

The Uvalde School Shooting and the Need for Emergency Management Concepts

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Watching the FRONTLINE/ProPublica/Texas Tribune [documentary](#) on the Robb Elementary School Shooting in Uvalde, Texas, our hearts ached even more than when we learned of the shooting on that terrible day in 2022. Schools are generally safe places, [as compared to other places](#) where active assailants have occurred. This incident, in many ways like [Sandy Hook](#), the [Covenant School in Nashville](#), and a few others, had an external attacker, rather than an insider threat. We could see from the start that too many things were going very wrong, from an emergency management perspective, through the whole emergency management cycle (before, during, and after). The point of this piece is not to “admire the problem” of the specific tactical failures towards life safety and incident stabilization (i.e. evacuating the students/staff and neutralizing the threat), but rather advocate for the application of some basic tenants of emergency management into what some may believe is simply a law-enforcement response only incident (and one which erroneously is thought of as not requiring formal incident command system concepts). **Nothing about an active shooter incident is simple.** Even in single jurisdictional responses to an active shooter incident, there will be fire, emergency medical services, hospitals, public health, mental health, and of course the school officials involved. Even with just five law enforcement officers responding, there are [established protocols](#) to build and staff an incident command system on-scene. Open-source reporting indicates there were more

than 400 officers who responded to the shooting in Uvalde.

Emergency managers understand risk assessments across the whole disaster cycle phases for every threat and hazard. We plan for continued life safety of all responders, perimeter control which includes ingress and egress routes for emergency vehicles such as ambulances, offsite friends and family reception centers and family assistance centers, joint information centers, memorial services, and more.

On Jan. 18, 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) issued its public-facing [After-Action Report/Improvement Plan \(AAR/IP\)](#) on the Robb Elementary School Shooting, which includes multiple chapters that reference emergency management’s standard elements and doctrine. There are even references to FEMA, something we have rarely seen in prior law-enforcement-produced AARs. We are also aware of two other formal after-action reports produced in Texas, an [academic one](#) and [a legislative one](#). The DOJ report specifically noted the lack of many of those emergency management standard elements, such as:

- Multijurisdictional and multidisciplinary coordination, exercises, drills, and communication.
- On-scene command at an incident command post, with check-in, accountability, etc.
- (True) unified command which includes whole-of-community partner participation.
- Common operating picture/emergency management intelligence.
- Interoperability, especially in Communications Systems, and most critically—**unity of effort.**

While the DOJ report is replete with references for needed [deliberative planning](#), we also believe that another emergency management tenant—the use of the **Planning P** to transition from the initial incident ramp up, into the Operational O, and finally transition to demobilization and recovery (including reunification)—is also warranted in every incident of scale, and at all incidents where the life safety of anyone, including responders, could be compromised. As with all no-notice incidents, it’s not so much the formalization of a battle rhythm of meetings and planning efforts at minute one, but rather establishing a planning section at the start, so that the comprehensive response/recovery missions can be implemented in a coordinated manner. Emergency managers know that you start planning for recovery, while you are still in response.

And speaking of life safety, we also recognize the terrible burden that the public now places on law enforcement to resolve active shooter incidents, in order “[to prioritize saving innocent lives over their own safety.](#)” Their accumulated training and education on assaults with weapons, barricaded subjects, and even prior active shooter incidents get reevaluated and criticized after every new [agile threat](#). Many times, this ‘Monday morning quarterbacking’ occurs without comprehensive, and funded, solutions. What we also recognize is that many law enforcement groups have not had sufficient

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Facilitation

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important than ever to ensure that when we meet with groups, whether virtual or in person, we have a clear method or process to quickly, effectively, inclusively, and collaboratively lead these groups to productive outcomes.

As with any skill, facilitation needs to be understood, learnt, and practiced. Here are some practical steps to integrate stronger facilitation

practices into your EM Programs:

Incorporate facilitation competencies into your performance management structures. Evaluate, develop, and reward individuals who enhance group collaboration skills within your organization.

Create opportunities for practicing facilitation competencies internally. Assign a neutral facilitator to lead your next large group session or discussion-based exercise.

Provide training opportunities for group facilitation skills, including effective communication, conflict res-

olution, and meeting management.

Identify individuals with an interest or certification in facilitation. They can serve as role models, mentors, and advocates for facilitation practices within your organization, fostering awareness and building facilitation capacity.

Encourage facilitators to share the benefits of utilizing a neutral facilitator, emphasizing how it contributes to building a more resilient workforce and promoting equitable engagement practices. ◆

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comprehensive shifts toward the use of ICS as policy and practice, training, and exercise. From an EM perspective, some law enforcement leaders have not embraced the POETE process, even though ICS is an aspect of both [CALEA](#) accreditation, as well as [NFPA](#) standards.

Society has come to expect what can be interpreted as a reordering of the 'LIP' prioritization for first responders. What should be the standard emergency services response priority order of life safety, incident stabilization, and then property/asset protection, has the first two courses of action **reversed** in an active shooter incident—law enforcement is expected to **first** walk past injured victims toward the shooter, to neutralize the threat/stabilize the incident as the top priority. And the public demands they do that at any cost, even ordering officers into harm's way, as warriors. This is how [rescue task forces](#) have evolved to help stop shooting victims from bleeding out, while other officers are focused on stopping the shooting (one could draw a parallel to focusing on fire suppression, ahead of rescuing people from the burning building). This is also why non-responders

are now being trained to be "[the help until help arrives](#)." The consequences, including potential criminal charges, for failing to stabilize this active shooter incident in Uvalde, and by doing so putting officers' own life safety in peril, [are still pending](#). There needs to be better overall whole-of-community emergency management planning, organizing, equipment, training, and exercising for active assailant incidents, across the country.

We encourage [law enforcement](#) and [school safety leadership associations](#) and [others](#) who produce after-action reporting/improvement plans for active shooter incidents, to incorporate professional emergency managers—from the impacted jurisdiction and beyond—as subject-matter-experts in the use of incident command systems. We also encourage those groups and law enforcement leaders themselves to **communicate, collaborate, coordinate, and cooperate** with non-governmental organizations such as [ZeroNow](#) and [Sandy Hook Promise](#) to benefit school safety on an all-hazards basis, across the full disaster phase cycle (before, during, and after). We are also working with [researchers](#) to help clarify the DOJ report into readable, actionable next steps for any community to perform to make their schools and other sites safer.

Finally, we believe there is certainly more to talk about on this threat (active assailants) from an emergency management perspective, and will move the conversation from the IAEM Bulletin to IAEMConnect, in the "[Emergency Management Community](#)." We hope to inspire members to add their voices there, to help provide emergency management solutions for the benefit of everyone. ◆

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