The Aurora Theater Shooting Experience: Considerations for Multi-Jurisdictional/Multi-Disciplinary Response to MASS SHOOTING EVENTS

Challenges in the 21st-century United States have proven monumental for those charged with providing public safety. Due to the grim rate of evolving threats, innovative thinking, planning, responding, and recovering have been necessary since the attacks of 9/11. As such, the many disciplines within the first responder community have reinvented the ways in which they respond to emergency situations.

Among the emerging and increasing threat scenarios is the active shooter mass casualty situation, which a 2014 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) study of 160 active shooter cases showed to be on the rise. Between 2000 and 2013, the rate of active shooter events rose from 6.4 to 16.4 incidents per year—leading to an overall average of 11.4 per year. If one considers that 70 percent of the incidents occurred in either commerce, business, or educational venues, it illustrates the challenge facing first responders. These types of locations are considered soft targets, and active shooter incidents exploit the extreme vulnerability of venues where members of the community traditionally feel safe. These attacks also exemplify the unpredictability of when or where the next incident might occur.

For those in public safety, protecting these soft targets requires a deeper understanding of the dynamics of active shooter events, which, depending upon the size and proximity of affected agencies, will drive the need for mutual aid from other jurisdictions and disciplines. Any mass casualty incident will unquestionably require some level of mutual aid response, the degree to which may also be unpredictable until the stark realities materialize.

By focusing on the lessons learned regarding the use of the numerable jurisdictions and disciplines that aided in the response to the largest civilian shooting in U.S. history—the July 2012 theater shooting in Aurora, Colorado—this account intends to assist chiefs and sheriffs in better preparing for the unthinkable.

Pre-Incident Planning
The post-9/11 public safety community has endeavored to be as imaginative as needed when considering the endless range of possible threats that any city could face. The city of Aurora and, indeed, the entire Denver metro area—specifically the 10-county North Central Homeland Security Region of Colorado—has embraced this notion for many years. By creating major full-scale emergency exercises, many of which have been active shooter scenarios, there is a healthy partnership among the countless agencies representing numerous disciplines and jurisdictions. Most of the exercises have intentionally involved multi-jurisdictional, cooperative responses to test various aspects of agency emergency plans and capabilities. The notion of preparing for an event that would undoubtedly deplete
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between jurisdictions and newly created partnerships between disciplines that had not been imagined previously. For example, public works departments within various jurisdictions were included in order to leverage heavy equipment for barricading high-security and restricted locations or for other emergency response needs. As a result of these partnerships and strengthened relationships, the greater Denver metro region improved in key areas of communication, operating procedures, training, and exercising. These relationships flourish today and have served to provide support among all involved jurisdictions. They are also the foundation from which Aurora received support on July 20, 2012.

1. In 2008, the City of Denver hosted the Democratic National Convention, and the Aurora Police Department was a significant contributor to the event’s security. This National Special Security Event required over a year of planning and resulted in bolstered relationships and functionalities.

2. In the North Central Homeland Security Region (NCR) of Colorado, a multi-year, phased augmentation of armored vehicles was based on a needs assessment of the gaps in certain parts of the metro area. The goal was to achieve a more representative number of vehicles across the region to enable an adequate response anywhere within the NCR. Once the additional vehicles were purchased, the new capability of responding to any active shooter event was written into plans for the respective jurisdictions and exercised in various areas of the region to determine response times, improve communications systems for coordination, and coalesce tactical responses.

3. Aurora borders Buckley Air Force Base. As such, Aurora has concurrent jurisdiction in base housing. This situation has potential catastrophic results if an event were to occur on base without pre-planned response and communications measures. To address this, Aurora coordinated a massive full-scale exercise in 2009 addressing an active threat at base housing. Called Vigilant Front Range, this exercise encompassed 500 participants, including personnel from 40 local, state, and federal agencies. The exercise focused on numerous aspects of an active attack from response through an ensuing multi-jurisdictional criminal investigation.

4. The Aurora Police Department conducted numerous active shooter tabletop exercises with the area’s school districts. This not only reinforced the response aspects for a school shooting, but strengthened the overall relationship with the school districts. These relationships proved crucial during the theater shooting investigation when local schools were used to accommodate evacuees living near the shooter’s booby-trapped apartment, stage and interview witnesses, and reunite survivors of the theater shooting with family members.

Some facets applicable to any emergency situation can be anticipated; the solution to these are well-established relationships and interoperable systems between all possible traditional and nontraditional first responder agencies.

Given the level of preparation by the Aurora Police Department, the shooting at the Century 16 theater, as well as the booby-trapped secondary scene at the shooter’s apartment, required relying on partners at the local, state, and federal levels. No level of preparation could have specifically prepared first responders for this event and its unique components. That said, the pre-incident planning efforts made calling on area partners from the multitude of first responder agencies in other jurisdictions, non-governmental agencies, and numerous other levels of assistance much easier.

The additional benefit of constant training and exercising encouraged critical thinking and decision-making among first responders—a crucial achievement that saved lives in Aurora. As an example, fire and emergency medical units were “besieged” with critically wounded victims. Police officers on the scene rapidly assessed the situation and adapted by transporting an unprecedented 27 shooting victims to area hospitals in police vehicles. None of the 27 victims with survivable injuries perished.

The Correlation Between Demographics and the Need for Mutual Aid

It is not unusual for urban area law enforcement agencies to face varying levels of violent crime, including mass shootings; however, as evidenced by the previously cited FBI study, there is no apparent relationship between mass shootings and their predisposition within urban, suburban, or rural settings. The 160 shootings studied occurred in a broad range of settings including small and large towns, urban and rural areas, and 40 of the 50 U.S. states. In 2012, Aurora’s population was 340,000 people, and the city encompasses 154 square miles. It is adjacent to the City of Denver and is the third largest city in Colorado. At the time of the shooting, 126 officers were available to respond, 54 of whom were either part of a special enforcement Summer Task Force or overlapping from the prior swing shift. With what would seem adequate resources, the Aurora Police Department was initially confident that it could deal effectively with the situation. However, the theater shooting rapidly grew
to an unprecedented event requiring additional assets from other jurisdictions.

A Summary of the Event

At 38 minutes past midnight on July 20, 2012, callers reported that a lone shooter had fired indiscriminately upon unsuspecting moviegoers attending a midnight screening of the movie The Dark Knight Rises. It was eventually discovered that the shooter had killed 12 people in the theater and wounded 58. An additional 12 were injured in the ensuing melee. The shooter had previously purchased a ticket and occupied a seat in the right side front section of the theater near an emergency exit. After the movie began, the shooter exited the theater through the emergency exit and went to his vehicle, which was in a parking space just outside the exit door. While there, he dressed in tactical gear, including a ballistic helmet; a gas mask; and protective chest, arm, and shin gear. He armed himself with a shotgun, an AR-15 style assault rifle, a .40 caliber handgun, and two canisters of a chemical irritant.

The shooter stepped back into the theater, tossed in one of the canisters and began to shoot—first with the shotgun, then with the AR-15 style rifle, and finally with the .40 caliber handgun. He was quickly taken into custody and soon thereafter informed officers that he had booby trapped his apartment several miles away. This set the scene for not only an active shooter scenario, but a subsequent major secondary mass casualty threat.

The Response

During the initial phases of this response, a combination of three things occurred: (1) uncommon courage among victims (some of whom shielded loved ones while subjecting themselves to fatal gunfire) and first responders (who entered the theater with tactical precision, taking the shooter into custody within the first few minutes); (2) rapid critical thinking by responders who swiftly assessed shifting and changing dynamics and transported numerous shooting victims by police car; and (3) good fortune in that the theater was one-half mile from police headquarters, additional police officers were available due to a shift change, and a number of trauma emergency departments were in close proximity.

The watch commander on duty during the incident made incremental assessments of necessary resources. While he was one of three watch commanders, each representing his or her respective patrol districts, he recognized immediately by the 9-1-1 reporting of an active shooter at a movie theater that patrol officers from all three districts should respond. Within three minutes of the first report, the Public Safety Communications Department (dispatch) notified adjacent jurisdictions of the active shooter, indicating no additional help was needed at that time. Soon, reports of 1,200 to 1,400 moviegoers fleeing from the 16-theater complex required an additional call be made to the Denver Police Department asking for mutual aid. Eventually, dispatch made an all-hands request for any available law enforcement agency in the metro area to respond.

In the early minutes of the response, officers quickly tried to determine how many shooters were involved, whether it was a terrorist attack, and whether secondary or tertiary threats existed. Responding officers took the shooter into custody within minutes, and he informed officers he had booby trapped his apartment with improvised explosive devises (IEDs). He insisted there were no other shooters and that there were no IEDs at the theater or within his vehicle at the scene. Naturally, the focus on the threat quickly shifted to possible IEDs at the apartment several miles away, the theater, and the shooter’s vehicle. Subsequent to the unparalleled metro-wide request for assistance, approximately 100 additional officers from roughly 21 agencies ultimately responded. While the massive response from partnering jurisdictions provided relief in numbers, it also added elements that complicated the response.

The Initial Challenges of Coordinating Multi-Jurisdictional Resources

Aurora enjoys a positive relationship within the first responder community and, as noted, has embraced the pre-incident planning process. In retrospect, while very effective in creating a supportive environment for responding to or requesting assistance from other agencies, pre-planning activities had not placed the proper emphasis on coordinating resources once they arrived.

As documented in the after-action report, the initial response lacked a coordinated, formalized mutual aid staging area or staging officer, resulting in uncoordinated efforts and confusion. Officers from other jurisdictions, at times self-assigned, duplicated efforts or engaged in activity not aligned with current needs. This shortcoming improved as the response expanded to the shooter’s apartment and the investigation developed.

One of the Aurora police chief’s first calls was to the FBI special agent in charge (SAC) of the Denver Field Office. In these early moments, he also communicated with the Colorado Information Analysis Center (CIAC), Colorado’s fusion center. The FBI SAC quickly assigned a significant number of field agents to begin supporting the investigation. The CIAC stood up its emergency operations center and initially focused on identifying possible associates or co-conspirators and social network presences and, later, assisted in coordinating tips and leads between the FBI, Aurora Police Department, and CIAC.

Divided Resources between the Theater and the Shooter’s Apartment

The booby-trapped apartment and the deployment of an irritant prior to firing on the unsuspecting moviegoers required assistance from numerous bomb squads in the metro area. Before the bodies of the deceased could be processed, all potential IED threats had to be cleared at the theater and the shooter’s vehicle located in the parking lot. The Arapahoe County Bomb Squad accomplished these tasks. Further, multiple initiating systems designed to cause a significant fire or explosion were discovered in the suspect’s apartment. Stabilizing this scene necessitated combined efforts of multiple explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams including those from Adams County; Arapahoe County; Boulder County; El Paso County; City of Denver; Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF); and the FBI. It was crucial to evacuate the apartment buildings within the proximity of a fire or blast radius. To accomplish this, the Red Cross, in concert with a local high school, created accommodations for residents who had no friends or relatives to stay with. After the area was effectively evacuated, bomb technicians were able to concentrate on the threat at their pace.

EOD Mitigation Efforts

The following excerpts from the after-action report best describe the artful joint operations between multiple jurisdictions to render the shooter’s apartment safe.

The FBI bomb experts played a major role in the analysis and disarming of the IEDs. FBI bomb experts from the Denver Field Office worked closely with Aurora police, fire, and other bomb squads. Pictures from the robot video camera were transmitted live to the Bomb Truck and some images were transmitted to experts at FBI offices in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. When the complexity of the situation became apparent, the FBI sent additional resources to Aurora. ATF agents also provided assistance.

[T]he county bomb teams, city police, city fire commanders, FBI, and ATF worked seamlessly together in this event, exchanging information and ideas on how to proceed with each step. All federal, state, and local bomb technicians attended the bomb school at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama. They have the same basic training and use the same standard operating procedures. Some individuals have higher level training and more field experience than others do, but they all operate from a common set of concepts and have a common lexicon.

In the Denver area, local, state, and federal bomb technicians trained together. All of this
facilitated smooth integration of unit operations during [this event].

The assistance from partnering jurisdictions not only augmented the much-needed additional resources and expertise, but created a collaborative and creative environment. The group assembled from this mix of proficiency quickly analyzed the threat, synthesized render safe strategies, and briefed senior leadership, providing them with the needed information to authorize actions in accordance with life-safety and criminal investigative priorities.

Recovery

While much of the collective mind-set regarding active shooter mass casualty events focuses on prevention, response, and mitigation, the emphasis on recovery and the impact it represents cannot be overlooked. An event such as this will touch innumerable groups of people involved in immeasurable ways—many for the rest of their lives.

There are numerous layers to consider when dealing with recovery. They may be best characterized as short term and long term; each may well require multi-jurisdictional assistance. What is predictable is a massive outpouring of sympathy post-event. Local, state, and federal VIPs will wish to contribute to the healing process in the days following the event, which may require security details. In addition, recovery tasks may include coordination efforts for prayer vigils, hospital visits with the survivors, visits to the victims’ families, and issues surrounding ad hoc memorial sites.

Further, first responders who may have been involved in the initial response and subsequent mitigation or investigative process will be physically and emotionally exhausted. In addition to managing internal staffing levels, it will be important to rely on partnering agencies to assist in coordinating these events. As an example, the president of the United States visited the families of victims and survivors two days after the shooting. Security was also needed for the Colorado governor, senators, and other dignitaries. Sixty-six officers provided security for the presidential visit, and Aurora relied heavily on the cities of Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, and Glendale, as well as the Colorado State Patrol, to assist with gaps in security needs.

On the same day as the presidential visit, a massive prayer vigil was planned at the Aurora Municipal Justice Center (city hall), which required comprehensive planning. The attendees included 45 elected and appointed officials and 500 special guests from a broad range of community organizations. In all, 10,000 people were present at the vigil. This, too, tested the resources available and required the assistance of partnering jurisdictions.

Victim Services Unit (VSU) advocates received high praise for their dedication and ability to provide victim and family services and support. This support is essential and, in some states, required by law. The VSU embraced the overwhelming demand this incident presented, but it could not possibly handle the enormity of the services needed by the multitudes of victims and families alone. The department’s victim advocates had a previously established relationship and readily available group of vetted victim advocates from other jurisdictions, as well as trusted volunteers. Forty-six additional advocates from nine jurisdictions were called upon to augment the services to be delivered. The Colorado Organization for Victim Assistance (COVA) and the Arapahoe County District Attorney’s

For further information on the Aurora shooting and response please see the after-action report at www.courts.state.co.us/Media/Opinion_Docs/14CV31595%20After%20Action%20Review%20Redacted.pdf.

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Office victim witness coordinator became involved within a few days of the shooting. However, this proved to complicate matters due to the assortment of advocates and case workers with “differing views on who was in charge and what their role should be.” While there were attempts to meet and decipher these points of contention, the constant demand for advocates’ attention prevented this from coming to fruition.

Managing the media during this event placed a tremendous demand on Aurora Police Department’s chief and public information officers (PIOs). While this requirement was met by Aurora Police Department staff, there was an initiative to provide PIO representation to the families of those killed to help buffer the onslaught of media activity. The Aurora PIO cadre were members of and had an established relationship with the Emergency Services Public Information Officers of Colorado organization (ESPIOC). This provided a pool of ready-made partners to assist with this task. Of the 12 families who lost a member in the shooting, 8 accepted the offer to provide a PIO. This effort began with a coordination meeting to assign PIOs to families and to establish boundaries and communication modes. Assigned PIOs then met with respective families and provided education about the media and their priorities, organized interviews for those who were willing, helped dispel rumors, and performed various other media-related services.

**Final Thoughts**

The depth and breadth of the impact an active shooter mass casualty event will have on the affected jurisdiction is incalculable. The first responder community has the good fortune of having colleague agencies across the United States whose after-action assessments can be drawn upon in order to improve future responses. Ongoing efforts to study shooter trends, tactics, and procedures offer increased insight from which planners and responders can look for positions of advantage.

While all facets of the theater shooting cannot be covered in one article, the discussion herein has identified the salient aspects pertinent to mutual aid from other jurisdictions. And, while these factors were pertinent to Aurora’s case, there will be untold nuances to the next events not anticipated by anyone. In a parting appeal, it should be emphasized in any active shooter planning and exercising that first responders are empowered to think and act critically during the event to be effective when there are frantic calls for help as the unimagined unfolds before their eyes.

**Notes:**


3. Ibid., 23.


5. TriData Division, System Planning Corporation, *Aurora Century 16 Theater Shooting.*

6. Ibid., 45.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

In January 2014, the IACP National Law Enforcement Policy Center, developed an updated *Model Policy on Active Shooters*, as well as a Concepts and Issues paper on the topic. In addition, the policy center has produced a *Model Policy on Mutual Aid* and an accompanying Concept and Issues paper. These resources, as well as all other model policies, are available only to IACP members and can be found at <www.theiacp.org/MPMembersOnly>.