Critical Incident Review: Active Shooter at Robb Elementary School—Chapter 3. Leadership, Incident Command, and Coordination

Frank Fernandez

00:06

Hello, everyone. My name is Frank Fernandez. I'm a retired chief from South Florida. Today, we're going to listen to chapter 3: Leadership and Incident Command and Coordination. We'll identify the lessons learned from the terrible tragedy at Robb Elementary—and once again, we extend our deepest condolences to the families of the tragedy at Robb Elementary.

Leadership in law enforcement's absolutely critical and essential in moments of a dire challenge such as the active shooter incident at the school. It requires courage, action, and steadfast leadership in chaotic environments. Leadership can be displayed internally within an agency and publicly when providing services to the community, but it arises very clearly under critical situations. Regardless of rank or title, leadership has a valuable role, a critical role in a mass casualty situation. Seconds do matter.

Today, as we look at Robb Elementary and the lessons learned from our Critical Incident Review, we'll be discussing those critical points of leadership, the lack of incident command and control, which led to a failed response at Robb Elementary. We'll be discussing incident command systems and the valuable role that it plays. You'll be hearing from Chief Rick Braziel from California, who has a significant background in tactics and many other attributes that brings great value to the assessment at Robb Elementary. We'll be defining those key leadership positions and roles that played a negative role in the outcome of this tragic situation. Conversely, we look at leadership as being one that requires courage. Asserting authority is extremely critical, stepping up as a leader, taking command, making sure that your officers are being driven towards a successful mission.

As we look at the incident at Robb Elementary, Leadership, Incident Command, and Coordination would be key to the success of any critical incident response. In this particular case, we had 21 fatalities, 19 students and two teachers.

Within three minutes of this offender entering the school, we had 11 officers arriving on scene. They arrived together within 21 seconds of each other. In this hallway, right outside of the classroom where this individual had started firing a number of rounds at these students, 11 officers with an assortment of equipment—helmets, vests, rifles—occupied the hallway. In that hallway, we had two chiefs of police, lieutenants, sergeant, officers, officers with backgrounds in tactical training, and although their initial response was in accordance with acceptable practices—they headed towards that door; they had done everything proper when they got there; they headed right to the door—as soon as one shot was fired through that door, leadership kicked in from the school police chief, and it paused the entire response. That pause left a gap of response of 77 minutes before victims were responded to inside of that classroom, before the offender was neutralized.

The appropriate response would've been for those chiefs, to have motivated their officers to penetrate that door. For a chief of police on the Uvalde Police Department to set up an incident command to coordinate and align all the resources. Had that happened, the response to this would've been different. Lives would've been saved. The penetration to that classroom was a must.

As we review chapter 3, you'll hear from both Chief Braziel and myself of additional lessons learned from this tragic response of the Uvalde Robb Elementary School shooting. The first on scene should engage the subject regardless of whether they have additional officers on site. We learned this through Columbine,[1] that the first officer on scene must, must enter those classrooms, the hallways, and do whatever it takes to identify the active shooter, stop the killing, and stop the dying. Regardless of whatever equipment the officer may have or may not have, that officer has a duty to respond as a single officer. Waiting for equipment to arrive and pausing for an opportunity to get inside the classroom or negotiating with the subject or waiting for a SWAT team are not appropriate responses for an active shooter, and that's what took place here at Robb Elementary. A very, very long pause.

I will say that the first responders that responded to that scene did act in accordance with national acceptable standards. They rushed through that hallway, as I mentioned, within three minutes. Within 21 seconds, 11 officers were together, so they were consuming the hallway. They act courageously up to that point. They even went up to that door. If you look at the video, you'll see that the officers ran through that hallway right to the door where the active shooter was engaging the students. They paused, and it was that moment in time when they paused, and rounds were fired at the officer at the door, that created this long, protracted delay and entering the classroom for 77 minutes.

Leadership created the pause. It was the leadership's responsibility to direct, coach, and guide, and direct those officers to penetrate that door with all means possible. But as we analyzed the situation, we realized that there were no attempts to penetrate the door whatsoever.

Culture always trumps policy. A culture of an organization must be led by leadership, understanding not just the policy, but how the policy is being driven into an organization. As we look at the culture of the Uvalde Police Department, the school police department, we realize that the policies don't exactly align with the culture. There must be a mindset among officers that they swore, they took an oath of office and swore to uphold the Constitution of our great nation to protect and serve the citizens. Part of that protection is getting inside that classroom, penetrating that door, and stopping the killing and stop the dying. Unfortunately, it faltered on their obligation to that oath of office, and everything stopped. And it stopped because leadership created this long pause by considering it a barricaded subject, which was a false and wrong move to do.

I'm joined today by Rick Braziel, a chief out of California. Chief, if you could introduce yourself and also add any comments to our introduction here, please.

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[1] On April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, two students shot and killed 10 students and a teacher and wounded 21 others before taking their own lives.

Rick Braziel

08:19

Thank you for that, Frank. My name is Rick Braziel. I did a little over 33 years in the Sacramento Police Department, much like Frank, had a lot of different assignments. I ran our Metro, which is all the special ops folks, worked my way up through the ranks and retired, spent the last five years as chief, and I retired in 2012, in December of 2012. And unfortunately, I've spent the last 11 years doing these Critical Incident Reviews, whether it's here, terrorism event in San Bernardino, California, the Dorner shootings in Southern California, all across the country, including mass demonstrations and response to riots.

I was given the privilege and honor to work with Frank and a lot of really good SMEs on Uvalde. It was hard for all of us to go through this, particularly when we're looking at failures in leadership, because when you put a group of leaders together and looking at the failures that we saw, you quickly identify that there's a culture that Frank mentioned, of really not valuing leadership, not valuing the importance of formal and informal leaders in an organization, because much like Frank mentioned, in an active shooter role, it's the first person on the scene that assumes command. That's the training we have. And in this case, you had first responders who had rank, who were formal leaders, and those who were informal leaders, who didn't.

So what we'd like to do is kind of run you through some of the lessons learned that we saw. These are just highlights. If you haven't had the opportunity to really dig deep into the chapter, we encourage you to do that, because it's much more rich. So we're going to kind of go through a few of the examples, and then kind of walk you through some themes, and then go through some additional. So when we talk to chiefs across the country, and we talk about Uvalde, or any other review that we've done, the common response we get is, "That could never happen here." Everywhere that it has happened, the leadership said, "That could never happen here." So when you sit and look at how we describe Uvalde and the lessons learned, please don't make the mistake of, "It could never happen here," because it could, and so preparation is always key to this.

So one of the things that we emphasize—and you know this, you're law enforcement leaders—that your mindset and how you prepare to get there is so critically important. So what we're suggesting to leaders, there's a phrase that some of you may be familiar with. It was taught in community policing decades ago, and it was called SARA. It was, it stands for scan, analyze, respond, and assess. So what didn't happen here is the leaders, formal and informal, didn't do a quick scan of what they had.

They didn't assess what they needed as far as the structure, and then that crippled them in their leadership role, because then there was no response. There wasn't an appropriate response. So what really should happen is, as anyone responding to a scene like Uvalde, or any other critical incident is, in your mind, is you're prepping for that arrival. "What kind of structure do we need for here? Do we need a traditional ICS structure? Do we need a unified command, and who's not there that we need to get there?" These are all things that you need to practice ahead of time. Do you have the right people in the right places? Are the right people—basically, the old phrase that we have in leadership is, "Do I have the right people on the bus, and then the right people on the right seats on the bus?"—which means that, have you thought about it ahead of time? Have you pre-trained your staff? Have you pre-trained staff

around you? We've got organizations like Los Angeles Police Department, New York Police Department, Dallas Police Department. It doesn't matter. The big agencies, they have all the resources internally, but in most of the country, they do not. Uvalde was a prime example of that, where the agencies that responded had to rely on each other for that leadership and that command and control, and they didn't have it.

So look around you. Are your partners trained, your partner agencies, local and federal? Do you have your school districts? Do you have your community-based organizations? All of that, by the way, is on the FEMA website. If you go through and look at all the ICS trainings, the different categories of people that should be trained, it's all there and it's all free. So when we talk about that, we look at, how do we plan, train, and respond to critical incidents?

Part of that planning and training and exercises is—they don't have to be big exercises. They could just be simple tabletops, sitting down over a cup of coffee with your allied police agencies, with your school district superintendent or principal, and just chatting about, "Hey, what if this were to happen here in our jurisdiction? Are we prepared to respond?" I don't know how many of you are, or work with the fire service. My family's half fire department, half law enforcement, so Thanksgiving's become very interesting conversations. But there's one thing that the fire department does extremely well. It's fire EMS and emergency services, is they do ICS. And why do they do ICS so well? It's because they do it every day all the time. It's not a critical events that initiates it, it's just their way of doing business. So we strongly encourage agencies to use that model, and again, it's one of those—I don't like giving credit to the fire service, but they're really good at this—is, "How do we implement ICS in our day-to-day operations?" It could be as simple as a promotional ceremony, a retirement event, where, "Who's the incident commander? Who's doing the planning and intel?" Just, you get in that mindset, that structure, so that becomes your go-to with everything you do. So when you're responding to a critical incident, you've what-iffed different scenarios at the table, you've actually played it out in your head, you've lived that call in a dream, that it becomes second nature, and that's what's critically important to us. So Frank and I are going to kind of piecemeal this, but Frank, what else could you say to emphasize on the importance of leadership in the first few minutes?

Frank Fernandez

14:22

Yeah, seconds matter. Leadership does matter. Officers arrive on scene and see a supervisor, or a middle manager lieutenant, or let alone a chief of police on the scene of a mass casualty incident, an active shooter. They're expecting direction. They're expecting to be coached and directed immediately, but when leadership sits idle, or when leadership does not make the right choices, it affects the entire team.

Preparation is the key. I think any leader should look at this incident, assess it, and do an evaluation of your own staff, of yourself, do an introspective look at where you stand in your leadership. Oftentimes the leadership wants to just arrive on scene and allow others to lead, and then you just watch. But when you're the chief of police and you're arriving at the scene of an active shooter, there is an expectation that officers have, that you're going to take some sort of action and lead from the front, but to lead

from the front requires courageous leadership. It takes assertive authority to take action, and that's part of courageous leadership, stepping up, taking command, making sure that your officers are being supported, coached, guided, directed.

Those seconds matter. In this particular case here, within three minutes of that active shooter engaging into that school, we had 11 first officers on scene, 11 police officers with a significant amount of equipment, and we had one chief of police from the school police and one acting chief—but he's the chief of police at that moment in time in terms of his responsibility—on the opposite side of the hallway. These two chiefs arrived relatively simultaneously, covering one side of the hallway while the other covered the other side. The fact that one of the chiefs just sat there idle and did not direct officers to enter into that classroom speaks to culture, speaks to the ability of officers not having that mindset that they have to engage. You know, part of Incident Command is understanding what you have to do at the right time and the right place for the right reasons.

At the right place, the right time, for the right reasons, but you must take action. The wrong action is no action, and unfortunately here, that's what took place, no action.

Rick Braziel

17:05

In addition to the leaders that were there in rank, the chief of the school district and the acting chief from Uvalde PD, what we also saw is leaders from larger agencies that responded and didn't identify and didn't act that, "Hey, wait, we're not in an ICS structure." So when you're looking at the sheriff's office responding, Texas DPS, they failed to take action as well, and this cascade of failures that Frank mentioned early on just continued to grow, and it really, when you look at Incident Command, it affected so many other components of this. In another video, we'll talk about the post-incident investigation and how hard it was to start that up because there was no Incident Command structure to begin with. Additionally, because most of the country is in areas where there's not large cities close by, one of the things that you should look at is in the region, do we have a system where we can share resources and incident command?

FEMA has what's called the National Qualification System. And basically, it is looking around at your peers, your agencies around you, and saying, "Listen, we can't all be trained the same because we just don't have the staff, so let's identify some key people in the region that are going to fill key roles, Incident Command or planning and intel logistics." Train them up through experience, maybe even using jurisdictions, large jurisdictions within your state or within your region to train up a cadre of folks that basically can help you respond and get through an incident, because you can't just do it alone. Uvalde PD was one chief, total of five staff. You can't staff Incident Command with five people in a response, but yet, there was no recognition that would ever be needed or could ever happen.

And once you get this together and you look at things regionally, and you get your cadre together, it's practice, practice, practice. Take something out of the playbook of the pros, pick your favorite sport. It doesn't matter what it is. Game day is preceded by hours and hours ad nauseam of practice, and practice could be just chalk talks. You could take the equivalent of just a coffee conversation, a quick tabletop, all the way to the actual drills.

We don't do that well. We make the excuse, "We don't have the time." You can't afford not to make the time, and literally, it could be 10 minutes over coffee, talking about an incident that occurred in another country or across the United States, or in the adjoining jurisdiction next door. So it really is, "How do you practice, practice, practice?," so that when the real event comes, because it will, it's not if, but when, when the real event comes, you feel confident and comfortable that your staff and the adjoining jurisdictions are going to respond appropriately. With that, I'll turn it over to Frank.

Frank Fernandez

20:01

Thank you, Rick. In terms of lessons learned from this incident, it's obvious that officers need training, and training is perishable. We need to make sure that agencies assess their training, the frequency of training. It is recommended that officers attend at least eight hours of active shooter training every year. Additionally, agencies should provide officers with direct training and simulated training, that looks at their actions, and they can reassess it and analyze how they would react to gunfire, to actually penetrating a door.

If the officers are not exposed to some sort of active shooter training, whether it's simulation or classroom, but to resurface the basic fundamentals that a single officer response is the appropriate response, officers' mindset will continue to fade, will continue to falter in those critical moments because that stress kicks in with the sound of gunfire. And what really kicks in at that moment in time is their ability to act instinctively, and the only way that you develop instinctive reaction by an officer is to provide them with training, so it becomes muscle memory. One lesson we did learn here, that we did observe, is that there was great momentum by those 11 first officers on scene, the FOSs that arrived. That momentum went straight down that hallway right to the door. As soon as the leadership kicked in and said, "Stop," and transitioned it to a barricaded subject, it stopped the momentum.

And when you stop momentum, then those skills that the officers have built up, those instinctive skills start to fade immediately. And so momentum is key to leadership. You will have to continuously re-evaluate, under these critical situations, the momentum of the team, and allow that momentum to build the opportunity for courageous leadership to push them through the door. It's a terrible, unfortunate situation, where an officer may have to go through a door with an active shooter on the other side, but that's where training kicks in. If you want your officers to survive an active shooter situation, then continuous training is the key to survival.

But the one answer is, the wrong answer is to not make entry. You must, must engage and make entry, and coordination of effort amongst the agencies is critical. The Incident Command System for a leader is critical here. ICS is key. The two leaders that responded to this active shooter—at least the, I would say

that first and foremost, the acting chief from the Uvalde Police Department—should have stopped, reassessed, and re-engaged immediately. In that moment when he stopped to reassess what he's got in front of him, he should be looking at the resources are ahead of him, the penetration to that classroom, and as soon as he has that in motion, he should be looking at how to manage additional resources that are responding to the scene.

How's he going to evaluate the medical practitioners that are responding as well? All this has to do with Incident Command Structure and establishing an Incident Command, and it really falls on the shoulders of the highest-rank individual until that person relinquishes that responsibility to someone else. In this particular critical situation here, what will surface was that there was no Incident Command System established, no one was assigned a particular task or structured in the Incident Command System, and therefore, when additional resources were responding, they were lined up outside aimlessly without a mission focus.

One of the particular purposes of an Incident Command System is to create mission focus. So we have a coordination of effort, a coordination of purpose. In Uvalde, had that taken place, the penetration would've happened into that classroom, the appropriate medical attention would've intervened, and the additional resources would've played a much more valuable role in the response to the critical incident at Robb Elementary. We know that agencies should create a train-the-trainer policy so that you're continuously developing with your own agency. Rick mentioned about having a coffee or discussion. Roll call training is another one of those opportunities that officers have. It doesn't always have to be a structured, external type of training that takes place. There are a number of different opportunities to learn, develop, and train your officers accordingly. During these critical incident, seconds matter, and within those seconds, actions have to take place. Actions take place within seconds only if pre-planning took place, the training was instilled and trained, and there's policies in place to guide the officers during these critical missions. MOUs and MOAs are needed to ensure that those responding agencies understand who's in command, the considerations for who has better training or better capability so you could coordinate and guide those resources to the appropriate location.

Conversely, when we look at Robb Elementary in the response to this critical incident, agencies were responding without any direction. They were responding as individuals and not as a team. Outside of the hallway, we had a number of officers. Over 370 officers responded to this incident. A number of officers were picking their own way, their own methods of how to provide their leadership, their services, and it led to a chaotic response.

There's a picture of the officers in the hallway. It depicts one officer in shorts and in Crocs. With 377 officers, there is no need for an office that's poorly equipped to be in a hallway like that. That's just one sign of a lack of leadership, a lack of control, command and control. That should have been an immediate attention to an officer, place that individual outside and in support capacity, but not in the hallway, where a critical response, such as the critical incident at Robb Elementary.

It's important that doing these MOA and MOU developments that you look at training capacity, experience, equipment, because through that effort, you're able to learn and get to meet those individuals that are your partners in that region, in your own region, and to look at capabilities so that when you are responding to these critical mass casualty situations, you know what resources you have available to you and how to call upon them. Self-deployments without an MOU is a recipe for a chaotic response, and we had a number of self-deployed officers and deputies on this incident, that consumed the scene to only create greater chaos. Although their intentions were well-intended—they responded to a mass casualty incident to provide support—it would've been much better situated if leadership would've guided those resources to the appropriate place where they were most needed.

Law enforcement should train and develop their personnel in tactical emergency medical and provide appropriate equipment. In this particular case, there were a number of deputies, officers, and agents that had medical background, tactical medical officer background. These first responders kicked in that training and developed a triage area. Although it is respected, appreciated that these officers have that medical background, the first initial response to an active shooter is not a medical response. It's a response to penetrate, to identify the active shooter, stop the killing, and then stop the dying. Unfortunately, because of the lack of Incident Command, because of the lack of a proper structure of ICS, the true practitioners, the paramedics, the ambulance, EMS practitioners found themselves either at a distance, unable to reach the location, or others were actually outside of the hallway and were not permitted to enter, not allowing true professionals with advanced medical equipment to provide needed medical attention to those that were injured. Again, the lack of Incident Command, the lack of leadership created this chaotic response.

Again, conversely, had Incident Command been applied here, and the two chiefs would've directed those resources appropriately, then the greater structure would've taken place. We've learned that police departments work extremely well under a high structure, discipline, and control. That is even more important when you have a critical incident. Officers need to have direction, especially under a crisis response. If they're told what to do and where to go, then you don't need to tell them how to do it, but if you tell them where to go, they'll get the job done. Leaderships response to the Incident Command Structure. The lack of structure to these first responding agencies led to a chaotic response and to individuals not receiving the appropriate medical timely service.

It is important that as you train your officers on active shooter responses, that you allow for medical practitioners to be part of the training. There has to be a coordinated effort between EMS, the fire department, emergency managers. All of the stakeholders in a crisis management situation should be working together to ensure that all of the protocols are understood by each of the other agencies.

This familiarization allows for continued or coordination of purpose. Agencies at a regional level should coordinate with each other to ensure that their resources when called upon are being utilized at their optimal level. This includes elected officials so they know their place, what their purpose is, but time and purpose in the right place are developed during those training exercises, tabletop exercises that prove to be the key to creating a muscle memory and a structured response to a critical incident such as Robb Elementary. Chief Braziel, anything you'd like to add to this section?

Rick Braziel

31:36

No. One, we just want to thank you on this section as well. It is all about practice, practice, practice and coordination with the folks around you. So I don't know if you could tell, but Frank and I are a little passionate about this, because the failures and leadership here are failures for all of us. We all get tainted with that.

The COPS Office. You've got the website for Uvalde, but please, if you haven't gone through the COPS Office website, is it extremely valuable with resources. We just don't know what we don't know until we find out we didn't know it, and so please, go through the website, have your staff go through it. There's libraries out there for after-action reviews. Those are great opportunities to sit and look at what are the common themes that we've seen in these critical incidents across the country, and then challenge yourself and your staffs, "How can you do it better?"

Take that approach. We can always do it better. And with that, I just want to thank you on behalf of myself and on behalf of Frank.

CIR Report Closing

32:36

Thank you so much for reviewing these important issues, for taking the time to talk about recommendations and policies. We certainly hope that the observations and recommendations throughout the report will improve the preparation and response by those law enforcement agencies that were addressed during the review, as well as other law enforcement agencies throughout the country, and we would add as well, as schools and school districts and people who are engaged with children in the school workplace to take a look at and address these different issues as well and become familiar with them. If you do nothing else, it would be very informative to review the recommendations, familiarize yourself with what the issues are talked about today, and look at these specific recommendations and see how you might be able to work them into your active shooter and other disaster response plans.

Also, in the latter chapters, starting on page 513, there are many resources for the different topics that are addressed throughout the report. That whole section is really comprehensive for anyone that's looking for specific agencies and organizations that provide consultation, direct services, crisis services. There are planning templates and other toolkits related to all the topics that are covered by the Critical Incident Review team and the entire report, so we encourage you even to familiarize yourself with the resources.

And certainly before we wrap up the video, we really do want to encourage you to look at all the different chapters. We cover many, many important issues, just as this one is important. There's tactics and equipment, leadership and incident command, post-incident response and investigation, public communications, trauma support services, and finally, pre-incident planning and preparation. If you're looking for more on that, that's chapter 8. Chapter 3 covers leadership and incident command. We know how important—that's the base of where you start all your planning from. Chapter 5, public

communications—we know that during and following a crisis are good interventions themselves. And so it's very, very important to familiarize yourself with what the appropriate type of public communications are that can help the community.

Chapter 6 covers trauma and support services, and I will make a plug here, that throughout every phase of the critical incident review, every team member was well-versed and practiced trauma-informed services in how we interviewed, how we talked to the community, how we talked about the incident itself, how we talked to the other youth and the community members, to make sure that we weren't activating people and adding to any of their distress. And as you can imagine, that's not an easy thing to do under these circumstances. So overall trauma-informed practices throughout this kind of a review and in all of your disaster planning in your exercises and drills, we don't want to make the school staff and the children feel more afraid. We want to help them get into a routine and a familiarity so that they know how to go through the process of keeping themselves safe without being more afraid because they're aware of the need to do this. And chapter 7 on school safety and security if you're looking for that specifically.

So there's a lot to learn there and we're so thrilled that you took the time to join us today. We also want to point out that we had an opportunity to talk to family members and learn about these children, who these victims were. And you will see that there is a section of remembrance profiles of the victims who were killed at Robb Elementary in Uvalde on May 24th in 2022. It was a gift and a really sacred place for us to be able to learn about who they were, these dynamic young people who were looking forward to their lives, and to honor their memories as their families continue to suffer through their losses.

But we also want to make sure that you know that you can visit the website where the entire report is listed. It's at cops.usdoj.gov/uvalde. You can download the report, you can refer to it, but know that the website houses the full report and the executive summary, and it's in both English and Spanish. And there are links for the resources that you can access at no cost, getting technical assistance to implement the recommendations in the report. Overall, the report has several hundred recommendations. So again, looking for specific information, you can go to the individual chapters and you can refer directly to the recommendations, and know that you can implement the different recommendations in the report with no-cost technical assistance. So please do visit the website, familiarize yourself with the information that you're looking for, and expand your reach to take a look at all the specific chapters, because there's a lot of lessons learned that we are hoping that throughout the country, others who are working in schools, working in law enforcement, are able to learn and implement some of the lessons that came out of this horrible event.

And we thank you very much for joining us today. We know that it takes a lot of energy out of your day to attend a webinar. We hope it was informative, and we appreciate your being with us. Thank you.