

# Oklahoma City: How Far Have We Really Come in 10 Years?

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The residents of Oklahoma City awoke the morning of April 19, 1995, as on any other day. But that April 19 was not to be a day like any other. No one could have predicted the horrifying events that were to unfold.

At 9:01 a.m., a bomb rocked the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, killing 169 people, injuring more than 500 others and causing massive destruction. At that point, the Murrah Building bombing was the worst domestic terrorist incident in U.S. history.

I was one of many people from around the country who streamed into Oklahoma City that day. For nearly 30 years, I have been involved in every phase of fire and emergency rescue response. But I was unprepared for what I saw as I stood in the midst of total destruction. My role was that of safety officer and critical incident stress debriefer. I have spent 10 years being deployed by Federal Emergency Management Agency for events such as this—including the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center.

## Are We Better Prepared? Learning from Experience

It's been 10 years since that fateful day in Oklahoma City and nearly four years since the events of Sept. 11, 2001. Over this time, virtually every law enforcement agency in the country has become more attuned to signs indicating another terrorist attack. The federal government has taken dramatic measures to thwart terrorist and to protect the public. Even private citizens have become more aware of their surroundings.

Despite this increased vigilance, government officials admit that another terrorist attack—perhaps using weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—is inevitable. If another terrorist attack occurs, how will we respond? Are we really better prepared than we were on the morning of April 19, 1995? Lessons learned indicate that emergency managers and response personnel at all levels need to make planning for terrorism a priority. No one is immune to a terrorist attack, so emergency officials and the community's first and secondary responders need to be more diligent in their planning efforts.

## Prevention

- **Reevaluate potential targets and vulnerabilities.** Domestic terrorists such as Timothy McVeigh have a deep-seated hatred for government. For these individuals, targets such as the Murrah Building present a natural attraction.

On the other hand, state-sponsored and transnational terrorists typically desire to hit a broader range of targets and will not hesitate to kill thousands of civilians to make a point. Their goal is to achieve maximum devastation and to disrupt society. Thus, these terrorists are attracted to a wider range of targets—including financial institutions, key elements of the infrastructure and events that attract many people.

Experience with terrorist incidents, both in the U.S. and internationally, points to the need for planners to revisit their hazard and vulnerability analyses. In doing so, many communities will realize new vulnerabilities and the potential for damage that far exceeds their response capabilities. Additionally, emerging threats from chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) weapons supports the need for additional personnel with special expertise to be involved in the vulnerability analysis process.

- **Institute protective measures at known targets.** Terrorists often attack “soft” targets—those that are relatively unprotected or are easily accessed. They are less likely to risk attacking a target that has been strengthened. Instituting protective measures such as barriers, cameras, or security personnel and metal detectors dramatically reduces the overall attractiveness of the target to would-be attackers.

### *Preparedness*

- **Include mutual aid partners in planning.** Most emergency incidents will not require mutual aid. Terrorist events, however, have the potential to be so large-scale that assistance from mutual-aid and emergency management assistance compact (EMAC) partners is necessary. Including these partners in the planning process for terrorist incidents helps ensure that all responders who could be called on in a terrorist emergency are aware of their roles (e.g., active assistance at the incident site versus “back filling” at fire stations and precinct houses) and can execute them without time being lost.
- **Plan for interoperable communications.** The inability for agencies within and across jurisdictions to communicate with each other in a wide-scale emergency remains a critical issue. Fire, police and other local agencies as well as responders from mutual-aid jurisdictions must coordinate radio frequencies to facilitate communication of critical information among all responders.

Communications also occur on a personal level—meaning language and culture are important as well. Consider this simple illustration using the word “squad.” To fire/rescue, this word may have a different meaning than it does to law enforcement agencies. Another example is the phrase “charge the line.” Law enforcement may recognize the term as a crowd control operation, while fire suppression may apply water to the hose in the appliance, while the utility company may put power or pressure on the line. Same words but different meanings.

- **Plan for interoperable equipment.** Activating mutual-aid agreements does little if on-site equipment is inoperable. Mutual-aid and EMAC partners should work together throughout the planning process to ensure that critical equipment (e.g., oxygen bottle valves, hose couplings) work in all coordinating jurisdictions. If possible, new equipment should be procured jointly to ensure interoperability (this may reduce overall equipment cost as well).
- **Protect critical response infrastructure.** New York City lost both its emergency operations center and its communications capability during the Sept. 11 attacks because both were located in the World Trade Center complex. Therefore, vulnerabilities of critical response infrastructure must be reassessed to ensure that they are not located in or near a potential target.
- **Plan for redundancy.** In a wide-scale attack against the infrastructure, critical equipment and systems may be inoperable. Planning what to do in the event of such failure and developing redundant systems is crucial to an effective response.
- **Involve medical and public health personnel.** One terrorist goal is to cause as many casualties as possible. Involving medical personnel in the planning phase will improve the medical response to an attack. For example, this might involve developing a plan whereby victims are triaged at the scene and transported to specific treatment facilities based on the type and severity of their injuries; this exercise will improve the

overall timeliness and quality of care. Public health personnel provide the specialized expertise that can be of particular significance following a biological attack.

- **Plan for mass fatalities.** Because state-sponsored and transnational terrorists desire to kill as many as possible, planning for mass casualties is a must. Ensure that the jurisdiction has access to facilities and systems needed to respond to a mass-fatality incident (including systems that facilitate family notification, and identification and return of remains). Involve the medical examiner and local funeral directors in this process.
- **Plan for site security.** Site security will be an issue for several reasons. First, the incident will be a crime scene and potential evidence must be protected. Second, well-intentioned but unskilled spontaneous volunteers (and media representatives) will likely arrive in large numbers. These volunteers pose a risk to themselves and to responders, and measures should be taken to keep them at a safe distance.
- **Educate the public.** Following a terrorist incident, the public will want to know where to go and what to do. People will also want reassurance that the government is in control. Thus, the public should be educated *before* an attack to avoid unnecessary panic during a response. Encourage the public to develop emergency supplies and “go kits” in case evacuation is necessary. Tell the public where to turn for accurate information about the incident and what actions to take.

Part of educating the public involves helping citizens understand threat levels. Threat levels mean different things in different areas of the country. Also, the terrorist threat is often overstated. Therefore, the public must truly understand the real degree of threat in the community and what it means to them and their families. This understanding will lead to appropriate public actions—from being aware of their surroundings to taking protective action as directed. An aware public can make sense of the steps that the government is taking to control the threat and reduce the risk.

Educating the public encompasses several steps that, in turn, will lead to more effective preparation for terrorist attacks.

1) Maintain ongoing public education programs to build public confidence in response organizations and encourage positive public reaction during a terrorist incident.

2) Build on existing programs and materials created for other types of emergencies. Work with local emergency planning committees and state emergency response commissions.

3) Educate the public about plans and procedures developed for terrorist emergencies. Take advantage of plans and procedures that are in place and emergency preparedness information on websites that can be adapted for terrorism situations.

4) Enlist the community’s help in the form of the media, community, business and religious organizations to raise awareness about what individuals should do in an emergency.

5) Target families with school-age children and other special groups. Pay particular attention to public outreach efforts related to protecting school children so that parents and guardians will not immediately crowd the roads and hamper responders in their rush to retrieve their children.

6) Encourage public involvement. Make clear the types of information that will be useful in preventing terrorist acts as part of your community’s public education campaign.

- **Plan for spontaneous volunteers.** Spontaneous volunteers who arrive on scene can provide a huge service if managed appropriately. The planning process should include procedures for accounting for, assigning and managing these individuals. Coordination with the American Red Cross during planning can be particularly beneficial in this regard.

- **Plan for a crush of media.** Members of the media will definitely descend on the scene of a terrorist attack. When planned for in advance and managed properly at the scene, media can provide a crucial link between government officials and the public. Develop a joint information system (JIS) and plan to open a joint information center (JIC) as a way to provide timely, accurate information to the public during response and recovery. Ensure that information flows both ways between the public information officer and incident command—and ensure that all responders know to defer questions to public information officer.

- **Train, then train some more.** Terrorist incidents are likely to be more complex than most incidents. Training all personnel who may be involved in a terrorist response will ensure that everyone knows what to do and when. Training with mutual aid and EMAC partners will ensure a cohesive response organization during an actual incident.

- **Exercise, then exercise some more.** Developing and conducting a progressive exercise program that involves all potential response personnel, including mutual-aid and EMAC partners, will cement the cohesiveness begun through training. During full-scale exercises, enforce personnel safety measures, such as the use of PPE and the buddy system, to ensure that all responders are aware of and follow safety protocols at all times.

Terrorist events definitely require critical thinking during the planning process to identify all high-risk targets and plan an appropriate response. Planning, training and exercising by city officials in Oklahoma City allowed for a more efficient and professional response to the attack. Just before the bombing, city personnel had participated in an integrated emergency management course at the Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, MD. This course enabled the emergency management and response personnel to execute an effective response.

### ***Response***

The response phase will proceed more smoothly if planning, training and exercising have been well-executed. However, terrorist attacks will pose response issues. These issues can be mitigated by incorporating several key lessons.

- **Establish a single incident command system (ICS) structure.** All responding agencies must follow the principles of ICS by establishing a single structure. Incident command may be organized as a unified command or area command, but everyone at the scene must respond through the same organization. Freelancing must not only be discouraged, it must not be tolerated.

- **Enforce safety requirements introduced through training and exercises.** To help victims, first responders often place themselves at risk by not following established safety requirements and other protocols at the scene. Responders must be certain that safety requirements and response protocols will be enforced, and on-scene supervisors and the incident safety officer must have enforcement authority.

- **Document as much as possible.** Lawsuits are inevitable following a terrorist incident, and documentation is likely to be overlooked as response agencies focus on

immediate incident needs. Documenting response actions and damage as well as costs associated with the response may save the jurisdiction millions in legal fees and settlements. Additionally, this documentation can highlight lessons learned to guide future plan revisions.

- **Look for potential cascading events.** Because terrorists desire to cause as much damage as possible, terrorist attacks are often accompanied by an increased probability for cascading events. For example, although WTC towers 1 and 2 were the target of the Sept. 11 attacks, WTC 6 and 7 also collapsed. Other structures were damaged severely enough that they posed a risk to responders. In addition, secondary devices may be used (as in the Atlanta bombing of a family-planning clinic as well as in numerous overseas attacks) to injure responders. Systems to identify the potential for cascading events and notifying response personnel of the risks must be in place and functioning during the response.
- **Plan for contingencies.** Responding to a terrorist incident is anything but typical, and despite the best planning, situations will arise that require implementation of contingency plans. Therefore, planners must attempt to identify what could go wrong and develop contingency plans.
- **Recognize when to ask for help—and how.** Few jurisdictions can respond to a terrorist incident alone. In most cases, mutual-aid agreements will be implemented immediately, but even they may not provide sufficient resources for the response. Recognize when additional help is needed. Be as specific as possible when requesting resources (both kind and type), and follow established channels to make the request. Don't forget to develop a plan for how to manage the response until the requested resources arrive.

### ***Recovery***

As difficult as response to a terrorist incident will be, recovery will be equally difficult but in different ways.

- **Manage the public's expectations.** Explain early on that recovery takes time. Victim identification is not easy and may be delayed by issues beyond the local community's control (e.g., crime scene investigation, decontamination, waiting for DNA results). Take steps to keep the public—and especially victims' families—informed. Be honest about what to expect and when during recovery.
- **Establish a family assistance center (FAC).** While an FAC should be established as soon as it becomes evident that fatalities have occurred, the center should remain available into the recovery phase. The FAC should be located close to the incident scene, but recovery operations should not be visible from the center. The FAC should incorporate security measures to protect grieving families from the media; it should also provide telephones, private rooms for counseling and notification, food service, nearby sleeping facilities, and a chapel or other location for family members to use as desired. Some FAC positions can be filled by volunteers, but trained counselors are essential.
- **Expect disagreement.** Because emotions will run high following a terrorist event, expect disagreement about nearly everything—from the length of time required for recovery and return of remains to an appropriate location and design for a memorial. Patience is critical throughout the recovery process.

## So What Does It All Mean?

Given the lessons learned from past terrorist attacks, the thought of planning for a terrorist incident may seem overwhelming at first. It is important to remember that you are not starting from scratch. Plans that are already in place to support response to other types of incidents serve as the basis for terrorism planning.

Begin with the hazard analysis to identify high-risk and high-impact threats. Then, plan, train and exercise to cover the gap between the current state of readiness and that required for a terrorist incident. A thorough, up-to-date hazard analysis can provide a solid foundation for an effective plan. The process which a jurisdiction will use for a terrorism threat assessment is similar to that used for natural hazards, only the number of targets to be considered must be expanded greatly.

Threat assessment involves four primary steps:

1) **Identify targets.** Review the community's facilities, sites, systems and special events that may be targeted by terrorists. Be sure to include:

- military installations;
- transportation systems such as rail yards, seaports, interstate highways, bus terminals, tunnels and bridges, subways, airports and truck terminals;
- utility systems including electric facilities, oil and gas storage and shipment facilities, telecommunications facilities, water purification plants and wastewater treatment plants.

2) **Prioritize the list of targets.** Include facilities, sites and systems that in the wake of a terrorist incident would result in: large numbers of casualties—both fatalities and injuries; extensive damage or destruction of facilities that provide or sustain needs; long-term catastrophic consequences to the general well-being of the population or the community at large.

3) **Assess individual target vulnerability.** Using the list developed in Step 2, assess the vulnerability of each facility, site or event. Ask the following questions:

\*What is the target's level of visibility?

\*What is the criticality of the site?

\*How would an attack on the site benefit terrorists?

\*How accessible is the target to potential terrorists?

\*Are CBRN materials present in quantities that would produce a threat to health or the environment if released?

\*What is the potential for collateral damage?

\*What is the potential for mass casualties based on the maximum number of individuals present at the site at any given time?

4) **Determine the jurisdiction's overall vulnerability.** Consolidating the list of potential targets, listing them from highest to lowest vulnerability. Identify additional and specialized resource requirements (e.g., technical expertise, decontamination units) and develop plans for what responders will do until those resources arrive. Develop and implement a public awareness program that enables local residents to take care of their own basic needs in the immediate aftermath of an attack so that responders can focus on the situation at hand. In addition, develop boilerplate public service announcements for the highest-risk and highest-impact situations to minimize the delay in providing information to the public.

Agencies at all levels and in all jurisdictions must work together to plan for terrorist attacks. Only a team effort will enable effective planning, training, exercising—and response.

### **Should an Incident Occur**

Despite best efforts, any community may be attacked. If that occurs, what should the priorities be? As with other types of incidents, the first priority should be responder safety. The best way to protect responders is to establish the ICS immediately. Establishing command and control over the incident sets the stage for an effective, safe response.

Other immediate priorities should include establishing a perimeter, establishing a site ID system, implementing the JIS and managing volunteers.

### ***Establish a Perimeter***

A perimeter must be established around the incident scene to protect any evidence and to ensure that the public, media and others remain a safe distance from the scene and its inherent hazards. Only authorized personnel should be allowed to pass through the perimeter and only at specified points of entry.

This issue becomes even more critical for incidents that involve possible CBR contamination. In these cases, secondary perimeters (corresponding to “hot,” “warm” and “cold” zones) should be established using procedures developed for other hazardous materials incidents.

### ***Establish a Site Identification System***

Limiting site access has posed problem at all terrorist incident scenes. As noted, spontaneous volunteers, family members and members of the media often rush to the scene. The best way to control access to the site is to establish an identification system that involves designated colors or symbols (and photos, if possible) to identify authorized personnel. Because someone may try to copy the ID system, anticipate the need to change it several times throughout the course of response and recovery.

### ***Implement a JIS/JIC***

Terrorist incidents, by their nature, will generate high levels of interest. People will be anxious. As noted, disseminating accurate, consistent and understandable information from a single source will calm these fears and will, in turn, will reduce problematic responses from the public.

The JIS should be implemented as soon as possible following an attack. This process should include opening a JIC as a single source of information for the media. Ensure that media representatives are credentialed and understand that the JIC is the proper source for information about response and recovery efforts. To supplement information provided at the JIC, consider pool coverage of the incident site to minimize operational disruptions and promote safety while allowing the media to report the story.

Announce press conferences in advance, and be sure to provide adequate notice. Also, ensure that those speaking at press conferences have the background and expertise to respond to media questions. If necessary, recommend to public officials that technical specialists attend news conferences to respond to questions about the details of the

incident (e.g., response procedures, decontamination procedures, specifics about agents used in an attack).

The public must be confident that elected officials are doing everything possible to control the situation and that these same leaders have the public's best interests in mind. The best way to gain and retain public confidence during an incident is to control the flow of information through the JIC.

### ***Manage Volunteers***

Volunteers can be a great help—or a second disaster—based on how they are handled. Be aware of the jurisdiction's policy and a given state's liability laws when making a decision about whether and how to use volunteer resources. In some cases, volunteers may be turned away; in many others, it's best to send them to a central location for coordination and assignment.

As noted, this issue should be addressed before an incident occurs and a central coordination point should be established for the community. Local and state Citizen Corps councils are an effective way to organize volunteers before an incident and manage them during an incident. Citizen Corps involves several programs including community emergency response teams, volunteers in police service, neighborhood watch, Fire Corps, and Medical Reserve Corps. In a community with no Citizen Corps council, it may be possible to coordinate with the state's Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) or the American Red Cross, both of which are Citizen Corps affiliates.

The following suggestions also apply to managing volunteers:

- \*Form a volunteer coordination team.
- \*Encourage the formation of disaster coalitions.
- \*Establish a volunteer reception center.
- \*Designate an entity to manage groups of unaffiliated volunteers.
- \*Review the jurisdiction's insurance policy with regard to volunteers.
- \*Develop a training and exercise program for potential volunteers.
- \*Stress the need to avoid "disaster within the disaster" with regard to the involvement of unaffiliated volunteers.

### **Conclusion**

I have been deployed to the Oklahoma City bombing and the World Trade Center collapse. I'm often asked to compare the two events. Both are similar in ways, different in others. The outcome, however, is that the U.S. citizens will never know peace as we did before that fateful day in 1995. How far have we come since the Oklahoma City bombing? Most communities have made giant strides, but some communities are lagging. Now is the time to become better prepared.

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