



ANATOMY OF AN ACTIVE SHOOTER DRILL

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“**G**unshots rang out on the first floor of the Wylie Municipal Complex. We jumped up from our desks, locked the door to the city manager’s suite, hit the panic button, ran into the office we had agreed on, slid the bookcase in front of the door, and called 911 to let them know how many shots we heard. All of our stomachs were in knots.”

Nelda Timmons, Executive Secretary to
the City Manager, City of Wylie



From top, Officers Jacob Perry, Tommy Johnson and Richard Chambers clear a Wylie City Hall stairwell during the city's active shooter drill.

Preparing for the Worst

In 2014, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) conducted a study that identified 160 active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2013 (approximately one every three weeks). Of the 1,043 casualties, 486 people were killed and 557 were wounded. These incidents are becoming more frequent. The first seven years of the study show an average of 6.4 incidents per year, while the last seven show 16.4 incidents. The goal of the FBI's study was to better understand how to prevent, prepare for, respond to, and recover from these incidents. Wylie Fire Chief Brent Parker said one of the most important parts of his department's job is to identify low-frequency/high-risk incidents. "An active shooter is just that," he said.

Wylie police, fire rescue, emergency management, dispatch, and city management are working together to be prepared in case such an event should happen in their city. "The focus in preparing for an active shooter event over the last five years has taken a significant shift of both law enforcement and the fire service to work as a seamless response," Brent said. "Fortunately for the City of Wylie, our police and fire have a strong relationship — which is half the battle. Trainers and other cities have also commented on the unprecedented support shown by our city manager and the willingness of all parties to partner for the safety of our citizens."

The Plan

The drill planning committee was made up of two fire-fighters; an emergency management coordinator; two police officers; and a member of the city secretary's staff, who acted as city hall liaison. They began meeting five

months out, increasing in frequency as the drill approached. Objectives were established for each of the areas: city hall, police, fire, communications, and emergency management.

The 44,000-square-foot, three-story city hall was designated as the site of the drill.

A crucial decision was about how much to tell city hall employees and when to tell them. Although there seemed to be value in creating a realistic drill by keeping advance information to a minimum, concerns emerged. What if someone suffered a stress-induced heart attack, became overly distraught, or responded with force? The team decided that the date would be announced, but not the specific time or specific drill details.

Planners agreed it was important to train not only public safety personnel, but all municipal employees who could be at risk. The goal was to encourage departments and individuals to think strategically and have a plan. This also gave directors the opportunity to evaluate their staff members and identify any employees who are likely to have an adverse response.

Go Time

"Although city hall employees were somewhat anxious, we knew the planning committee had thoroughly evaluated all aspects of safety," said City Manager Mindy Manson.

With safety as a top priority, Assistant City Manager and former police chief Jeff Butters made a sweep of the building the morning of the drill to meet with employees, address any concerns, and remove potential weapons in offices and common areas. Mutual aid agencies, local scanner groups, and the media were also informed of the drill through email, phone calls, and social media.

Fire and police personnel set up barricades, securing the city hall perimeter and limiting non-employee access to the facility. To replicate typical response times and limit the dangers of officers running code to the scene from throughout the city, police were staged in an adjacent parking lot and released accordingly. The staging area also provided the opportunity to clear active firearms of those participating in the drill.

City hall staff met in council chambers for a briefing at 8:00 a.m. Assistant Fire Chief Brandon Blythe stressed that no real weapons would be used, but the shooter's simulated weapons would sound very realistic. Blythe reminded staff that police and fire would be in "response mode," a different way of behaving than they were accustomed to seeing. He stressed that safety officers would be placed at



Firearms used in the active shooter drill by, at bottom, Officers Donald English and Chris Taylor have ribbons tied around the barrels to designate fake weaponry. No live guns were inside city hall during the active shooter drill.

the front doors to ensure that no live weapons entered the building, and additional observers and safety officers would be on each floor to stop the drill if issues developed. Staff was told to resume normal activities following the meeting.

Key to the success of the drill were high school theater students strategically placed in various departments throughout city hall, under the guise of a job-shadowing program. Unknown to the employees, the students were enlisted to act out a scripted scenario in which a disgruntled and armed father storms city hall looking for his daughter.

Once all security measures were in place around 9:00 a.m., Brandon sent a text to the planning group and students, notifying them it was "go time."

Following the minute-by-minute script, students began to play their parts, catching employees off guard. The shooter initially entered the utility billing department through a first-floor door equipped with a motion detection lock that was tripped by a student participant. Agitated and seeking his daughter's whereabouts, the now active shooter left behind many "casualties" while making his way to the third floor. Finding his daughter in the parks department, he barricaded himself in an adjacent breakroom, joined by his sympathetic but scared daughter.

Police took advantage of the training opportunity to work on two resolutions. One involved quickly taking out the shooter; the other, a prolonged negotiation. Police cleared the building of employees sheltering in place, and fire rescue attended to the wounded. The entire drill lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Rescue Task Force Response

Fire rescue put to the test an innovative new response to active shooter incidents using the Rescue Task Force (RTF) concept. Traditionally, firefighters waited until police had cleared a scene and eliminated the threat before entering and treating victims. Police and fire have shifted their thinking and combined resources to allow firefighter-paramedics to enter the active shooter warm zone deployed as one unit with force protection, typically three medics and two armed responders. To streamline the process and ensure adequate resources, fire marshals serve as primary force protection. RTF teams enable medics to reach critical victims faster, providing life-saving care.

Aftermath

"When we were told to come out of the office where we were sheltering, it was a little unnerving to see armed SWAT members pointing guns at us, telling us to get up against the wall and patting us down," said Nelda Timmons. "After the all-clear, we were relieved when we gathered in council chambers to discuss it . . . and have pizza."

Brent said the exercise was extremely valuable. "The drill was successful and went off without any major hitches. Briefings with the staff and then with public safety personnel brought to light areas that needed improvement, even down to replacing the utility billing department door with a push-button exit rather than motion detection. The drill was eye opening and caused staff and first responders to think and plan for a 'what if' situation, something that is much more likely today than in years past." ★



From left, Detective Chad Hermes and Officer Joel Effinger assist Wylie East High School senior Randy Points, portraying the role of an injured bystander in Wylie's active shooter drill.