it prolonged the intense media pressure and politicized the shooting. The mayor later told the press that her decision to join the President during his Dayton visit was not an easy one. She believed the President was a divisive figure whose presence could fracture her grieving city. Some residents protested the visit.

However, the mayor considered it her duty to greet him. She met briefly with President Trump and directed him to activities she believed would be healing, such as meetings with victims and medical staff at the hospital, and with first responders. She also used the opportunity to urge the President to “do something” to prevent gun violence.

Illustrating the challenges mayors may encounter when handling the visit of a controversial leader, President Trump criticized Mayor Whaley’s handling of the visit.¹ Both mayors received death threats following his visit.



¹Morin, Rebecca. “Trump’s Ohio Visit: Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley Confused by Trump tweet.” USA Today, 2019. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/08/07/trumps-ohio-visit-dayton-mayor-nan-whaley-confused-president-tweets/1946291001/>.

Appendix C: Funding Sources for Cities

The cost of responding to a mass shooting is enormous. This appendix lists potential funding sources for reimbursement of expenses incurred by your community. It is organized by the following categories:

- Crime Victim Compensation
- Law Enforcement Expenses
- Emergency Response Costs
- Family Assistance and Resiliency Centers
- School Violence Prevention and School Shooting Response

This appendix is necessarily incomplete, especially where state resources are concerned. Also, federal resources may be affected by 2025 budget cuts. However, it provides pointers to guide your research.

Crime Victim Compensation

Both federal and state agencies provide direct financial support to victims of crime, including victims of a public mass shooting. Victim advocates can help connect victims to these compensation sources, which are summarized below.

State Funding

Each state's victim assistance program is different, but most are funded by Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grants to states. The VOCA Compensation program provides grants to every state, the District of Columbia, and every territory to fund eligible crime victim compensation programs. Victim advocates can help victims and family members understand whether they are eligible for payment and identify any barriers to receiving compensation. Generally, crime victim compensation programs pay for out-of-pocket expenses that were not already covered by other programs, including medical care, mental health counseling, lost time at work, and funerals. They are usually reimbursement-based, meaning that victims shoulder the upfront costs.

Important note: If a victim accepts funds from another source (such as money from a victims' fund established with donations from the public) to cover an expense that state funds would have covered, they cannot receive reimbursement for those costs from their state program. Some states also place eligibility limits on the VOCA funds, such as by denying claims of victims who have criminal records.

Key Resources: Crime Victim Compensation and VOCA Funding



VOCA Grants to States: Webpage that provides links to state agencies that provides VOCA funds.¹

National Association of Crime Victim Compensation Boards, Compensation Protocol: This manual provides managers of crime victim compensation programs with an updated mass casualty protocol that reflects newly identified practices and lessons learned from those who have responded to mass casualty events.²

Federal Funding

As of the writing of this appendix, federal funding for agencies listed below may be limited or unavailable. Contact the agency directly for information.

Antiterrorism Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP)

The AEAP of the U.S. Department of Justice provides technical assistance and compensation to institutional applicants, such as state victim assistance and compensation programs, public agencies, Indian tribal governments, U.S. attorneys' offices, and higher education institutions. Grants are by invitation only, but you may contact your state agency to learn whether you might be invited to access AEAP funds for victim services.³

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

In the event of a major disaster declaration, as in the case of a hurricane or major terror attack (like 9/11), the Stafford Act authorizes funding through the FEMA Individual Assistance program, which offers reimbursement to individuals for emergency services like shelter and medical expenses. See FEMA Individual Assistance for more information.

To be eligible for general FEMA funding to reimburse costs related to a mass shooting, a city must provide evidence of extensive property damage, such as damage caused by fire or an explosion, or demonstrate exhaustion of local resources. At the time of this writing, general FEMA funds have not been granted to any city to cover the cost of responding to a mass shooting as they have for other "major disasters."⁴ In the case of the Pulse shooting, the request for FEMA funding was denied based on failure to show an "unmet need" not covered by state or local response.

¹Office for Victims of Crime. "Help for Victims." Accessed February 13, 2025. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/help-for-victims/help-in-your-state>.

²Office for Victims of Crime. "Compensation Protocol: A Guide to Responding to Mass Casualty Incidents." October 2004. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/library/publications/compensation-protocol-guide-responding-mass-casualty-incidents>.

³Office for Victims of Crime. "Antiterrorism and Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP)." Accessed February 13, 2025. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/aeap/overview>.

⁴Congressional Research Service. "Stafford Act Assistance and Acts of Terrorism." March 1, 2023. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/R44801.pdf>.

Small Business Administration (SBA) Disaster Loan Program

FEMA offers the SBA Disaster Loan Program to provide low-interest loans for costs incurred by municipalities or businesses that are not covered by insurance or other sources. Orlando obtained a number of SBA loans, totaling \$353k, to assist local businesses that were impacted by the Pulse shooting. Several counties in Illinois obtained SBA loans to aid businesses that were impacted by the Highland Park shooting.⁵

Key Resources: FEMA and SBA funding

Stafford Act Assistance and Acts of Terrorism: Congressional Research Service report explaining the applicability of Stafford Act assistance to acts of terrorism and mass shootings.⁶



Disaster Assistance: information about the SBA Disaster Loan Program.⁷

Law Enforcement Expenses

Police Overtime

Police overtime pay is a major expense following a mass shooting. There are two federal sources of funding to consult.

Emergency Federal Law Enforcement Assistance (EFLEA) Program

The EFLEA Program can help municipalities and law enforcement agencies mitigate the cost of responding to a mass shooting, including to cover emergency costs borne by police departments.⁸ Note that it is often by invitation only.

Justice Assistance Grants (JAG) Program

The Justice Department's Byrne JAG program provides grants to public safety organizations for overtime or other "precipitous" increases in expenses resulting from mass violence. Both state agencies and local governments are eligible to apply, so you may need to coordinate your plans for an application with your state's law enforcement agency. After the school shooting in Parkland, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement received a JAG grant of \$1 million to defray overtime costs for police from 18 different agencies that responded to the shooting.⁹

⁵Illinois.gov. "Gov. Pritzker Announces SBA Disaster Declaration Approval for Highland Park Shooting." July 29, 2022. <https://www.illinois.gov/news/press-release.25237.html>.

⁶Congressional Research Service. "Stafford Act Assistance and Acts of Terrorism." March 1, 2023. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesecc/R44801.pdf>.

⁷Small Business Administration. "Disaster assistance." Accessed February 13, 2025. <https://www.sba.gov/funding-programs/disaster-assistance>.

⁸Bureau of Justice Assistance. "Emergency Federal Law Enforcement Assistance (EFLEA) Program." December 16, 2024. <https://bj.a.ojp.gov/program/eflea/overview>.

⁹Department of Justice. "Justice Department Announces \$1 Million to Florida Law Enforcement and First Responders Who Supported the Parkland High School Shooting." U.S. Department of Justice, April 23, 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-1-million-florida-law-enforcement-and-first-responders-who>.

Death or Injury of a Law Enforcement Officer

The Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program (PSOB) provides death and educational benefits to the survivors of fallen law enforcement officers, firefighters, and other first responders, and disability benefits to officers catastrophically injured in the line of duty. For more information, please see the Bureau of Justice Assistance website.

Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness

Funding opportunities are available through the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) office that cover mental health expenses for law enforcement agencies.¹⁰

Emergency Response Costs

State Funding

States employ a variety of strategies to mitigate the costs of disasters within their jurisdictions. In many ways, state agencies are the front line of disaster response, paying upfront for costs that may later be reimbursed by the federal government. For example, Texas released \$5.5 million in funding after the El Paso shooting to pay for psychological first aid, state behavioral health services, county reimbursements related to the prosecution, school-based mental health services, a Resiliency Center, and more.¹¹ Therefore, consult state public health agencies, emergency response agencies, and state law enforcement to identify potential grant opportunities, which may include:

- Disaster account or flexible contingency funds that can be used to cover costs from natural disasters or emergencies (guidelines vary by state)
- Rainy day or reserve funds (nearly half of the states allow these funds to be used for emergencies)
- Moving funds between state agencies (transfer authority) or authorizing funds within an agency's budget to be used for disaster relief (sometimes made possible by the state declaration of emergency)

Note that some of these funding resources may only be used to cover the costs borne by the state in responding, rather than expenses incurred by the city's response.

Federal Funding: Antiterrorism and Emergency Assistance Program (AEAP)

In addition to providing crime victim compensation as mentioned above, the Office for Victims of Crime offers three other funding streams through its AEAP: (1) crisis response (2) consequence management, and (3) criminal justice support. While applications are by invitation only, local governments are among eligible applicants. Note that the office encourages applications to be coordinated with state agencies and local chapters of organizations such as the American Red Cross and United Way.

¹⁰Community Oriented Policing Services. "Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEMHWA) Program." U.S. Department of Justice. Accessed February 10, 2025. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/lemhwa>.

¹¹Office of the Texas Governor. "Governor Abbott Meets With Lawmakers Following El Paso Shooting." August 7, 2019. <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-meets-with-lawmakers-following-el-paso-shooting>.

Consultants at the Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Program (OVC TTAC) can help you determine whether your city may be eligible to apply for AEAP funding and prepare you to meet application requirements if invited. In the past, AEAP funds have been used to cover, in part, costs associated with the Family Assistance and Resiliency Centers. Note that the grant process is complicated and reimbursement takes time.

Family Assistance and Resiliency Centers

As noted above, OVC TTAC consultants can help you write a grant proposal for AEAP funding to help fund victim service centers. Other potential funding sources include state funds, the United Way, and private foundations. For example, the State of Florida and Heart of Florida United Way partnered to fund the Orlando United Assistance Center, the Resiliency Center for Pulse victims. In Texas, the state provided funding for the Resiliency Center for victims in El Paso.

School Shooting Prevention and Response

Prevention

There may be funding available in FY 2025 and future years for local governments interested in preventing school violence. The Office of Justice Programs will manage \$40 million in supplemental funding under the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) for the STOP School Violence program. This funding supports K–12 prevention by enhancing school climate, establishing behavioral threat assessment and intervention teams, deploying anonymous reporting tools, and deploying other evidence-based strategies. Congress has reduced some BSCA appropriations, so future funding levels may vary—applicants should check Department of Justice announcements for current amounts and deadlines. For more information about prevention strategies, see **Appendix D, Strategies to Prevent Mass Shootings**.

Another noteworthy funding source is the COPS School Violence Prevention Program (SVPP) for coordination with law enforcement, training, and hardening security measures at school buildings.¹²

Response

In addition to the funding sources listed in this appendix, schools that have responded to a mass shooting may be eligible for funding specifically for educational institutions.

One possible resource is the Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV). Local education agencies and institutions of higher education that have experienced a traumatic event of “such magnitude as to severely disrupt the teaching and learning environment” are eligible to apply. This funding source may also be available for municipalities.¹³

¹²Community Oriented Policing Services. “School Violence Prevention Program (SVPP).” Accessed February 17, 2025. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/svpp>.

¹³<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/response-programs/safe-and-supportive-schools/school-emergency-response-to-violence-project-serv>

Appendix D: Strategies to Prevent Mass Shootings

“By understanding the warning signs and knowing how to connect individuals with resources, communities can play a vital role in stopping violence before it begins.”

– Brittany Prescott, Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Unit Manager,
Michigan State Police

Many mass shooters exhibit clear warning signs before their attacks, including suicidal ideation, violent threats, and escalating behaviors. These warning signs can be identified and disrupted through coordinated intervention strategies. This appendix outlines how Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) programs, Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs), and suicide prevention strategies can be deployed at the local level to reduce the risk that a would-be shooter will carry out their deadly plans.

Each of these strategies targets a different stage of intervention. BTAM programs identify and manage threats before violence occurs. ERPO laws provide a legal tool to temporarily remove firearms from those who pose an immediate risk. Suicide prevention measures address the broader crisis of suicide (which accounts for over 60 percent of gun fatalities in the United States), while potentially preventing mass violence. When implemented together, these approaches strengthen public safety and reduce the risk of mass violence.

Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Programs

On October 25, 2023, an Army reservist opened fire in a bowling alley and a local bar in Lewiston, Maine. The attacks resulted in 18 fatalities and 13 injuries.¹ Prior to the attack, the shooter exhibited significant mental health issues. In July 2023, he was hospitalized for two weeks after reporting hearing voices and expressing a desire to harm others. A close friend, deeply concerned about the shooter’s deteriorating mental state, took proactive steps to prevent a potential tragedy. He alerted both the base commander and law enforcement officials about the escalating risk. However, despite this clear warning, no action was taken that might have prevented the mass shooting.²

The Lewiston shooting underscores the critical need for effective BTAM programs to identify and mitigate potential threats before they result in violence. Mayors and local leaders can play a crucial role in promoting and implementing these programs.

¹The Associated Press, Northeastern University, and USA Today. “Mass Killing Database: Revealing Trends, Details and Anguish of Every US Event since 2006.” *USA Today*, February 9, 2024. <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2022/08/18/mass-killings-database-us-events-since-2006/9705311002/>

²Ramer, Holly, Nick Perry, and David Sharp. “He Warned Authorities about the Maine Gunman, but They Downplayed His Texts. Now He’s Speaking out.” AP News, January 11, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/lewiston-maine-shooting-warning-signs-robert-card-e154aac79b4f9d42a5381c20cd6618dd>.

What is BTAM?

BTAM is a multidisciplinary strategy designed to identify and mitigate threats before they escalate into violence. An individual engaging in concerning or threatening behavior is referred to a local, state, or school-based BTAM team. These teams typically consist of law enforcement, mental health professionals, educators, and community advocates who work together to evaluate the threat posed by the individual and develop the appropriate response.³

Brittany Prescott, BTAM Unit Manager for the Michigan State Police,⁴ explained that the BTAM plan for an individual often includes one or more of four core strategies:

- 1. Mental Health Intervention:** Evaluate the individual and facilitate necessary care.
- 2. Resource Connection:** Link to social services, health care, and community-based support.
- 3. Watch and Wait:** Monitor for escalating behavior, prepare to act as needed.
- 4. Arrest:** For cases posing an immediate and actionable threat.

State law enforcement fusion centers can share information across state lines if the individual moves. Information sharing across jurisdictions promotes public safety. To ensure appropriate oversight and public trust, fusion centers should operate under appropriate federal guidelines and be subject to regular independent review.⁵

BTAM in Schools

At least 12 states have established a school-based BTAM program.⁶ These programs can help identify threats early and provide appropriate support to students in crisis, potentially preventing suicide as well as school-based violence. Standardized procedures across districts are needed to ensure consistent responses and continuity of services for students who transfer between schools.

Model Programs and Resources

Some states have developed BTAM models that serve as models for others. North Carolina pioneered state-level BTAM programs and trains teams in other states. Florida's BTAM program—developed after the Parkland shooting—is managed by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. It is legislatively mandated and receives dedicated funding for comprehensive training, staffing, and resources.⁷

³Fields, Ashleigh. "Secret Service Calls for New Local Law Enforcement Units in Push to Prevent Mass Shootings." *The Hill*, October 16, 2024. <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/4936117-secret-service-encourages-behavioral-assessment-units/>.

⁴<https://www.michigan.gov/msp/divisions/intel-ops/mioc/btam>

⁵German, Mike, Rachel Levinson-Waldman, and Kaylana Mueller-Hsia. "Ending Fusion Center Abuses." Brennan Center for Justice, December 15, 2022. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/ending-fusion-center-abuses>.

⁶<https://blog.securly.com/btam-legislation/>

⁷Florida Department of Education. "Behavioral Threat Management." Florida Department of Education, March 11, 2025. <https://www.fldoe.org/safe-schools/threat-assessment.stml>.

Key resources to help communities and leaders develop BTAM programs:

- **National Threat Evaluation and Reporting (NTER) Program:** The Department of Homeland Security NTER program provides training for local leaders and agencies. Sessions range from a one-hour overview to a three-day course that equips participants to establish BTAM teams.⁸
- **Association of Threat Assessment Professionals (ATAP):** A global organization offering networking, training, and resources for professionals in threat assessment.⁹
- **Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant:** This Department of Homeland Security program is responsible for promoting prevention strategies and offers grants to fund BTAM programs.¹⁰



The Role of Mayors

While mayors are not directly responsible for creating or managing BTAM teams, their leadership is essential in promoting these programs. Actions mayors can take include:

- **Learn about BTAM:** Mayors can familiarize themselves with BTAM principles and available state resources, and advocate for the adoption of a community-based program.
- **Educate the public:** Initiatives like Michigan’s “Stop a Plot” campaign serve as models. This campaign educates the public on recognizing warning signs of potential threats and provides avenues for reporting concerns confidentially. By promoting similar programs, mayors can empower community members to actively participate in violence prevention efforts.
- **Secure funding:** Collaborate with law enforcement agencies to pursue grants from the Department of Homeland Security to support BTAM programs. The Department of Homeland Security’s Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention grant program offers financial assistance to develop and enhance local prevention capabilities.¹¹
- **State-level advocacy:** Mayors can influence state legislators to mandate and finance statewide BTAM programs. Statewide initiatives ensure a cohesive and standardized approach to threat assessment, enhancing the effectiveness of interventions. For example, the New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services has allocated funds to build capabilities for preventing targeted violence through Threat Assessment and Management teams.¹²
- **School BTAM teams:** Mayors can urge school districts to adopt BTAM programs to identify and manage potential threats within educational settings. Many states offer training and resources to help schools establish these programs.

⁸U.S. Department of Homeland Security. “National Threat Evaluation and Reporting Program Office.” Homeland Security, March 6, 2025. <https://www.dhs.gov/nter>.

⁹Association of Threat Assessment Professionals. “What is ATAP?” Accessed March 11, 2025. <https://www.atapworldwide.org/page/aboutus>.

¹⁰U.S. Department of Homeland Security. “Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program: Applicant Resources.” Homeland Security, February 4, 2025. <https://www.dhs.gov/targeted-violence-and-terrorism-prevention-grant-program-applicant-resources>.

¹¹U.S. Department of Homeland Security. “Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program: Applicant Resources.” Homeland Security, February 4, 2025. <https://www.dhs.gov/targeted-violence-and-terrorism-prevention-grant-program-applicant-resources>.

¹²New York State. “Governor Hochul Awards \$10 Million Through Domestic Terrorism Prevention Grant Program,” October 3, 2024. <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-awards-10-million-through-domestic-terrorism-prevention-grant-program>.

Extreme Risk Protection Order Laws

Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs), commonly known as red flag laws, are a proactive tool that may prevent mass shootings by temporarily removing firearms from individuals deemed a significant risk to themselves or others. ERPO laws allow family members, law enforcement officers, and, in some jurisdictions, educators or health care professionals, to petition a court for an ERPO. If the court determines that the individual poses a credible threat, it can order the temporary removal of firearms and prohibit future purchases for a specified period, usually one year. These laws include legal safeguards, such as hearings to contest the order, to balance public safety with individual rights.

Effectiveness in Preventing Mass Shootings

The effectiveness of ERPO laws in preventing mass shootings stems from their capacity to intervene when individuals exhibit warning signs. Research from the National Collaborative on Gun Violence Research found that approximately 10 percent of ERPOs issued in six states were in response to mass shooting threats, with K–12 schools being the most common targets.¹³ Documented cases also show where an ERPO was used to remove a gun from an individual planning a mass shooting.¹⁴

In addition, researchers have found that Indiana’s ERPO law reduced suicides by 7.5 percent.¹⁵ As discussed in the section below, mass shooters are often suicidal. Many kill themselves during their attack. Therefore, actions to prevent suicide may also help prevent mass shootings.

Real-World Applications and Challenges

Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have enacted ERPO laws, many in response to mass shootings. However, an Associated Press analysis found that these laws are often underutilized due to limited public awareness and resistance from some authorities.¹⁶

Some jurisdictions have actively resisted enforcing ERPO laws—with real-world consequences. In Colorado, the state enacted an ERPO law in 2019, but officials in El Paso County declared it a “Second Amendment sanctuary” and refused to implement it. In 2022, a gunman killed five people and injured 25 others at the Club Q nightclub in Colorado Springs. Just a year earlier, he had been arrested for kidnapping and threatening to kill his grandparents, reportedly stating he would become the “next mass killer.” Despite these warning signs, local authorities made no attempt to use the ERPO law to remove his firearms. Victims later filed wrongful death lawsuits against the county, arguing that its failure to act contributed to the tragedy.¹⁷ Although the case was dismissed in July 2025, the judge emphasized that the officials’ inaction reflected a “conscious and intentional disregard of a known and unjustifiable risk” and amounted to a “moral abdication.”

¹³Morrall, Andrew R., Liisa Ecola, and Heather McCracken. “The National Collaborative on Gun Violence Research: Five Years of Accomplishments.” RAND, August 6, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/08/the-national-collaborative-on-gun-violence-research.html>.

¹⁴Wintemute, Garen J., Veronica A. Pear, Julia P. Schleimer, Rocco Pallin, Sydney Sohl, Nicole Kravitz-Wirtz, and Elizabeth A. Tomsich. “Extreme Risk Protection Orders Intended to Prevent Mass Shootings: A Case Series.” *Annals of Internal Medicine* 171, no. 9 (November 5, 2019): 655–58. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M19-2162>.

¹⁵Kivisto, Aaron J., and Peter Lee Phalen. “Effects of Risk-Based Firearm Seizure Laws in Connecticut and Indiana on Suicide Rates, 1981-2015.” *Psychiatric Services (Washington, D.C.)* 69, no. 8 (August 1, 2018): 855–62. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201700250>.

¹⁶Condon, Bernard. “Red Flag Laws Get Little Use as Shootings, Gun Deaths Soar.” AP News, September 2, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-highland-park-july-4-gun-violence-chicago-politics-5165bbcde8771ebf09e7641674d0de9a>.

¹⁷Bedayn, Jesse. “Victims of 2022 Mass Shooting at an LGBTQ+ Club Sue County for Not Enforcing Red Flag Laws.” AP News, November 19, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/club-q-colorado-springs-mass-shooting-lawsuit-ad1274288555cf3f19aaffc27084ea9e>.

The mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine, described above, is another incident in which law enforcement failed to use an existing ERPO law to disarm a potential shooter—but for different reasons. Maine’s narrowly drafted “yellow flag” law requires police to take an individual into protective custody, followed by a formal mental health evaluation and hospital admission, before a petition to remove firearms can be filed. In the Lewiston case, although the shooter exhibited clear warning signs, law enforcement did not initiate the process, and the shooter was never hospitalized, rendering the law unusable. This tragedy highlights how procedural complexity can discourage the use of preventive tools. If your state has an ERPO law, consider asking your legal counsel to review it to ensure it is actionable and effective before a crisis escalates, and to advocate for reform if it is not.

By contrast, Florida’s ERPO law—enacted after the Parkland tragedy—has been used more than 12,000 times to remove firearms from individuals deemed dangerous. While it remains controversial among some conservative lawmakers, its widespread application demonstrates that ERPOs can be effectively implemented to prevent suicide and mass violence, even in politically conservative states.¹⁸ Still, mechanisms are needed to ensure that ERPO usage data are regularly evaluated, including assessments of potential disparate impacts on historically marginalized communities.

The Role of Mayors

Despite these challenges, ERPO laws remain an important preventive tool. Addressing barriers to implementation—whether political, legal, or logistical—can help maximize their effectiveness. Actions mayors can take include:

- **Collaborate with law enforcement agencies:** Establish strong partnerships with local law enforcement to address both ideological and practical challenges in ERPO enforcement. Regular training and open dialogue can ensure officers understand the importance of ERPOs, are equipped to implement them effectively, and are able to assist ERPO petitioners.
- **Initiate public education campaigns** to help residents learn how to initiate ERPO petitions. The Ad Council has developed campaigns to raise awareness about extreme risk laws, helping communities understand how to use these tools as crisis intervention measures.¹⁹
- **Track ERPO usage data:** Establish a system to monitor ERPO applications and outcomes in your community.²⁰ Analyzing these data can help identify barriers to use, such as low uptake in communities that distrust law enforcement or are wary of firearm restrictions, and guide efforts to improve the law’s effectiveness. Regular reporting can also strengthen public confidence.
- **In states with narrow “yellow flag” laws,** mayors can advocate for reform that simplifies the process and brings the law in line with broader, more effective “red flag” models.
- **In states without ERPO laws,** mayors can advocate for their passage, highlighting the law’s effectiveness in preventing both suicides and mass shootings. The Ohio Mayors Alliance, for instance, has noted that the absence of ERPO legislation limits the state’s ability to compete for federal funding aimed at crisis intervention.²¹

¹⁸Odzer, Ari. “DeSantis Reaffirms Opposition to Red Flag Law as Maine’s Gun Control Laws under Spotlight.” NBC 6 South Florida, October 27, 2023. <https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/desantis-reaffirms-opposition-to-red-flag-law-as-maines-gun-control-laws-under-spotlight/3144856/>.

¹⁹Ad Council. “Extreme Risk Laws Education Campaign.” Accessed March 11, 2025. <https://www.adcouncil.org/campaign/extreme-risk-laws-education>.

²⁰Morral, Andrew R., Liisa Ecola, and Heather McCracken. “The National Collaborative on Gun Violence Research: Five Years of Accomplishments.” RAND, August 6, 2024. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/08/the-national-collaborative-on-gun-violence-research.html>.

²¹Ohio Mayors Alliance. “Policy Recommendations for 2023 from the Ohio Mayors Alliance to Members of the Ohio General Assembly and Ohio’s Statewide Executive Officeholders.” Ohio Mayors Alliance, January 2023. https://ohiomayorsalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/OMA_MayorsRecommendations.pdf.

Key Resources: Improving Implementation of ERPO Laws



Extreme Risk Protection Orders: Implementation in a Social Justice Context: This analysis of ERPO laws by Northeastern Law School provides recommendations to improve implementation.²²

National Extreme Risk Protection Order Resource Center: An online resource for ERPO implementers hosted by The Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance.²³

Suicide Prevention

Thirty percent of mass shooters commit suicide during their rampage, according to the Associated Press/USA Today/Northeastern University Mass Killing Database.²⁴ This fact provides hope that some of these horrific crimes can be prevented by focusing on suicide prevention.

Secure Firearm Storage Advocacy

Suicide is the leading cause of gun deaths in the United States, accounting for nearly 60 percent of gun deaths.²⁵ Research shows that firearm access triples the risk that a household member will commit suicide.²⁶ This does not mean responsible gun owners must give up their firearms. However, a public education campaign can encourage gun owners to temporarily remove or secure firearms when a household member is in crisis. Promoting secure storage practices, such as using gun safes and lockboxes, can prevent both suicides and unauthorized firearm access by minors.

Notably, over 80 percent of K12 school mass shootings, including the Sandy Hook shooting in 2014, involved a firearm that belonged to a family member or neighbor.²⁷ These facts highlight the importance of promoting secure firearm storage to parents with school-age children to prevent youth suicide (which is on the rise) and school shootings of every kind.²⁸

²²Alturaigi, Hailah, Aidan Cullinane, Taylor Dial, Mary Lemay, Mia Lin, Cecilia MacArthur, Alexandre Miranda, et al. *Extreme Risk Protection Orders: Implementation in a Social Justice Context*. Northeastern University School of Law, Spring 2020. https://www.phaionline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Extreme-Risk-Protection-Orders-Implementation-in-a-Social-Justice-Context.Final_.pdf.

²³The National ERPO Resource Center. "National Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) Resource Center." Accessed March 11, 2025. <https://erpo.org/>.

²⁴The Associated Press, Northeastern University, and USA Today. "Mass Killing Database: Revealing Trends, Details and Anguish of Every US Event since 2006." *USA Today*, February 9, 2024. <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2022/08/18/mass-killings-database-us-events-since-2006/9705311002/>.

²⁵Gramlich, John. "What the Data Says about Gun Deaths in the U.S." Pew Research Center, March 5, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/05/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-us/>.

²⁶American Public Health Association. "Reducing Suicides by Firearms." American Public Health Association, November 13, 2018. <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/28/reducing-suicides-by-firearms>.

²⁷National Institute of Justice. "Public Mass Shootings: Database Amasses Details of a Half Century of U.S. Mass Shootings with Firearms, Generating Psychosocial Histories." February 3, 2022. <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/public-mass-shootings-database-amasses-details-half-century-us-mass-shootings>.

²⁸American Psychological Association. "APA Adopts Resolution on Secure Firearm Storage to Prevent Suicides." American Psychological Association, February 29, 2024. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2024/02/securing-firearms-storage-prevent-suicides>.

Secure firearm storage also prevents accidental gun injuries and deaths involving children. The number of children who die from guns every year has doubled over the past decade, rising to more than 3,500 in 2022, and many more children are seriously injured.²⁹ The best way to prevent gun-related injuries to children is to remove guns from the home or store them securely.³⁰

The Role of Mayors

Mayors can develop comprehensive public health strategies to reduce suicide among at-risk community members, which may also help prevent mass shootings. Suggested actions include:

- **Speak on suicide prevention themes when appropriate**, such as when a beloved community member has died by suicide or during national suicide awareness week.
- **Support at-risk veterans:** Veterans experience suicide at rates higher than the national average. Partner with other mayors to adopt measures and support programs to reduce veteran suicide. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has partnered with the Department of Veterans Affairs to bring the *Governor's and Mayor's Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families* to communities.³¹
- **Initiate public education campaigns to promote secure firearm storage** in partnership with law enforcement, community-based organizations, medical associations, mental health service providers, schools, and gun owners. The messaging can be crafted to meet the specific needs of the community. For example, you can highlight the mission of groups who offer free gun locks to gun owners. You can join school officials in recommending secure firearm storage to parents.
- **Provide options for voluntary firearm storage:** For example, the Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition has partnered with gun shops, businesses, law enforcement agencies, and public health departments to provide a network of places that offer voluntary, temporary gun storage during times of crisis.³² Most states now have a similar initiative.³³ Mayors can advocate for a similar initiative in their community.
- **Enhance community-based mental health services:** Invest in accessible mental health care, focusing on early intervention and support for those exhibiting signs of distress. The 2024 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention emphasizes the importance of community-based approaches to identify and support individuals at increased risk.³⁴

²⁹Villarreal, Silvia, Rose Kim, Elizabeth Wagner, Nandita Somayaji, Ari Davis, and Cassandra Crifasi. *Gun Violence in the United States 2022: Examining the Burden Among Children and Teens*. Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, September 2024. <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2024-09/2022-cgvs-gun-violence-in-the-united-states.pdf>.

³⁰Schaechter, Judy. "Guns in the Home: How to Keep Kids Safe." HealthyChildren.org, June 24, 2024. <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Handguns-in-the-Home.aspx>.

³¹Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "Governor's and Mayor's Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and Their Families." SAMHSA.gov, November 6, 2024. <https://www.samhsa.gov/technical-assistance/smvf/challenges>.

³²Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition. "Gun Storage Map." Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition, October 15, 2024. <https://coloradofirearmsafetycoalition.org/gun-storage-map/>.

³³<https://gunstoragemap.com>

³⁴Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "2024 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention." Department of Health and Human Services, April 15, 2024. <https://www.hhs.gov/programs/prevention-and-wellness/mental-health-substance-abuse/national-strategy-suicide-prevention/index.html>.

- **Suggest Sandy Hook Promise for local schools:** Sandy Hook Promise (a nonpartisan program established by parents of children killed in the Sandy Hook school shooting) has developed a program that empowers students to identify kids in crisis and report to the appropriate authority. This program has prevented suicides and school shootings by enabling timely interventions.³⁵
- **Address underlying socioeconomic factors:** Support initiatives that tackle issues such as unemployment, housing instability, and substance abuse, which can contribute to mental health crises and violent behaviors. A holistic public health approach recognizes the importance of addressing these problems to reduce incidents of suicide and mass shootings. For instance, a novel approach to preventing gun violence in at-risk communities is limiting the concentration of alcohol outlets in at-risk communities.^{36 37}

³⁵Sandy Hook Promise. "Safer Schools Through Proven Prevention Programs." Sandy Hook Promise. Accessed March 11, 2025. <https://www.sandyhookpromise.org/our-programs/program-overview/>.

³⁶Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, and Consortium for Risk-Based Firearm Policy. *Alcohol Misuse and Gun Violence: An Evidence-Based Approach for State Policy*. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, May 2023. <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023-may-cgvs-alcohol-misuse-and-gun-violence.pdf>.

³⁷Public Health Advocacy Institute. "A Mayor's Guide To Reducing Alcohol Retailer Density To Reduce Community Gun Violence." Northeastern University School of Law, 2024. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6532bd0da3b9227dacad21a9e/t/661d4e7e1a654a4c17add363/1713196671621/Alcohol+Retailer+Density+%26+Community+Violence.pdf>

Appendix E:

National Mass Violence Center Resources for Victims and Families

The National Mass Violence Center (NMVC) is an important resource for your community. Its primary role is to address the behavioral/mental health and victim assistance needs of victims, survivors, family members and friends, first responders, and communities impacted by a mass violence incident.

This appendix provides links to NMVC resources to help your community prepare for, and respond to, mass violence incidents of every type. We encourage you and your staff to consult NMVC resources when planning your community's victim service protocol, and to contact the NMVC should you need technical assistance following a mass shooting.

Resource for Mayors

The NMVC and U.S. Conference of Mayors prepared the ***Timeline for Mayors' Engagement of Victim Service Professionals & Behavioral and Mental Health Professionals in Advance and in the Aftermath of a Mass Violence Incident***. This tool offers an overview of how mayors and their executive teams can plan, learn, connect, and prepare for effective responses to mass violence incidents.¹

National Town Hall on Mass Violence

The **National Town Hall on Mass Violence** is a quarterly, virtual series that provides evidence-based resources and practices for mass violence preparedness, response, and recovery. It also provides a forum for the ongoing exchange of ideas discussing experiences, lessons learned, and best practices to improve community response to mass violence incidents. To access this series, choose the "National Town Halls" option on the "Learn" tab on the NMVC website (<https://nmvrc.org>). You can also register to receive announcements of upcoming Town Hall webinars.²

1. Overview of Mass Violence Resources (Jan. 27, 2022)
2. Mass Violence Readiness (May 5, 2022)
3. Mass Violence Response (July 14, 2022)
4. Mass Violence Recovery and Resilience (Oct. 13, 2022)
5. School-based Mass Violence Incidents: Addressing Student, Caregiver, and School Personnel Impact (May 25, 2023)
6. Road to Recovery for Mass Violence Survivors (August 24, 2023)
7. Helping the Helpers: Addressing Needs of First Responders Following MVIs (November 30, 2023)
8. Trauma Across the Lifespan of Mass Violence Survivors & Impacted Communities (February 22, 2024)
9. How to Create a Coordinated, Survivor-centric Community Response Plan for Mass Violence Incidents (May 14, 2024)

¹<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://nmvrc.org/media/bc2narpc/uscm-nmvrc-mvi-timeline.pdf>

²<https://nmvrc.org/learn/national-town-halls/>

10. Report Out from the First National Summit on Mass Violence Victims and Survivors (September 5, 2024)
11. Overview of the Three Centers Often Created in the Aftermath of Mass Violence Incidents (March 27, 2025)

Preparedness

- “Improving Community Preparedness Training & Technical Assistance” (ICP TTA) is an NMVC website with information, resources, and details about how to apply for technical assistance in planning and preparation from the NMVC.³
- “Prepare Your Community” provides information and links to resources that can strengthen a community’s readiness to respond to mass violence incidents.⁴
- “The Role of Victim Assistance Professionals in Preparing for Mass Violence Incidents” is a tip sheet to help you understand the resources and roles of your victim assistance partners.⁵
- “At-a-Glance: The Role of Victim Service Professionals” is an overview of the services and aid that victim services professionals bring to a mass violence incident response. Useful for those in your community or staff who may need background on the subject.⁶
- “Overview of Three Centers” is an overview of the three centers often created in the aftermath of a mass shooting: Friends and Relatives Center (aka Notification Center), Family Assistance Center, and Resiliency Center.⁷

Response

- “The FBI’s Trauma Notification Training” is a free online course that demonstrates a four-step approach to providing trauma or death notifications to next of kin. The course highlights various challenges as well as best practices for making notifications with professionalism, dignity, and compassion. Trauma Notification Training is also available as a free app.⁸
- “Planning and Implementation Guide: Comprehensive, Coordinated Victim Assistance for Mass Violence Trials” provides a framework to create and implement a Victim Services Management Plan for professionals who oversee the provision of victim/survivor and behavioral/mental health services and support for mass shootings. A second edition will be published in 2025.
- “After the Death Notification: Ten Guidelines for Assisting Victims & Survivors of Mass Violence” describes the continuum of care families of deceased victims will need.⁹

³<https://icptta.com/>

⁴<https://nmvrc.org/community-leaders/prepare-your-community/>

⁵<https://www.nmvrc.org/media/0ddft0pn/tipsheet11.pdf>

⁶<https://www.nmvrc.org/media/pobdrf1n/role-of-vsps-rrr-matrix.pdf>

⁷<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://nmvrc.org/media/lxkdgpes/overview-of-three-centers.pdf>

⁸<https://le.fbi.gov/trauma-notification-training/launch-course-instructor-resources>

⁹<https://www.nmvrc.org/media/fmcb5jxo/tipsheet10.pdf>

- “After an MVI: Helpful Hashtags and Social Media Accounts” provides information to shape appropriate language for use on the city’s social media accounts.¹⁰
- “Tips for Community Leaders: Establishing a Family Assistance Center (FAC),” provides best practices for establishing a Family Assistance Center in the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting.¹¹

Recovery

- “Rebuild Your Community” provides links to resources that will be helpful throughout the recovery phase.¹²
- “TRANSCEND” is a self-help app for victims and survivors.¹³

Resiliency

Following a mass shooting, a recognized best practice is to establish a physical Resiliency Center to help the affected community recover from trauma. Some communities also establish a virtual Resiliency Center to provide resources and support until a physical center can be established, or to serve individuals who cannot access the physical center. NMVC’s Virtual Resiliency Center provides resources to help individuals and communities recover from mass violence. For many communities recovering from mass violence, the Virtual Resilience Center (VRC) provides a dedicated page with local resources and notifications.¹⁴

Continuing Education

- “SNAPS webinar series” is a series of brief (10–20 minutes) presentations on an array of topics. They are skills-focused, with concise key objectives or takeaways, and include additional resources for participants to access further information.¹⁵
- “Mass Violence Podcast” features conversations with experts about a variety of topics related to mass violence preparedness, response, recovery, and resiliency.¹⁶

¹¹<https://www.nmvvrc.org/media/fu2j4is3/tipsheet7.pdf>

¹²<https://www.nmvvrc.org/media/tkgfidqq/tipsheet19.pdf>

¹³<https://www.nmvvrc.org/community-leaders/rebuild-your-community/>

¹⁴<https://www.nmvvrc.org/survivors/self-help/>

¹⁵<https://massviolence.help/>

¹⁶<https://nmvvrc.org/learn/snaps-webinars/>

¹⁷<https://nmvvrc.org/news/videos-podcasts/>

Appendix F:

A Note About Community Gun Violence

This appendix focuses on responding to **community gun violence**—a form of “everyday” gun violence with root causes that differ from public mass shootings. Accordingly, prevention strategies must also differ. Still, many of the recommendations found elsewhere in this Playbook apply to incidents of community gun violence involving multiple victims. Below you will find resources to help reduce community gun violence and recommendations to help communities recover from the trauma caused by these acts of mass violence.

“Mass Shooting” Defined

This Playbook focuses on “public mass shootings,” defined as shooting rampages in public places resulting in four or more victims killed by the assailant.¹ These tragic events—such as school shootings, attacks on houses of worship, or shootings at public gatherings—receive intense media coverage but are statistically rare. Since 2006, the United States has averaged about six such incidents per year. In 2024, only three shootings met this definition.²

However, the nation experiences far more frequent shooting incidents involving multiple victims. According to the Gun Violence Archive, there were over 500 shootings in 2024 in which four or more people were injured or killed.³ These events are often classified as “community gun violence” rather than “public mass shootings” because they typically occur in neighborhood settings, often involve people who know one another, and are driven by different dynamics—such as interpersonal conflict, group retaliation, or cycles of violence. They also frequently fall below the threshold of four deaths typically used to define a public mass shooting.

Community gun violence disproportionately affects large U.S. cities and often occurs in concentrated areas within historically underserved neighborhoods.⁴ The perpetrators are usually young men—many of whom have also been victims of gun violence themselves. These shootings devastate families, derail young lives, and create lasting trauma in otherwise vibrant communities.

Different Root Causes Call for Different Solutions

Public mass shootings and community gun violence stem from different root causes and therefore require distinct prevention strategies.

Mass shooters are typically driven by perceived grievances, hatred, or extremist ideologies, making their attacks difficult to anticipate. However, they often exhibit warning behaviors or share their intentions with others or on social media—a phenomenon known as “leakage.” Effective prevention strategies include establishing Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management programs and implementing Extreme Risk Protection Order laws. Many mass shooters are also suicidal, making suicide prevention a key element in reducing mass violence. For more information, see **Appendix D, Strategies to Prevent Mass Shootings**.

¹Throughout the Playbook, we use the term “public mass shooting” or the shortened “mass shooting” to refer to these crimes.

²The Associated Press, Northeastern University, and USA Today. “Mass Killing Database: Revealing Trends, Details and Anguish of Every US Event since 2006.” *USA Today*, February 9, 2024. <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2022/08/18/mass-killings-database-us-events-since-2006/9705311002/>.

³Gun Violence Archive. “Gun Violence Archive.” January 8, 2025. <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>.

⁴Abt, Thomas. *Bleeding Out: The Devastating Consequences of Urban Violence--and a Bold New Plan for Peace in the Streets*. Basic Books, 2019.

In contrast, individuals involved in community gun violence are often motivated by retaliation, interpersonal disputes, insecurity, or gang affiliation. The root causes of this violence include poverty,⁵ systemic racism, under-resourced schools, limited economic opportunity, and gaps in public safety strategies and social services.

Research and experience show that community gun violence can be reduced through:

- Intervention programs targeting known perpetrators (e.g., violence interrupters)⁶
- Focused deterrence and other coordinated law enforcement and community-based strategies
- Law enforcement focus on gun trafficking, including improved gun tracing⁷
- Expanded access to social services, including hospital-based violence intervention programs⁸
- Community-based support for at-risk youth, such as mentoring and after-school programs⁹

These evidence-informed strategies have been successful across a range of communities, regardless of socioeconomic context. Work with your police chief and trusted community leaders to design and implement intervention programs—or strengthen existing ones—that are appropriate for your city.

Under the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA), millions of dollars in federal funds were distributed through the Community Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative to help build the infrastructure needed for community safety and neighborhood resilience. However, recent shifts in federal budget priorities may impact the availability of these funds in future years, putting some local programs at risk. Cities interested in launching or sustaining these programs should consult the U.S. Department of Justice for current grant opportunities.

Key Resources: Community Gun Violence Prevention



Cities United: Supports a national network of mayors who are committed to reducing the epidemic of homicides and shootings among young Black men and boys.¹⁰

Justice Action Alliance Policymaker's Playbook: Offers policymakers a three-step process to address community gun violence.¹¹

John Hopkins University, Center for Gun Violence Solutions: Online resource that provides research-based prevention approaches to community gun violence.¹²

⁵Note that some communities of high poverty have low crime rates. These communities demonstrate what criminal justice researchers describe as “community collective efficacy,” which is characterized by social cohesion, shared identities and social norms, and a willingness to take action to defend norms particularly when the interests of vulnerable populations are at stake.

⁶Braga, Anthony A., David M. Hureau, and Andrew V. Papachristos. “Deterring Gang-Involved Gun Violence: Measuring the Impact of Boston’s Operation Ceasefire on Street Gang Behavior.” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 113–39. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-013-9198-x>.

⁷City of Chicago. “Gun Trace Report 2017.” City of Chicago Office of the Mayor and Chicago Police Department, 2017. <https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/mayor/Press%20Room/Press%20Releases/2017/October/GTR2017.pdf>.

⁸Cooper, Carnell, Dawn M. Eslinger, and Paul D. Stolley. “Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Programs Work.” *The Journal of Trauma* 61, no. 3 (September 2006): 534–37; discussion 537-540. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.ta.0000236576.81860.8c>.

⁹Heller, Sara B. “Summer Jobs Reduce Violence among Disadvantaged Youth.” *Science* 346, no. 6214 (December 5, 2014): 1219–23. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1257809>.

¹⁰Cities United. <https://citiesunited.org>.

¹¹<https://www.cjactionfund.org/pp-home>

¹²<https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/solutions/community-violence-intervention>

Compassionate Response to Community Gun Violence is Needed

Communities affected by community gun violence experience trauma, just like communities that experience a public mass shooting. They deserve the same compassion and support to recover.

Yet when a shooting kills multiple partygoers or people on the street in a city neighborhood, there is scant press coverage, no visit from the President or top officials, and no victims' fund or Family Assistance Center established in response. This disparity is not lost on the affected communities. Local advocates frequently point out that the families and victims deserve the same attention and resources they would receive if the shooting occurred in an affluent neighborhood.

As a starting point, you should publicly acknowledge that a community gun violence incident is a "mass shooting" if many people are injured or killed.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio learned this lesson in 2019, when he was criticized for waiting more than three days to acknowledge that a Brownsville shooting that left one dead and 11 injured was, in fact, a mass shooting.¹³ He later announced \$9 million in funding for programs to help the affected community.¹⁴

Drawing on the recommendations in this Playbook, you can:

- Schedule a press conference to inform the public of law enforcement actions taken in response to the shooting.
- Promptly identify the victims, convey messages of unity and healing, highlight local mental health resources, and announce services available to families and victims.
- Describe violence intervention programs that you have established—or plan to implement—to reduce community gun violence.
- Reach out to the victims' families to offer comfort and ensure their needs are met. Coordinate with your police chief or prosecutor's office to connect families to victims' advocates and state victim compensation programs.
- Meet with affected community leaders and local partners to listen to their concerns. Determine what else your office can do to address the challenges experienced by the affected community.
- Be innovative: If your city has a Resiliency Center, could it be made accessible to victims of community gun violence? If not, could you establish one that would also be available should a public mass shooting occur? Philadelphia is piloting a continuously operating Resiliency Center for community gun violence victims. Washington, D.C., and San Francisco are also adapting their mass violence victim infrastructure to support these cases.

¹³Goldberg, Noah. "Mayor Calls Brownsville Tragedy a 'mass Shooting' after Days of Hesitation." *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 31, 2019. <https://brooklyneagle.com/articles/2019/07/31/mayor-calls-brownsville-tragedy-a-mass-shooting-after-days-of-hesitation/>.

¹⁴City of New York. "Mayor de Blasio Announces Nearly \$9 Million in Funding to Support Brownsville." The official website of the City of New York, August 6, 2019. <http://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/381-19/mayor-de-blasio-nearly-9-million-funding-support-brownsville-following-mass>.

- Consider whether services at an existing Family Justice Center¹⁵ in your community could be broadened to assist families affected by all forms of gun violence—including suicide, domestic violence, and community violence. If your city lacks such a center, could you work with local partners to establish one?¹⁶

Conclusion

All victims of gun violence deserve your compassion and support. And all neighborhoods in your city deserve to be safe from gun violence. Fortunately, effective strategies exist to reduce community gun violence—and most must be implemented at the local level. That means local leaders like you are uniquely positioned to drive progress, even as you work to prevent public mass shootings.

¹⁵Family Justice Center Alliance. “Affiliated Centers.” Accessed February 25, 2025. <https://www.familyjusticecenter.org/affiliated-centers/>.

¹⁶There are approximately 60 Family Justice Centers located in the United States. The concept is to create a family-friendly environment in which a multi-disciplinary team works together in one, centralized location to provide coordinated services to victims of family violence.

Appendix G: After Action Review

An after action review (AAR) should be conducted following any mass violence incident to ensure your community is better prepared to respond to future crises. According to Chief Frank Straub—who led the AAR teams for the Pulse, San Bernardino, and New Zealand mass shootings—mayors or city managers, not law enforcement, should initiate the AAR process. This appendix provides background and recommendations to help you commission an effective review.

An AAR should be a holistic evaluation of the events leading up to, during, and following the incident. The purpose is learning and improvement, not assigning blame. The review should assess the law enforcement response to the shooting. Equally important is an evaluation of your office's emergency response and that of other city agencies. This broader review will help inform planning for future emergencies.

A well-executed AAR also delivers other benefits. It can justify investments in emergency preparedness, highlight the value of emergency management and public health agencies, and serve as a valuable resource for other mayors facing similar crises.

As mayor, your role during the AAR process is to select an independent, qualified team; clearly communicate the goals of the review; and review the findings for accuracy and cultural relevance.

Recommendations

Chief Straub recommended the following best practices for conducting an independent AAR:

- **Act quickly** to capture accurate recollections from all participants.
- **Use multidisciplinary teams:** Include independent experts like SWAT specialists, medical professionals, and legal counsel to ensure thorough analysis.
- **Support the interview team:** Utilize mental health clinicians to prevent secondary trauma among team members gathering and reviewing information.
- **Avoid naming individuals:** Focus on actions, processes, and systems rather than individual names. Anonymity encourages honesty and minimizes blame.
- **Include the community:** Give community members a voice to foster healing and improve public trust in the findings.
- **Evaluate preparedness, response, and recovery:** Assess whether training, equipment, protocols, and mutual aid agreements were adequate, and how well they functioned during the response. Also assess interagency coordination and recovery efforts, such as reuniting families and personal possessions, and addressing community trauma.

Balancing Transparency and Liability

While it may be tempting to withhold information relating to mistakes or failures, Chief Straub emphasizes that transparency is paramount. Openness fosters public confidence and accountability, while hiding issues erodes trust.

At the same time, expectations of human performance under these conditions must be realistic and communicated up front. Political leaders, district attorneys, and the media should be encouraged to extend grace to law enforcement officers operating under extreme, life-threatening conditions.

To balance public accountability with legal and security considerations, Chief Straub recommends producing both a full internal report and a public executive summary. Therefore, legal counsel should be involved in the AAR process and review reports before they are made public.

Leaders in Action: Independent After Action Review



Following the Highland Park mass shooting, two independent AARs were conducted to assess the response and guide improvements. City Manager Ghida Neukirch commissioned an external consulting firm to conduct the city's AAR, which focused on emergency procedures, interagency coordination, communications, and victim services. Separately, Lake County completed a state-funded AAR that focused on regional emergency management and law enforcement response. The Lake County Emergency Management Agency now recommends this model—state-supported, independent AARs—for all mass casualty incidents, noting its value in reducing the burden on local governments while ensuring accountability and learning.

Key Resources: After Action Reviews

How to Conduct an After Action Review: The National Police Foundation and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) developed this AAR guide to provide a detailed step-by-step guide for law enforcement agencies and relevant stakeholders.¹

Independent Experts:

Hillard Heintze, a Jensen Hughes company

A nationally recognized security risk management firm specializing in active shooter preparedness, behavioral threat assessment, emergency response planning, and law enforcement consulting. Hillard Heintze conducted the AAR for the City of Highland Park.

Website: www.jensenhughes.com

Contact: Jensen Hughes



ALERT Center at Texas State University

A national leader in active shooter response training and incident analysis.

Website: www.alertt.org

Contact John R. Curnutt, Assistant Director and founding member of ALERTT

Chief Frank Straub (ret.), *The Violence Intervention Group*

President and founder of a consulting firm composed of subject matter experts focused on targeted violence prevention and post-incident review.

Website: www.violenceinterventiongroup.com

Lieutenant Greg Pass (ret.), *First 30 Group*

Director of Training and Research, and a targeted violence preparedness consultant. First 30 Group provides active shooter incident safety training and maintains a repository of mass attack AARs and other documents that may be of interest to mayors.²

Website: www.first30group.com

¹National Police Foundation. "How to Conduct an After Action Review." Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2020. <https://www.policinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/How-to-Conduct-an-AAR.pdf>.

²AAR repository: <https://first30group.com/resources/>

Appendix H: Mass Shooting–Related Acronyms

The following acronyms are often be used by first responders and victim service professionals. The Playbook sometimes uses acronyms when referring to mass-shooting resources, organizations, and common phrases. For your convenience, we have provided the most common acronyms in this index.

AAR	After Action Review
ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
ADAMHS	Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health Services
AEAP	Antiterrorism and Emergency Assistance Program
ALERRT	Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training
ARC	American Red Cross
ASPR	Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response
ATAP	Association of Threat Assessment Professionals
ATF	Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives
AVI	Active Violence Incident
BJA	Bureau of Justice Assistance
BTAM	Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management
CCRT	Community Crisis Response Team
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CERC	Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication
CERT	Community Emergency Response Team
CHDS	Center for Homeland Defense and Security
CIRG	Critical Incident Response Group
COPS	Community Oriented Policing Services
CRS	Community Relations Service (DOJ)
CSTAG	Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
EFLEA	Executive Forum for Law Enforcement Advisors
EMA	Emergency Management Agency
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
EMT	Emergency Medical Technician
EOC	Emergency Operations Center
EOP	Emergency Operations Plan
ERPO	Extreme Risk Protection Order
FAC	Family Assistance Center
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation

FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
HIPAA	Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act
ICP	Incident Command Post
ICS	Incident Command System
IPAWS	Integrated Public Alert and Warning System
JIC	Joint Information Center
MABAS	Mutual Aid Box Alarm System
MCI	Mass Casualty Incident
MVI	Mass Violence Incident
NACCHO	National Association of County and City Health Officials
NIMS	National Incident Management System
NMVC	National Mass Violence Center
NTER	National Threat Evaluation and Reporting
NTSB	National Transportation Safety Board
OVC	Office for Victims of Crime
PFA	Psychological First Aid
PHAI	Public Health Advocacy Institute
PIO	Public Information Officer
POTUS	President of the United States
PSOB	Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
REMS	Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools
RTF	Rescue Task Force
SAC	Special Agent in Charge (FBI)
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SBA	Small Business Administration
SERV	Project School Emergency Response to Violence
STOP	School Violence Prevention Program (DOJ)
SVPP	STOP Violence Prevention Program
SWAT	Special Weapons and Tactics
TTAC	Training and Technical Assistance Center (OVC)
VOAD	Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster
VOCA	Victims of Crime Act
VSD	Victim Services Division (FBI)



In the aftermath of a mass shooting, mayors and city managers are called to do the hardest work of their professional lives. The Mass Shooting Playbook was created to help civic leaders guide their communities through crisis and recovery.

Drawing on the real experiences of city leaders and the expertise of state and federal partners, the Playbook offers clear guidance on crisis communications, emergency operations, victim and family assistance, legal considerations, collaborating with first responders, school shootings, and more.

It also provides ready-to-use tools, including:

- A 24-hour Mass Shooting Protocol
- Preparedness checklists and a tabletop exercise worksheet
- Prevention strategies
- Case briefs from eight cities who responded to a mass shooting

All resources are available free at www.UnitedOnGuns.org.

“The Playbook is required reading for every mayor.”

— *Mayor Buddy Dyer, Orlando, FL*

“As helpful as NIMS for mayors and city managers.”

— *Kristin Wilson, Chief of Operations and Performance, Nashville, TN*

“The Playbook provided vitally helpful direction.”

— *Mayor Nancy Rotering and City Manager Ghida Neukirch, Highland Park, IL*

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