

Critical Incident Review: Active Shooter at Robb Elementary School—Chapter 5. Public Communications during and Following the Crisis

Nazmia Comrie

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Hello everybody. My name Nazmia Comrie. I'm a sociologist at the Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. Thank you so much for spending some time with us today. We'll be discussing chapter 5, Public Communications During and Following the Crisis, from the [Critical Incident Review: Active Shooter at Robb Elementary School](#) in Uvalde, Texas, report.

This chapter describes generally accepted practices and protocols for keeping the public informed during a crisis along with public information officer duties and responsibilities in the initial response; media staging and relations; during and post-incident public communications to family members, social media, and the general public, including proactive messaging and rumor monitoring, control, and response; and finally, initial family support, unification, and notification.

This chapter's organized based on three aspects of public communications related to the tragedy that occurred at Robb Elementary School. So first is a public communications during a tragedy that covers the day of the tragedy and the subsequent three days following that. The second section is public communications in the aftermath of a mass casualty incident. This section covers communications since the initial tragedy. And then finally, communications with victims and families. This covers communication, as stated, with the victims and the families.

This recording will only cover public communications in the aftermath of a mass casualty incident as well as communications with victims and families. A separate recording on the public communications timeline can be found on the website cops.usdoj.gov/uvalde, and that's going to cover the first portion of this chapter.

Well executed in trauma-informed public communications during and following a disaster, emergency, or mass violence event can help victims and community members prepare and respond effectively to such events. Communications from trusted leaders who adopt a trauma-informed approach to providing information and demonstrate a sense of calm, competency, control, and compassion can also help impacted individuals and communities manage their stress and distress reactions to these events. Thus, communication, both internal to organizations or groups and external, are critically important in every disaster, emergency, and mass violence incident. Communications must be timely and accurate and provide as much information as appropriate at a given time. Doing so helps provide individuals and communities with a sense of trust and confidence in their leaders, even when receiving what in many cases is some of the most devastating news that anyone can receive.

To talk further about this, I'd like to hand it off to April, one of our fellow team members to continue the conversation and go over some of the observations and most importantly, the recommendations from this section of the report. April?

April Naturale

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Thank you Nazmia, and hello to all of you who are on the webinar today. Thanks for joining us. My name is April Naturale, and I'm a traumatic stress specialist having worked in disaster response over the past 30 years. It was my privilege to be part of the Uvalde Critical Incident Review team.

Over the many years of working in the crisis and disaster response field, it's continued to become starkly evident that public communications are one of the most important things we can offer impacted individuals and communities. It is in and of itself a mental health intervention. We often advise communities that if they don't have a large budget or a lot of staff to respond, then to focus on the public communications so they can reach the maximum number of people and impart some of the basic emotionally supportive information that can help survivors to recover.

In this section of the report on the response to the Robb Elementary School shooting, there are 44 recommendations that are directly related to the events in Uvalde, but these recommendations are applicable to all crisis communications. Anyone participating in talking to community members, survivors, family members, other responders, and of course to the public should familiarize yourself with these recommendations as any or all of them may be applicable to the situation that you are encountering.

And for those of you who are the designated point of contact for the press, it's imperative that you understand the principles around trauma-informed communications. You can literally impose trauma on anyone who is exposed to the information that you're sharing. Thus, you have a responsibility to follow best practices in this area. For those of you who are public information officers or press yourselves, you likely already know the best practices. One of the resources for these are the DART Center for Journalism and Trauma. It's referenced in the Uvalde report. It's one of the best sources for updated best practices related to this work.

The best practices include, first, minimizing exposure to trauma and ensuring that your material is not retraumatizing people. Or if you are sharing sensitive information, it must be for a very specific and necessary reason. Then, in all communications, promote transparency. Hold briefings that are timely and accurate with what information you do have at the time, and create a sense of trust by also sharing what you don't know. That means that you don't delay communications or share any assumptions about information that you lack. And finally, correct or remediate mistakes as soon as you realize they've been made.

Unfortunately, none of this happened in Uvalde. Families asking about what happened to their loved ones were instead often ignored, given false information. And in a terribly upsetting public meeting, they were taken through a step-by-step description of what the shooter did. Social media posts were inaccurate, at first stating that the children were safe and the shooter was in custody. That information was never even corrected.

As important as disseminating public communications, it's also important to listen. And while every crisis has aspects that are common across all of those impacted, there are also significant differences in the experience of the community members based on their history, the varied cultural groups, the socioeconomic status of the community, and other demographics of the area. There are also many specific concerns from different groups and that it's almost impossible for responders to know what these are. That's why listening to the community's concerns and then addressing them in whatever way possible that you can at the time, even if you say, "I don't know, but I will find out" is key.

These types of communications can occur through town hall meetings, community forums, which we'll talk about a little bit more in a bit, and they can even occur via email or phone calls if necessary. Mostly, survivors appreciate opportunities for face-to-face meetings with law enforcement agencies and other community leaders to connect and communicate key information.

Leaders are not expected to automatically know how to communicate in a victim-centered, trauma-informed way. It's actually not something that comes naturally to most of us. We tend to say things to try and make people feel better without really knowing what that is, or we repeat platitudes that we've heard—"Don't worry, it'll all be okay,"—statements that are often misleading. They sound hollow and are usually meaningless. That's why it's important that responders who deliver public communications be trained to do so and be aware of the need to work with someone from within the community to integrate culturally sensitive ways of working with the particular groups. The simplest example is to be aware of primary language skills, never assuming that everyone understands what you're saying. Refrain from using acronyms. And use clear language about the number of people injured or having died.

We have become very accustomed to seeing and hearing violent incidents on television, on social media, on the news, and even in conversation with each other. Just because we're used to it doesn't mean that it's acceptable or that it doesn't affect us. If we become numb to this type of exposure, we're losing our humanity. Everyone, including law enforcement staff and other community leaders do not and should not be exposed to traumatic material of any kind unless for a very specific, unavoidable reason. And for most responders, there really is no reason to be exposed to graphic traumatic material such as pictures of a gruesome violent incident, body fluids, distorted bodies, or severe damage to a human. Exposure is the indicator of risk for developing a mental health concern like depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder. That's why we should not be exposed to trauma material for no reason.

Law enforcement and other government officials are the lead in sharing information about events and need to understand that the decision to share information should also take into account that it's our responsibility to warn someone when disturbing or graphic material is going to be shown. And still, this should only be done when absolutely necessary, as when a family has to identify someone who died or when an officer who's investigating has to view the details of the injury.

It often helps, too, to make sure that people know how to calm themselves before being exposed to graphic material, learn breathing exercises or grounding exercises, things that can calm us. And in the field, we often have behavioral health staff available to support those victims and family members who may become distressed due to the exposure to an incident, whether they're having conversation with leaders or have to look at one of their loved ones or any other situation where they may become exposed.

It's essential that every one of us protect children from seeing any kind of these types of graphic materials. There's almost never a reason for a child to be exposed to violent graphic material.

Exposing people for no reason is plain and simply sensationalism or trying to bring attention to oneself. In Uvalde, as we've seen with other mass violence incidents, every law enforcement officer and government official on the scene went to go see and look at the details of the murdered victims and the perpetrator. You can't unsee these distressing scenes. It's highly recommended that you follow the old crisis counseling adage, "Don't look at what you don't have to see." Our curiosity often makes us convince ourselves that we have to see something, but that is usually not the case unless you're an investigator. So learn to take a step back and protect yourself so that you don't become overwhelmed or distressed by your exposure and you don't expose other victims or family members or community members when it's not necessary.

Remember, if we go ahead and look at all these violent scenes and then we try to stop ourselves from feeling because we need to be tough, then we're becoming numb not only to these situations, but then we also lose our ability to feel even joy in the everyday events that we want to engage in with our families, with our children. So instead of learning to numb yourself, tell yourself you don't need to see gruesome scenes. It's an important message for us to make sure that we share with everyone we're working with and that we protect victims, family members, and community members when these events happen.

Let's go to the next slide and talk about best practices in giving victims families and communities opportunity to be heard.

As we mentioned earlier in slide 3, victims, family members, and often community members in general need to be heard. They need to have a voice in expressing their concerns after these horrific events happen. Law enforcement and local leaders who are trusted members of the community are generally those who are appointed to speak to people who are negatively impacted by a mass violence event. This can occur in briefings, town hall type events where appropriate, or in a victim forum where there are

just victims or just family members and victims. However you need to arrange these, it's important, and local leadership is important too. The victims and family members of the community want to know that local leaders care about them and speak to them in a compassionate way.

The meetings also need to be timely. Imagine yourself being a family member waiting and waiting and waiting for information. It's unacceptable. It increases anxiety and it increases the likelihood that somebody will remain anxious for a long time. These meetings should be separate from any meetings where the press are present. The press don't use the same types of guidelines that law enforcement leaders do. It's up to the leadership to make sure that the victims and family members are protected. And it's within your control to restrict the press as a leader. This is an opportunity for survivors to be heard and for law enforcement to show their support, bring in representatives who will be offering resources to those impacted, and connect them with Office for Victims of Crime advocates and other providers who'll be working with them as they move through the process of accessing resources and possibly witnessing or speaking at legal procedures when there is a perpetrator being brought to court.

The forums are an opportunity for everyone to hear the same information. This is very important. When everyone hears the same information, it really helps as they speak to each other. They can dispel rumors and misinformation that way, so having everyone come together to hear the same information will be very important. They can learn about what to expect after events like this. We know when we share information about what may happen in the coming weeks or months, at the six-month point, at the one-year point, people report feeling less anxiety because they already know, they had an idea of what was coming. And they can connect with each other for information and support. As I said before, they can correct misinformation with each other. And they can learn what law enforcement and government leaders are doing to help. Otherwise, they really don't know. They might read something in the press, but they might assume that leaders aren't doing anything.

In the Uvalde event, we had two family forums that the Associate Attorney General, Vanita Gupta, held with family members to stress that she as well as the Attorney General of the United States and other leadership at the Justice Department were paying attention and were concerned about what was happening in Uvalde almost a year later. There were no time limits to these family meetings. Family members and victims were able to ask questions and they talked about the need to remember and to memorialize their loved ones who were killed. The—Associate Attorney General Gupta answered questions directly herself and assigned team members to provide details of the team's review process and to follow on.

Victims' forums are a place for those impacted to learn of the eligibility for available resources. These may be coming from different areas. They may be coming from the locality, from the state, or even from the Federal Government. Nearly one year after the shooting at Robb Elementary, there were family members and victims who reported that they were not receiving victim advocate services or support. Many were unsure as to whether they were eligible or where to even go to access services. Others reported being overwhelmed and confused by the excessive paperwork to file for victim compensation,

and they didn't have an assigned victim advocate to help them. To address this type of information gap, victim and family forums can be tied to larger public media campaigns that bring awareness to the services available.

The Uvalde community has yet to hear adequate information of the tragic events that happened. Some parents have asked if their child was alone or near friends. This kind of information may have comforted them. Others want to know if their child would have lived had law enforcement entered the room earlier. Many victims and family members have reported that no one has taken accountability for what happened. No one has apologized or even acknowledged their pain. It's an awful place to be over two years later.

Leaders also need to be attuned to the culture of those most highly affected. Consider access to languages other than English. Consider where to hold meetings to assure that people can get there by public transportation or maybe specially arranged travel should they not have access to a car or funds to travel far. Consider time frames for forums and child care access as parents may have to bring their children with them or need help in arranging for child care. Many are just often afraid to leave their child at home when there's been a crisis in the family or the death of a loved one.

Consider the language that you use around death and grief. We're not often comfortable with this language, and as leaders, we need to be. What are the meaning of these terms in the different cultures you'll be working with? Consider how you acknowledge the incident and the subsequent deaths, the loss that the community has suffered. And show respect and compassion at the start of your conversations. Refrain from using false or pat statements like, "They're in a better place," things that are meaningless. And refrain from assuming anyone else's religious beliefs or imposing your beliefs on them. Again, these trauma-informed interactions don't generally come naturally to us, so training is very helpful in allowing those of you who are leaders who your community members will look to for support and guidance in seeing you as compassionate and trustworthy.

So as we close, again, we urge you to review the recommendations in the public communications chapter of the Uvalde report. There are key points within the 44 recommendations noted for this chapter alone. As we mentioned earlier, the DART Center for Journalism and Trauma is a best practice resource. All responders should also be familiar with the incident command structure and where public communication falls within that structure. If you have a small incident command group, you may have one leader who has one job, but also the other job of being the public communications lead. You can also take the free courses at the FEMA Training Center to learn about public communications and how to do what needs to be done in a trauma-informed and compassionate way. The Office for Victims of Crime provides victim advocates for families, victims. They provide consultants to help set up with provider services and help applying for grants where appropriate.

Starting on page 513 of the report, there are many resources from different topics that are addressed throughout the whole report. That section is really comprehensive for anyone looking for specific organizations and agencies that provide technical assistance, consultation, direct services, crisis services. There are even planning templates and other toolkits related to the topics covered by the Critical Incident Review team.

The other chapters of this Critical Incident Review are just as important as this one. We address tactics and equipment, leadership and incident command, post-incident response and investigation, school safety, trauma and support services, and finally, pre-incident planning and preparations. We also took the time to learn about and remember the victims who lost their lives that day. You may want to read about them. So if you note the website, the report is listed at cops.usdoj.gov/uvalde. You can download or just read the report there.

I know we've covered a lot here, but there's much more detail in the report and specific recommendations and many resources. Take some time with it. It's worthwhile. And thank you too for joining us here today.