Strengthening Law Enforcement Leadership and Decision-Making Skills during an Active Threat Incident

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Nazmia Comrie

Thank you everyone for joining our webinar today, and thank you. We're going to be talking about Strengthening Law Enforcement Leadership and Decision-Making Skills during an Active Threat Incident. This is a webinar series that the COPS Office is currently hosting in a number of different topics. Leadership in law enforcement is absolutely critical, especially in moments of a dire challenge such as an active threat incident. It requires courageous action and steadiness in a chaotic environment. Leadership can arise regardless of rank or title, and such moments require steady and commanding actions. Today we're going to be discussing strategies and critical approaches to leadership and decision-making during and following an active threat incident, as well as processes and training that can be implemented today. My name is Nazmia Comrie. I'm a sociologist at the COPS Office, which is the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services at the U.S. Department of Justice.

Before we get started, just a couple of logistical notes. You'll notice at the bottom of your screen that there is a Q&A and a chat function. I encourage you, for any questions that you may have for the panelists, please put it in the Q&A function. I'll be monitoring those as we're having the conversation, and either there or towards the end of the webinar we will do our best to answer all of the questions. If we run out of time and cannot answer your question, we will circle back and make sure that responses are sent out to everybody. [The] chat function will be used to provide resources and any links as appropriate. I also encourage you to be on mute when you are—during the presentations so that we don't have any background noise. And before we get started on the conversation today, I do want to give a quick overview of the COPS Office for those that may not be familiar with our office.

As I mentioned, the COPS Office is a component of the Department of Justice, and we are responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's law enforcement agencies, and we do this through information and grant resources. We award grants to hire community policing professionals; develop and test innovative policing strategies; and provide training and technical assistance to community members, local government leaders, and all levels of law enforcement. Since 1994, the COPS Office has been appropriated more than $20 billion to help advance community policing, and one way we provide assistance to the field is through information sharing. Today's webinar is one such way, and as I mentioned, this webinar is part of our COPS Office Critical Incident Review Implementation Strategies webinar series, which spotlights topics that are included in the report, *Critical Incident Review: Active Shooter at Robb Elementary School*.

For those that may not be familiar with the report, I'll just give a high level overview, but upon request of Uvalde leadership, the COPS Office conducted an in-depth analysis of the tragic shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, where the lives of 19 children and two teachers were lost in a mass shooting. We had three goals as part of our review. First was to provide to the families in that community an authoritative review of the mass shooting response. Second was to provide lessons

learned to the field, which is why these webinars and other avenues of getting the information out there are so critical. Third, and importantly, is to honor the victims, the survivors, their loved ones, and the entire Uvalde community. Aided by a team of subject matter experts, including one that you'll be meeting shortly, we spent over 50 days during nine separate visits to Uvalde. We reviewed over 14,000 pieces of evidence, video, and documents, and interviewed hundreds of people.

As a result of this Critical Incident Review work, earlier this year, the Attorney General of the United States released a nearly 600-page report detailing our observations and recommendations of the multiple failures in leadership, decision-making, tactics, policy and training, and provision of trauma and support services. Today we're going to be touching on the report recommendations in the areas of leadership and decision-making. And with that, I'd like to bring in our panelists. First I'd like to turn to Frank to give a brief introduction of yourself and then Travis, you following that.

Frank Fernandez

04:21

Thank you, Nazmia, and good afternoon to everyone. Thank you for joining our webinar today. First and foremost, I extend my deepest condolences to all of the families and those who suffered during this tragic event at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas. My name is Frank Fernandez. I'm a retired chief from the South Florida area. I served at a very young age of 19, started at the city of Miami Police Department, served there for 25 years doing many different assignments. Thirteen of those years, I spent on the SWAT team as an operator, team leader, and a commanding officer. The last seven years of my career, I spent as a Deputy Chief and Chief of Operations. Upon my retirement, I went on to the city of Hollywood just north of Miami. I became the Chief of Police and the Assistant City Manager overseeing police and fire. I was then recruited to go to the city of Coral Gables back down home—grew up, where I went to high school.

I became the Director of Public Safety and the Assistant City Manager overseeing seven departments. I've been blessed with the opportunity to also work concurrently for the last 14 years with the Department of Justice, the Civil Rights Division, and now the COPS Office doing pattern and practice investigations on eight different departments across the country in the last 14 years as well as the last two years working with Nazmia and a number of renowned experts in the field of law enforcement looking at the Uvalde incident at Robb Elementary.

Nazmia Comrie

05:57

Thank you, Frank. Travis?

Travis Norton

06:01

Hello, Nazmia. I'm a retired police lieutenant with 25 years experience at Oceanside Police Department in Southern California. I'm an instructor in active shooter response, less lethal, SWAT command and tactics, use of force, and critical incident response. I currently instruct for the National Tactical Officers

Association and the California Association of Tactical Officers. I also serve as a policing fellow for National Policing Institute and the Future Policing Institute. I currently serve as a strategy development chair for the NTOA. I was selected as an active shooter SME by National Policing Institute and Safe and Sound Schools for several active shooter reviews both in the U.S. and internationally.

I also lead a critical incident review team for the California Association of Tactical Officers, where I get to travel all over the country and internationally to review these active killer incidents. I also hold a doctorate in policy planning development from the University of Southern California. My research focused on active shooter police response, and specifically I interviewed 25 police responders to active shooter incidents, most of which were incident commanders. And I was able to glean a lot of information that's not in after-action reports, which I'll be sharing with you today.

Nazmia Comrie

07:06

Thank you so much, Travis, and thank you so much, Frank. And for those that may have just joined, I encourage you once we get this conversation started to enter any questions you may have for this esteemed panel in the Q&A function at the bottom of your screen. I also think it's important that because we are talking about active shooters and active threat incidents, that we also talk about the trauma and the fact that we are going to be talking about loss of life and serious injury—although we will not be going into the details, I do just want to provide that caution that that is part of this conversation today. And like Frank, I want to extend our heartfelt thoughts with all those communities that have been impacted by violence and by what we are talking about today, including the Uvalde community. So with that, I'd like—Frank, I'd like to turn to you first and I'd like to set the stage for—I'm going to ask a really broad and difficult question. What does it take to be a great leader?

Frank Fernandez

08:09

To be a great leader in police departments—and I speak from the perspective of all the ranks that I've held, including the chief of police position in three departments and assistant city manager, director of public safety—and I would say that it takes courage. It takes courage to pre-plan, prepare. Most of these tragic responses to a threat, to an active threat incident, really goes back down to the lack of pre-planning, preparation, and training. And I say to be a good leader, you have to show courage. You have to be decisive, to be able to make those decisions before they happen. You have to be a visionary leader to understand these things are happening everywhere and anywhere, and they could come to your doorsteps at any time, so you'll have to be ready to respond. You have to be courageous to take care of your people, take care of your officers, take care of your community, and you do that by pre-planning and preparing your staff.

Look, today, we're not investing sufficient amount of funds to train officers. We're sending them out in the field with very limited amount of training and expecting them to respond in seconds with precision. And they can and they will, so long as they have the proper training. Good leadership starts in that pre-planning phase, looking at being a visionary leader. When it gets to the active shooter threat, when

you're there, you have to be calm, steady, and decisive. I think the operative word for a leader is decisive. Idle leadership—you'll hear about it during the Uvalde incident—played a key role in the failures leading into the 77 minutes that it took to enter that classroom. So decisiveness is one of those key elements that a leader must have in their inventory. But to be decisive as a leader, you have to prepare yourself, kind of like Travis with his PhD.

I think every chief should do the same type of work. Preparing yourself, researching, analyzing, assessing, and making sure that you have in front of you all the tools necessary to coach, guide, and mentor your department to a successful mission. And I would say that every day is a mission. Every day should start off with a checklist of every officer at a roll call, making sure they're ready for that daily mission, making sure that your inventory of trainers are in tune to the latest and best practices that are out there to coach and guide your officers. Decisiveness—steady and calm—only happen with leadership if the leadership team dedicates itself to preparing and pre-planning for a tragic event.

Nazmia Comrie

10:49

Thank you. I mean, Frank, to a certain extent, it's like what we talked about in the report, about how every incident and every day you should be using almost incident command. And to a certain extent that's what you're talking about is that every day that checklist or that preparation should be occurring. So Travis, I'd like to get anything you want to add to that, and I'd also like you to touch on non-ranked positions, and do you think these same aspects that Frank outlined and what you are going to be sharing also apply to non-ranked positions?

Travis Norton

11:18

No, I would agree with Frank. I'll give you my three big takeaways from leadership from my viewpoint. Number one, you as a leader need to study leadership, learn what has worked for other leaders in the past, apply their lessons learned to the context of your environment. There are a lot of great books out there to help you understand similar leadership challenges you're facing. Somebody out there has faced the exact same thing you have and has probably written about it. Second, I think it's extremely important that you keep in touch with what is going on at the line level, especially with morale.

Traveling across the country, a lot of agencies have morale issues, and the one way you can deal with that is—[what] your officers want to know is that you care and understand them. You understand what it's like to work a graveyard shift, and that will go a long way with them. Third—this applies to your informal leaders to your point—develop and coach them. Give them opportunities to learn and grow in multiple contexts. We all as leaders have a use-by date, and we always need to be thinking about that next generation of leaders and developing them.

Nazmia Comrie

12:22

That's great, and I really like that you bring up the succession planning because we have to be thinking about the future. And so I really appreciate that. So with that, I really want to now turn to critical incidents, and I really just want to stay on the same topic of leadership, and Travis, I want to go to you first. In the midst of an active attack threat, what kind of leadership is needed?

Travis Norton

12:47

Well, in the context of crisis leadership, you cannot be a timid commander, and to Frank's point, you have to be decisive, and you absolutely have to be skilled at crisis decision-making. I know there are a number of checklists that are useful for active shooter incidents, and they are useful, but remember, checklists don't bend to changing circumstances, and it won't help you during a rapidly unfolding active shooter incident that doesn't fit your checklist. I think it's important to understand tactical science principles, because principles provide you with a glimpse of where to look when there's no answer that's apparent. One thing to remember, 20% of active shooter incidents have some type of novel occurrence that is challenging the decision-making of leaders, and it's causing us a lot of confusion. I had numerous incident commanders tell me that they were faced with a problem that they had never seen or never trained for before, and they were essentially caught flat-footed.

Another point of consideration, again to Frank's point, is your pre-event activities. Those should focus on three things. Actually four. Training and education. There is a difference between training and education. The how versus why. Your planning piece and also the logistical piece. If you have a piece of equipment, such as breaching gear, that you haven't trained with in six to 12 months, you have a hole in your problem. If you as a leader are not doing these three things, your agency event performance is going to suffer. Last, as a leader, you also have to educate yourself and study these after-action reports such as the Robb Elementary report. These reports are so rich with lessons learned, and they have the same themes. It's incident command leadership, it's indiscriminate parking, it's inappropriate self-deployment, it's communications, it's unified command, mostly centered on fire and EMS. And we have to do [a] good job as leaders in studying these reports, taking those lessons learned, and then plugging them into our training.

Nazmia Comrie

14:34

Frank, anything you want to add to that?

Frank Fernandez

14:39

Yeah, the number of departments that have been across the country with the Civil Rights Division, and probably no different than in Uvalde—you could tell if a leader is engaged, as Travis mentioned, just by looking at their desk. When you walk into their office, you look around at, like Nazmia has in their

background, the books that are on the shelf, and it tells you what they're studying. To become a learning organization, you have to lead from the front. You have to know what's happening around the world, around the country, in your region, and in your state or your county. And to do that, you have to be a student of education, continuously studying. And that really lets the foundation be built on a learning organization. It all starts from there. And you have to have courage as a chief. You have to devote time to it. If your office and your desk is not complete with books, analysis, different critical incidents that have happened around the country—today, more than ever, we have the ability to access information in very rapid fashion.

The COPS Office has a library, an inventory of opportunities that any agency, big, small, medium-sized, can access right from their computer or from their phone immediately. Moreover, if you call the COPS Office, they're going to probably do everything they can, everything possible to send you a technical assistance team to help you and to assist you in guiding you through those—whatever agency challenges you may find yourself. So what I'm getting to is that it takes time, commitment, dedication, and courage to do the work of a good leader and to lay out that foundation for your officers to succeed every day. And I'll finish with this, I'm very passionate about the aviation world. I'm still a reserve officer with the city of Miami Police Department. I fly in the Aviation Unit in the helicopter, and I can tell you that we don't fly the helicopter unless we do a pre-check every day.

For every flight hour that we take on, it takes about 10 hours of pre-check and maintenance. So think about that. For every one hour that we fly, it takes us about 10 hours of cleaning the helicopter, checking all the—fuel capacity, all the equipment in the helicopter. So the same thing should happen for your officers. Think about what does it take to put an officer out on patrol for a shift. How many hours of training? It can't be once a year, and it can't be every six months. It doesn't have to be formal training, but when they get to roll call, that's one opportunity that should be seized every single day to train, coach, and guide those officers to a successful mission. You must set aside time to develop and coach them. If you do it, my experience tells me from looking at different departments across the country that the vast majority of your officers will respond in accordance with your training.

But it is a perishable skill that if you don't consistently apply it, it's no different than—if we don't go to the gym every day and work out, then our muscles start to deplete every day. If you miss one day, you know, you feel it yourself in your arms and your legs. They don't feel as strong and as tight. Same thing happens with an officer. So again, pre-planning and preparation—if I were to tell you what section to look at in the Uvalde report, it would be to focus in on that section. It's going to help you understand how to prepare and plan for this event that is high liability—a low frequency, high consequence issue. Low frequency, high consequence: You need to prepare for those.

Nazmia Comrie

18:16

Thank you for that. And I think part of this topic and one of the questions we received from the audience that I want to insert here is tied in a little bit to what we've been discussing in particular with incident command. And the question is why do you think departments fail to use proper incident command? Is this a training department failure on implementing? But what are your thoughts on that? And so maybe, Frank, I can go to you first and then Travis, any thoughts you have on that?

Frank Fernandez

18:43

Yeah, I think what happens is that we don't practice it enough. The fire department is exceptionally good at incident command, and I've seen it in practice. I think all the professionals in the field, when you look at the fire department and they respond to a fire, the battalion chief pulls up, takes command of the incident. On the radio, he actually says, "I am in command." He pulls out an incident command board from the back of his truck or his vehicle, and he starts managing that incident step by step. In an active shooter situation, you don't have that ability. So we do operate different in an active shooter, active threat situation, but there are a lot of principles that do apply.

But in order for you as a leader to be really good and a practitioner in the field of incident command, utilizing ICM and those NIMS processes and practices, what I can tell you is that you need to do it every single day, practice it, teach it, coach it to make sure that when that low frequency, high consequence event comes up, instinctively you know how to react. But you have to be able to lead from the front. You can't expect someone else to do it. I often hear chiefs of police leaning on their SWAT commanders, leaning on their practitioners in the field to take that command. The chief has to lead by example. If you want to lead your agency, you must be able to do whatever you're asking everybody else to do.

Nazmia Comrie

20:14

Thank you. Travis?

Travis Norton

20:17

I think to kind of echo what Frank said, we are usually in police work really good at managing dynamic tactical problems most of the time. But as that incident matures, we forget about those ICS principles. We're used to operating on our own. And fire is very used to, they respond as two to three people and they set up that incident command. It is culturally what they do. And so for us, that is not culturally what we do. You have a high risk, low frequency event. If you don't work in a busy department, you're not doing that every day. You're not building out that ICS system. And I think that is one of the primary challenges that we have. You can see through a lot of these after-action reports that are available that ICS is one, and leadership is one of the absolute primary problems that we have.

And it's not even a, at the beginning, in the first hour, in the first two hours, it's not a robust ICS system. And honestly, during the first part of that response, it's more of a centric network than it is a rigid hierarchy. And so how we picture that is a whole other conversation, but I think it's because we just don't use it every day and we don't build it out. I used to respond to critical incidents. I would write out my hierarchy, so I knew who was where. But one of the things—and I was going to bring this up in another question you have—is that ICS is imperative, don't get me wrong, but it doesn't answer any questions for us, and it doesn't solve our tactical problem. So that's something to think about. I'm not talking down about ICS. I'm just saying it's really something to be aware of.

Nazmia Comrie

22:01

That's great, thank you both. And the only other thing I would add to the question we got and to what you both have shared is that we also have to broaden who within an agency is exposed to ICS. I think a lot of times we focus in on, as Frank said, the SWAT commander. We focus on the leadership within an agency, and there is value, and it's really important for people to be aware of some of the terminology, some of the structure. They may not be the incident commander, they may not be an incident commander in a year or five years. But being aware of that, understanding things like what a JIC means, Joint Information Center, but those types of things I think are really important.

And so that would be another piece I think we have to do. And it's also tied in with one of the recommendations in the Uvalde report where we do talk about different types of training that should be accessible and available to those throughout the agency. So thank you to the person who provided or asked that question. So this has been really helpful from a leadership perspective. And I want to now think about following an active attack incident and what is needed from leadership. And so Travis, maybe I can go to you and then Frank, anything you want to add to that?

Travis Norton

23:05

Yeah, so this is a really broad topic. I want to focus on just one piece of it. That's on the mental health of your responders and those that are involved in other capacities such as dispatch. I think it's important to make sure that you have a strong wellness program—not just say you have a wellness program, actually have a strong one at your agency—and that the services that are provided post-incident. Not everyone processes critical incidents such as an active shooter the same. And what works for one person wellness-wise is not going to work well for another. So you as a leader have to have a plan on the front end that will help confront these challenges when a crisis occurs.

Nazmia Comrie

23:44

Thank you. Frank?

Frank Fernandez

23:47

I think a leader has to be able to think holistically on any critical incident starting from pre-planning and preparation through the incident and then post-incident. When looking at the post-incident, you have to look at the effects on the community, effects on your employees, your officers, and also those agencies that came to support you. A regional effort. So you have to look after them as well because they did come to support. And in doing that, it's all about preparation. Part of their preparation is looking at what is known as a Swiss cheese model, so looking, think about a Swiss cheese, little holes in it. So you have to look at your planning and preparation, look and see where are your holes and where do you need to fill them. And you also have to identify individuals within your agency that are good at those areas, that are focused in, that are refined and polished in those areas that you can lean on and you can provide an opportunity for them to take command during those critical situations.

But I will say this though, I think one of the lessons learned from many of these critical incidents—certainly here in Uvalde, Texas—is that if you're going to have a badge and a gun, and you're going to be in a command position, you need to make sure as the chief that all those individuals are ready to take lead and take command. Someone who's been in an administrative position for years and years, you'll have to look at that Swiss cheese and see how many holes does that person have in their leadership ability to take command. And if you put that person in a position such as an acting chief during a critical situation, will that person be able to perform? Everybody wants to perform. The question is, are we placing them in the right place at the right time for the right reasons? And do they have the capacity to be able to manage a critical impromptu threat that requires instinctive, timely reaction?

And as the Attorney General said in Uvalde, Texas, seconds do matter. Seconds—not minutes, not hours—but seconds matter. And the only way you could be prepared to respond to an active shooter as a leader is that you have to pre-plan, prepare, train, consistently reinforce those skills so that when it does happen, you as a leader are prepared to respond in seconds and be a calm, steady, and decisive leader.

Nazmia Comrie

26:11

Great, thank you both. So I want to shift a little but not too much, but I want to start talking about decision-making and Travis, I know you've done a lot of research in this space and I'll probably put you in an impossible position to ask you to condense all of that into one response, but I'd really like you to pull what are some of those primary considerations that you have found in your research, in your work that are really actionable items that those that are listening today can start to think about and may potentially influence?

Travis Norton

26:42

Well, I say this. Police officers are well trained and poorly educated. We know how to do things. We just have a hard time articulating why we do them. In the decision-making space, one of the things I talk about is we all have a slide deck in our head and when we're responding to a critical incident such as an active shooter, we're pushing through that mental slide deck, trying to find a slide that looks like the problem that we're facing so that we have countermeasures that we can apply. And when that slide deck is empty—because we have a lot of new supervisors, we have a lot of new officers, people at all ranks, their slide decks are empty—and we do a poor job training and educating on decision-making. Think about this, and I'll give you a quick example. It's absolutely important that when you go to the range, that you can put accurate rounds on target.

That's imperative. But do we train on the decision very much on whether or not we should shoot in the first place? And so when we look at any active shooter critical incident, when those operations are analyzed, it's always the decisions that are most conspicuous. And so I have over the years created a decision-making exercise based on research by Dr. Gary Klein. He's got a lot of great books. One of his best is *Streetlights and Shadows*. He did a lot of work with fire and military, and it's called recognition-primed decision-making. And what happens is these decision-making exercises are essentially a snapshot in time where you're given a scenario, you work through it, you talk about it, there's multiple ways to deliver them, but what that does is it imprints a slide deck or a slide in your head and adds it to your Rolodex, if you're old enough to know what a Rolodex is.

And as you're responding to a call, this will actually create artificial experience—this is research based—and you will actually start solving that problem that you're facing out in the field from where you left off in that thought process. And they're extremely important. I teach them all over the country. I taught them at my agency. I've had people tell me how advantageous they are, how it helped them perform well, and it gave them a starting point, and they weren't caught flat-footed, which is happening at some of these active shooter events where the decision-making just falls flat.

Nazmia Comrie

28:59

That's wonderful. And everyone is going to have a sneak peek because we're going to spend a couple minutes doing a little bit of an exercise, although it wouldn't be as interactive as if it was in your training, but everyone will have a sneak peek on that. But Frank, any thoughts on what Travis has shared or anything else on decision-making?

Frank Fernandez

29:16

Look, I think decision-making is the key. That is the essence of leadership. You need to make decisions. The only bad decision is not making a decision. Idle leadership—if we look at Uvalde, Texas, I think most people are really interested in finding out what were the failures there. I think leadership failed. As the Attorney General mentioned during his speech in Uvalde, it was a failure of leadership. Eleven officers

responded, and within three minutes, that incident was over. They did respond. Eleven responded right in there as the shots were fired. They consumed and flooded the hallway. Their senses, all of their senses were alerted to smoke, the smell of gunfire, of gunpowder. There's smoke in the air. There's sound being penetrated through a deep thumping noise of a rifle round going off. And they're headed right to that door, right to classrooms 111 and 112. They showed an enormous amount of courage.

It was at that moment in time when they got to that door that within three minutes, 11 officers, several SWAT officers, or SWAT-trained I should say, with leadership, two chiefs of police readily available right there in that hallway made a decision to stop the forward momentum of that courageous team. And they stopped the forward momentum through—that's decisive leadership, except that they went the wrong direction. Instead of moving in, they stalled that momentum by calling it a barricaded subject. And at that point in time, all momentum ceased. So decisive leadership and decision-making, the decision-making model has to be practiced. I think Travis brings together an enormous amount of opportunities to be able to go through this exercise to really train and coach and guide your people to understand that seconds do matter and decisions you make do have major consequences. That team that day, the leadership, what they had to do is make sure that they did not sit idle.

They did have one sit idle and make no decisions. And we had one make a decision to stop the forward momentum. I think we all know that once you stop the forward momentum of a team like that, you seize all courage. And no matter how much training officers get—I spent 13 years on a SWAT team, on a very active SWAT team—courage drives you through that door because if your conscious mind kicks in, it's going to tell you not to go through that door, because you're going to probably end up on the wrong side of that. But what drives you forward is a good leader saying you must go in there. And Nazmia, if I may, I'll just say this, that it takes courageous leadership, but I do want to emphasize that it also takes a commitment. And when these chiefs of police get sworn in just like I did, you put your hand on a Bible as I did, you raise up your right hand and you swore to uphold your oath of office.

And that oath of office talks about the Constitution that you're going to protect the Constitution and part of the Constitution is protecting our citizens—and *peace* and *tranquility* are words in the Constitution—it's your job to keep them safe. When you take that oath of office, it's your job that you're taking on as a commitment to your community under that oath to coach, guide, and mentor, lead your officers to a successful mission, to the point of probably even putting them in harm's way in the protection of the citizens, in the protection of their constitutional rights.

Nazmia Comrie

32:54

Thank you. Thank you both for that. I think because we are talking decision-making, I want to pause here and I want to turn to Travis so we can do a little bit of our exercise and then I have so many more questions, but we'll get through that through the audience Q&A. So Travis, I'm going to hand it to you.

Travis Norton

33:15

Okay. I want to go through a decision-making exercise that I have. And when you deliver the—and I hope you take a picture of the exercise we're going to do—but you can deliver these in multiple ways. I did these in briefing. You can do them in classes, down time, all of these different types of things. So this decision-making exercise is such that you have arrived at an active shooter call where the suspect shot several people in the parking lot of a retail business, then went inside the business and shot several more victims. The first arriving three officers conducted entry into the business and were ambushed by the suspect. One officer was shot and down inside the store and the other two officers were unable to make entry into the store due to the heavy volume of suspect rifle fire. Another entry by officers was attempted.

But that heavy volume of fire forced the officers back out of the store. You are the first arriving supervisor and therefore in command. So what do you do? So stop right there. Think about some things that you would do. But one of the issues that several interviewees discussed with me during my research was this. When the targets of our adversary turn from innocent victims to police officers, it's causing us challenges. Yes, it's still an active shooting, but our tactics need to change because you're no longer going in to save the victim, because you have to fight through that problem before you can worry about the victims. Essentially, these types of incidents are challenging conventional response models, and it's simply not stop the killing and stop the dying when you have an incident commander who now has to consider the lives of officers who are repeatedly being shot upon arrival. Three-quarters of active shooters are accessing the crisis site through the primary entry point.

Think about this, how many different entry points are there in a business? I can name multiple active shooter incidents where we're getting shot at the initial entry point. Borderline is a big one. Ask yourself, what tools do you have to start to manage this problem? There were several out there including the rule of three. Three things I need to know right now. Three things I need to do right now. Three people to act on my behalf. There's the initial focus of effort methodology. You have to have these tools in your mental toolbox. What about your tried and true tactics such as hammer and anvil or envelopment? But just remember, your tactics are going to be context-dependent, because one works in one set of circumstances—could be a complete recipe for disaster in another. And I think it's extremely important to think about all of these things because over 20% of the incidents that we're responding to, and I don't know if I mentioned this before, involve novelty.

Talking to incident commanders who are telling me, "I'm looking at this problem and I had no idea what to do. My training was completely failing me." So I would really encourage you to take this back to your agency, develop it, talk about it, you're going to get arguments. Those are all good things. But this will start to fill your mental slide deck because a lot of these decision-making exercises that I do are based on things that have happened to me during my experience and things that I've heard happen to other people. These are real-life scenarios, and I just think that it's important that you're doing these and filling your slide deck.

Nazmia Comrie

36:40

That's great. Thank you, Travis. Frank, what are your thoughts on anything you want to add around the exercise or how these could be utilized at agencies?

Speaker 4

You're on mute, Frank, please restart.

Frank Fernandez

37:04

I think that Travis brings up an opportunity here for the command staff to bring forward an opportunity to bring this situation to your command and figure out your conventional and unconventional methods that you would utilize to address this critical incident. Officers shot, innocent people shot, you tried many methods of penetrating, unsuccessful, so you have to convert to conventional and unconventional methods to make entry. But the issue for a leader is going to be to take these types of scenarios, those hypotheticals, those low probability, high consequence events, and analyze them today, which will prepare you for tomorrow.

Nazmia Comrie

37:47

Thank you. And a couple of other things that I would add to this is that I think these are the types of exercises that could be used in training as Travis has referenced, but these are also the types of things that could be used in in-service and roll call, ways to keep the conversations going and to keep those reminders—because they are at times low frequency as Frank mentioned. I think the other thing is, one thing we talk about in the report is—and Travis touched on this a bit—is that when you go out to the range for your qualifications, most of the time it's just, all right, can you hit the target? And it's a very simple XYZ exercise. Maybe sometimes you can incorporate some of the techniques and some of these decision-making into that so that when we're constantly having the conversation, we're taking advantage of training and education and awareness and the muscle memory.

And so I think there's a lot of real value in being able to use these and to create some for your agency. And I think another important piece here that Travis was referencing—and because we are also referencing the Uvalde report—a thing that's important—one of the big questions our team really debated is one of the things we had heard from a lot of people we interviewed is, "Is this still an active shooter?" Because as Frank mentioned, it transitioned into a barricaded situation. And I want to be very clear, we say this in the report and the Attorney General said it: At Robb Elementary on that day, it was an active shooter from the beginning until the very end of that response. And so I really want to just emphasize that as we're having these kinds of conversations. Yes, please, Frank.

Frank Fernandez

39:27

No, I just wanted to add that just looking at the unfortunate tragedy in Uvalde, first I'll say about the officers that initially responded, those first 11 FOSs, first on scene, they really acted with an enormous amount of courage. They did not hesitate and stop. They went through doors and they just kept going towards the gunfire. It was within those three minutes that everything stopped. But I do want to say that you must, must continue that forward momentum when there's an active shooter. The word *barricaded* and *SWAT* are two words that should never be used for an active shooter. It is super unlikely, almost unthinkable, that a SWAT team is going to be available to respond to be the first on scene. This is a first on scene response, single officer response. Your duty, that officer's duty, is to get and penetrate that forward momentum towards that individual firing those rounds, killing people, and you must stop the killing and then stop the dying.

That's the main mission. The responsibility of leaders is to pre-plan, train, coach, guide, and mentor. You've seen it multiple times. Those are the major failure points. One chief there in the hallway sat idle. He didn't make a decision. Another chief called it a barricaded subject, a wrong decision. The right decision would've meant to force those officers to go through that door. And sometimes in leadership you have to do things that put officers in harm's way. But that's the oath of office that we all take and that they took in adherence to protecting the citizens of your community. And it all starts with—really, I'm going to put my city manager on right now—and that is going to your county administrator, going to your city managers and explaining to them that in order to be a successful law enforcement agency, you must devote a lot more time to training your officers. And utilizing the aviation world as an example, I will tell you that today we are safer, more safer than ever before when we fly commercial.

You go to Delta, American, even Spirit, all these airlines that you fly, they're all much safer today than ever before, simply because they have routine training, checkpoints, they analyze every single incident. Think about an NTSB report when an airline goes down, they analyze, they put everything back together. And the NTSB report is similar to what the COPS Office did here issuing this authoritative report in Uvalde, Texas. That is that airplane coming together and analyzing all the different parts, what worked, what didn't work. And the way you get good at that is in your own respective jurisdictions, whenever you have an incident, put together a post-incident review team and do like the NTSB does. Do like the COPS Office did, analyze that incident. And as Travis mentioned, there's so many lessons you can learn from, and then maybe you can recreate that incident and see how they could respond to it.

I truly believe that it takes three steps. You first have to crawl, then walk, and then run. And so the way you crawl is you first have to understand it. You start walking when you start practicing, and you could run with it once you do repetitive training. And those three skills takes courage. You got to go to your administrators and make sure that you're constantly applying training and setting your officers up for success for a successful mission every single day and starting the day off thinking that you're going to have a low probability, high consequence event that's going to happen. And look, today we're talking about active shooters, but just yesterday the Federal Government took down three major terrorists across the country. So tomorrow we may be talking about a terrorist attack that goes off. Something

goes boom. Are you ready for that? Are you ready to assume leadership in a second? And again, as the Attorney General mentioned, seconds do matter in your leadership, and the only way to prepare for those seconds is to practice. And by the way, practice doesn't make perfect. The right practice makes perfect.

Nazmia Comrie

43:43

No. 100% agree. Thank you so much for that, Frank. And keeping—

Travis Norton

43:44

And Nazmia—

Nazmia Comrie

43:48

Yes, please, Travis.

Travis Norton

43:49

Real quick. I'll be fast. I think we're doing a great job training our officers in active shooter response. As Frank mentioned, the initial responding officers in Uvalde did a good job, but many times the friction points, again, lie with the incident commander. I've had numerous commanders tell me that when they're promoted their crisis decision-making skills diminish because they're used to making slow and deliberate decisions during their day-to-day duties. Another contributing factor to that leadership performance during an active shooter is the cultural challenge, where we have command leadership who shy away from training to avoid embarrassment. That goes to training these incident commanders in more than just ICS. And as I said before, ICS is imperative. Don't get me wrong, I'm not downplaying ICS, but it only gives your problem structure, and it doesn't solve your tactical problem or answer questions. And again, it's always the decisions that are analyzed that are most conspicuous.

In Robb Elementary, we weren't talking about the tactics that BORTAC used. Were they doing a threshold assessment to go into the room? It was that decision to intervene in the first place. You as trainers, as command staff, if you're going to reduce self-induced frictions, you have to train and have a policy and mitigate things like indiscriminate parking, train on your expectations related to inappropriate self-deployments, mitigating superfluous radio traffic. If you train on these things, you're going to cut down on that self-induced friction and you're going to have a better response, which ultimately in turn is going to save lives.

Frank Fernandez

45:10

Nazmia, I just want to add that culture plays a key role in leadership. It's not just applying training, your policies and procedures and supervision, but as a leader in all of the command positions in the police department, you have to get up front. As Travis mentioned earlier, go out and do ride-alongs. Go out and assess what the SWAT team is doing, what your emergency managers are doing, and understand that there's a theory and there's a practice. Does the theory match the practice? That's part of cultural awareness. And as a leader, I will tell you, just looking at Uvalde, Texas, when those 11 officers were in the hallway, four distinctive times, they had activations of an active shooter. Those sensors were activated four different times throughout those 77 minutes, reactivating the opportunity to say, "Let me engage, let me engage." But they still did not engage.

That tells you that the practice and the training did not match the culture. You have to make sure that your operational culture is one that aligns with how you're going to operate every day in your policies and procedures and your training. Oftentimes, I've seen that your trainers are teaching and coaching and guiding your personnel outside of the vision that chiefs have for the department. And the only way that a chief understands what the training unit is doing is you have to go through that training. And many of the failures across the country is where chiefs of police, assistant chiefs, deputy chiefs, and majors of those command staff, when they go to training, they go to the executive version of that training. I say to you that you must go through the entire training to fully understand what your officers are being coached and guided to do and to then match the culture to the training and policies and procedures that you have in place.

Nazmia Comrie

47:06

Great, great points that you both bring up. So thank you for that. I'd like to ask for any of our participants that are listening to start adding questions to the Q&A. I have a ton more questions, but I also want to really make sure that we answer the questions you may have or if you have comments. So again, please, at the bottom of the screen, there's a Q&A function. Click on that, add a question. While you're thinking about your questions, I'm going to throw out another question to our panelists here. And we've kind of touched on this in a lot of different ways with training, but I just want to just give space for training in particular. Are there any other pieces or any other actions that you think that those that are listening and should really be thinking about when they're considering training? And I know we've talked a lot about that, but I just want to give space here for that while people are thinking about questions. So maybe Frank, I'll go to you and then I'll go to Travis after.

Frank Fernandez

48:00

Yeah, look, on the training side, I think that there should be a full assessment every single time that there’s a tragedy that takes place across the country. Every chief should be tuned in on what's happening everywhere, have sensory awareness of what's happening. And when they do, then you

assess it to your training unit. What are we doing? What are we training? Just yesterday, I attended training at the Miami Police Department, and the major of that unit walked in and talked about the OODA Loop. That's a decision-making model. They call it the OODA Loop.[1] Did a fantastic job of explaining it in about 10 minutes. Exceptional leader, by the way. But the one thing that I would say is that he is actually out there assessing the culture that was being trained. He is leading from the front. And oftentimes when we look at training, there's a major disconnect between what's actually being taught and what actually the command staff is actually understanding of.

And it happens, I think, because they don't go through the full-scale training. They go through the summary. They go to the executive summary because they're busy, because they're busy wanting to go to another meeting or to another meeting with a mayor, commissioner, or city manager. And I say that all those things have to take a back seat to the first and foremost important topic of the leaders. Take care of your people. Make sure that they're safe to assume that daily mission. And the only way to do that is to start your day with training in mind and what you're doing about it and how you're coaching them. End your day with training and coaching and what you're doing about it.

Nazmia Comrie

49:37

Thank you, Frank. Travis?

Travis Norton

49:40

I kind of gave my thoughts on training already specific to your leaders that are going to be responding to this. But let's turn real quick to after-action reports. We have all of these AARs that are out there. There's 16 or 17 of them specific to active shooter incidents. You have internal after-action reports, your tactical teams are making these after action reports fairly regularly. What I see across the country is we write these after-action reports. We have all these rich lessons learned, and they sit in a computer file somewhere and we don't do anything with them. Well, the problem with that is we're not plugging them back into the next training that you're having. So you should be taking something like the Uvalde report, pulling those lessons learned that are specific to the context of whatever area you work in the country in, and then putting them into your next training.

And you could take a critical incident, your agency that happens, happened last month. Don't let these after-action reports live in somebody's file somewhere and not turn them into training, because that shows a process. And I've heard people say, "Well, we don't write after-action reports because we're worried about liability." Well, the challenge is you're going to be asked, "Well, so you're telling me you don't do anything wrong?" Well, yes, we are humans. We make errors. Here's our process for getting those lessons learned down, putting them back into training so that we don't repeat those. And that's a common theme that I see with agencies across the country. I think that's important to mention here.

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[1] OODA: **o**bservation, **o**rientation, **d**ecision, **a**ction

Nazmia Comrie

51:17

That is great. And a couple of questions that we have that I'm going to tie into this. So one, because we were talking a little bit about the culture. What do you do if you're in an organization that doesn't have this kind of culture that's being described, and how do you effectively change the culture from the bottom up? So who wants to take that?

Frank Fernandez

51:37

And I'll take that. Leadership, it starts anywhere and everywhere. Every officer, every employee, civilian or sworn, they're all leaders. Speak up. Let your voice be heard in a respectful way, in a way that communicates effectively. Confrontation and these argumentative points of views are not going to get us anywhere. We need to make sure that the voices are heard. But it also starts with the culture of an organization at the top becoming a learning organization. And much of that is looking and listening. After-action reports, as Travis mentioned, are extremely important. Bring together a team to look at it, assess it from both the practitioner's point of view out in the field to the command level, mid-level managers, and assessing and analyzing these situations or how do you become better? But culture trumps policy every single day of the week, every day. So you have to make sure that the culture supersedes policy.

It's extremely important that the culture of an organization is constantly being driven on becoming a learning organization, learning from past experiences—your own, from others—and how do you perfect it? And I do want to touch on a couple of things that Travis mentioned earlier, and that is assigning of equipment. We saw this in Uvalde, Texas. Officers going in with shields and helmets and vests and rifles and some equipment that they did not know how to use. So they purchased it. Some vendor sold them on it that you must have this to be an exceptional organization. They bought it with the right intentions, but they didn't train on how to use a shield. And Travis can talk about this, and I'm going to ask you, Travis, but we saw one officer holding a shield with a rifle. So imagine you hold the shield on one hand and you hold the rifle in the other.

And in all aspects of SWAT, I don't see one person shooting single-hand with a rifle. So that just tells you that the lack of training is quite evident. It wasn't because there weren't enough officers, because we had over 370 officers present at this location. And then before I go to Travis on that question, I just want to say that, look, seconds matter, decisions matter. The lack of preparation matters. Just yesterday in the news, Sandy Hook Elementary, those kids celebrating a milestone in their academic careers[2] still talk about what happened. And they were trying to celebrate with those that did not make it through that tragic active shooter incident. So imagine, that's lasted over a decade now. And so this Uvalde incident

[2] The survivors of the December 14, 2012, shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, graduated from high school in June 2024.

will last over a decade. And the question for chiefs, if you don't want to have that negative legacy, make sure that you're planning and preparing for the inevitable. If you're going to buy equipment, make sure that you're training with the equipment, they know how to use the equipment properly. Travis?

Travis Norton

54:36

Going to I'll first address the cultural question. I think it starts at the patrol shift level. You have to become a learning organization. Frank brought this up earlier. You can look at Peter Senge. He talks about creating learning organizations, learning from your mistakes. If you want to stop having too many people talking on the radio in an active shooter, if you want to increase unified command, if you want to stop indiscriminate parking, you start at the shift level. That becomes the expectation. You start doing decision-making exercises. Then other shifts start wondering, well, hey, what's going on over here? And it starts to slowly, very slowly, infect the rest of the organization, for lack of a better term. And I think that's how you culturally, hey, let's talk about what I did wrong last night. I violated this fundamental, I didn't handcuff this officer right. You have to create that learning environment where people feel comfortable enough to admit their mistakes.

And I'm not talking about the ones that are horrible, but the ones that, hey, we can learn from these things. And you as a leader have to create that environment. To the equipment point, I'm a big proponent of one person, one job. If you're going to hold a shield, you hold the shield. Now, there's always exceptions to that, but take a pitching machine and start throwing baseballs at a shield and let me know how that works out for you, because that is not going to work out at all. So there's a lot more to unpack there and we don't have the time for it, but a much larger discussion.

Frank Fernandez

56:01

And I'll say this, that's just an example of many other equipment failures that we identified. That's only just a sample of it, but you'll read more about it in the report that was issued through the COPS Office, but just a sample of issuing equipment and not being properly trained. Having officers in certain cases with breaching tools and not training those officers on the breaching techniques of how to actually enter through a doorway. Nazmia?

Nazmia Comrie

56:33

Yeah. Thank you. Thank you all so much. And we are running out of time and I'm going to attempt to quickly touch on a couple of questions that just in the last minute came in. I think we have a question around equipment and rifles and I think we did touch on that, but I think that the key thing is—and we do talk about this in the report—is that any equipment that is provided to officers and deputies and personnel, there should be training, there should be regular training on that. So that is one thing I want to touch on with that question. The second, we do have a question on collaboration and city leadership. It's absolutely key when we're talking about training and policies and procedures, is to think about how

we can collaborate with other stakeholders. And I know Travis and Frank probably talk a lot about this, but I really want to flag that, that it's important that where it is appropriate, you can invite maybe some of that city leadership to observe some of the training as an example.

And then finally, we do have a question around complaints. And the one thing I would say is that it is outside the scope of what we're talking about today, but there's a lot of information out there around how community complaints should be handled, how reporting should be. And so if you all are interested in community complaints, we can absolutely provide further information. Because we are running out of time, I apologize that I didn't give an opportunity to Frank and Travis to fully respond to those questions. But what I real quick want to just reference is that, one, thank you for your time today. You could be in a lot of different places and the fact that you are here and engaged with us is really important. If you have further questions, if you are looking for assistance on implementing anything that has been discussed or anything else that was in the Uvalde report, I encourage you to reach out to the COPS Office.

You can go here to the cops.usdoj.gov/uvalde web page to find more information, download the report in English and in Spanish, see further resources. You can also reach out to any of the panelists. I have my contact information there. And I thank you all once again for being here today. Our next webinar in this series will be in August. August 8th at 1 p.m., and we'll be focusing in on public communications. If you have further questions, please reach out to us. Thank you again for being active participants, and please be safe.