We as professional telecommunicators are trained to do our job no matter the call, at times needing to put our emotions aside for the time being. However, there are times that we receive a call for an event so horrific that putting our emotions aside is impossible. We can’t help but worry about our friends, family and community, for we are members of the community as well.

This is exactly what happened on Dec. 14, 2012, when my PSAP received multiple 9-1-1 calls reporting a school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. If you were to ask any telecommunicator where they were on that day, many would be able to recall exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news of the unfolding event in Connecticut. Some may have silently been thankful it wasn’t them who received that call on that day — no one should feel guilty or have shame about having those feelings. No one should ever have to experience what we went through that day, and what we continued to feel in the days, months and years that followed. The sad truth, however, is that many communities have handled (or will have to handle in the future) events that test our mental, physical and emotional capacity.

I write this article not as a timeline of what happened on that clear December day, for I believe you all know what occurred. Instead, I write as an observer who saw and continues to see the need for change in our profession and in ourselves in terms of how we think, how we react, and how we recover from tragic events. As I have said many times, it is not a matter of if this could ever happen in your community, but when. I write as the director of a small PSAP charged with the responsibility of overseeing a wonderful and talented staff who deal with the same issues and stressors you deal with every day, but with a twist ever since our community was pushed into the national limelight.

Our Experience

At Sandy Hook Elementary School are among the sadly growing list of school shooting incidents. School shootings often resemble other active shooter incidents because the response poses unique challenges for all facets of public safety. These incidents typically involve shooting or violence in progress when telecommunicators receive the first reports and notify law enforcement and other responders. The event may continue to escalate before and after officers arrive on scene. These incidents are fast-paced with events unfolding in rapid succession.

SCHOOLS are considered “soft targets,” which means the attack typically begins with staff and students unaware of what is happening. The number of casualties can grow quickly after the first shots, sometimes within a matter of minutes. The perpetrators tend to be mobile, moving through the scene while victims may be trapped or fleeing. Telecommunicators may be faced with numerous calls from within the scene or from witnesses nearby, possibly presenting conflicting information. For telecommunicators in the PSAP, monitoring on-scene communications is a challenge as the responding units attempt to assess the situation and stage a response. Depending on the situation, it may be necessary for the local agency to reach out to others for back-up and assistance.

Among the special challenges telecommunicators face is the need to obtain accurate information about the number of suspects, weapons and ammunition, location within the school (may be changing), and any vehicles. As for the scene, telecommunicators face an even greater challenge in trying to determine the number and location of victims, possible pathways for evacuation, and access points for officers.

Given the critical nature of the operation, it is vital for the telecommunicator to project professionalism and competence in radio communications. In spite of the high level of anxiety that is natural in these situations, the telecommunicator needs to speak in a clear and normal voice, keep broadcasts brief and to the point, acknowledge all transmissions promptly and control emotions. Echo procedures may be helpful due to noise on-scene from sirens, vehicles or other adverse conditions on-scene. Echo procedures can emphasize important information, ensure that acknowledgements are heard and that messages are received.

Telecommunicators may need to monitor several channels at the same time and, above all else, need to be alert to responder safety, conveying any information that responders may need to ensure the safest operation possible.

Support, Outreach & Initial Response

The aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting brought an overwhelming response from our telecommunication family across the world: cards, letters, flowers, baskets and a multitude of thoughts and prayers came flooding in at a time when we needed it most. We created a memory book to archive all of this goodwill and it is there to help us to remember the support we continue to receive from our brother and sister telecommunicators. All of the emails received were printed (and hopefully acknowledged, although we may have missed a few) and shared with the staff, and have been carefully preserved.

We received cards and visits from people you read about in the APCO magazine, on websites, and maybe get a glimpse of at a conference, but never in your wildest dreams ever think you would meet and share an embrace (or a great lunch) with. These are the beautiful memories that we look back on and it brings smiles to our faces and tears to our eyes. We cannot thank our “lifelines” enough for their support. These lifelines came from many places and in many forms.

I immediately received calls from those who had been at other similar events: Virginia Tech, Columbine, Aurora and Pennsylvania. They called and talked and visited and gave us love and support and great insight. Our public safety partners from Sprint, Motorola and our state interoperability team were here within hours to lend a hand.

In addition to all the critical needs of the response to the school shooting incident, the PSAP must also maintain all other routing services to the public, without interruption.

We are a small center, with only two staffed positions on at a time, and we sometimes go down to one person on the midnight shift. The decision to ask for additional

The Sandy Hook Elementary Tragedy

Our experience & what I learned

by Maureen A. Will

Members of the media pick up a CD containing recordings of 9-1-1 calls from the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, Wednesday, Dec. 4, 2013, in Danbury, Conn. AP Photo/Jessica Hill

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communications staff help did not come easy. As a manager you believe that you and your staff can handle anything that comes your way, we’ve handled major storms, natural disasters, pandemic disease and staffing shortages. But nothing can prepare you for the onslaught of communiques coming in from the media, community and law enforcement from across the state as well as federal authorities. All we knew were the things they want information and they want it now.

For a small agency this is overwhelming. During the first 24 hours we fielded more than 300 calls an hour demanding communications from a main console area, and that didn’t include my personal office lines. We only have three positions, so the decision was made to call in an additional dispatcher within the first 90 minutes of the event. As part of our protocol, a script was set up for wording and direction that were easily transferred to the assigned public information officer (PIO). With the unified command system put into place, the operations section chief for law enforcement was able to direct incoming law enforcement to the appropriate staging posts and the logistics section chief handled deployments. Information boards were put up letting staff know who was in charge along with important phone numbers and contact information.

**TERT**

Critical incidents, such as the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, may require more telecommunicators than the local PSAP can handle. For times when critical incidents, such as the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, so access to my own home was still a necessity. I was becoming overwhelmed. The straw that broke my back was being in a meeting and having a supervisor come in and tell me that he had removed the two counselors assigned to my staff and that they were not welcome in the area where the officers were trying to have lunch. I remember looking at the two ranking officers in the room and there has to be space set aside within our centers for instances such as this. The one thing we know is that you cannot just pull a dispatcher off the phone, even in a critical crisis; there has to be space set aside within our centers for times when we need to pick up and leave our consoles or the multitude of back-up law enforcement officers returned to their own communities. The communications staff continued to field calls from around the country wanting to do something to help. Sometimes they called to see how the community was doing, or to get an address to send a box or a card to the town. However, many other calls were from people with a different agenda (such as conspiracy theorists and those who made hateful and hurtful statements). We answered all those calls with grace and dignity, as any one of you would.

The **TERT initiative has proven itself time and again**

families began to try to pick up the pieces. It didn’t end when the last TERT member left the consoles or the multitude of back-up law enforcement officers returned to their own communities. The communications staff continued to field calls from around the country wanting to do something to help. Sometimes they called to see how the community was doing, or to get an address to send a box or a card to the town. However, many other calls were from people with a different agenda (such as conspiracy theorists and those who made hateful and hurtful statements). We answered all those calls with grace and dignity, as any one of you would.

**Mental Health Concerns & Lessons Learned**

Training for our telecommunicators is always on the minds of managers and directors. So much has been written about stress and stress relief, yet is it realistic in this day and age? Nothing prepared me for the mental health days that followed for me and several others. It’s not just one or two; we know it’s a concern and it’s not being done: one for the two primary dispatchers and one for the non-law enforcement staff. Training for our telecommunicators is always on the minds of managers and directors. So much has been written about stress and stress relief, yet is it realistic in this day and age? Nothing prepared me for the mental health days that followed for me and several others. It’s not just one or two; we know it’s a concern and it’s not being done: one for the two primary dispatchers and one for the non-law enforcement staff.

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What was brewing in our center was contract negotiations, a potential change in shift configurations, an administrative change other than “that’s the way we’ve always done it.”

Many of those same issues arose in my center, and I had been warned that if something was brewing it would most likely come to a head after an event such as this.

I thought I had it all covered and could handle what was needed (I was in law enforcement for more than 30 years, and retired at the rank of Captain). Who was going to tell me what I needed for my people? I was so busy moving forward, standing strong because we are not seen. I didn’t always see the little things and I didn’t always take care of myself. As a manager, we cannot ignore those anniversary milestones, it needs to be understood that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can surface at any time under many different circumstances.

Making a Difference

So what can we do to make the next event as smooth as possible? Here are a few ways we can make a difference.

We need to change laws and regulations to make sure the job title public safety telecommunicator is included in the Standard of Occupational Classification (SOC). Currently, we are classified in SOC under Administrative Support Occupations (43-0000).3 We should be included in the Broad Occupation Group of Dispatchers (43-5030) and under the Major Group, Office and Administrative Support Occupations (43-0000).1 We should be in the Protective Service Occupations Major Group. We need all public safety telecommunicators covered under workers’ compensation, portal-to-portal, to include mental health services. We need staffing and working regulations changed to include public safety telecommunicators so that we receive all the same benefits that police, fire and EMS receive as it pertains to scheduling and overtime.4

Managers and directors need to ensure that they are trained and their staff receives the most up-to-date training, which includes having up-to-date policies and procedures for when there is an active assailant. We need to ensure that our staff has access to committed and professional Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) personnel. We need to ensure that telecommunicators are included in all debriefings, not just the big ones. I also encourage all centers to consider getting involved in TERT, because you never know when you will need it.

Police, fire and EMS are often eligible for grant funding and workers’ compensation benefits for mental health services, even scheduling incentives, following a tragic event, but as telecommunicators we are not.

There is no excuse for those in upper management not being involved with APCO or not providing staff with an APCO membership. We must take advantage of the best practices, lessons learned and trainings provided, especially the Registered Public Safety Leader (RPL) distinction. There is no excuse for our staff to not be trained by the Center for Missing and Exploited Children and acknowledged as 9-1-1 call center partners. We need to acknowledge that we don’t know everything and that it is OK to ask for help. I learned that lesson the hard way. We need to have our voices heard. I encourage everyone to talk to your legislators and get them involved; they are approachable. Consider attending or getting involved in the 9-1-1 Goes to Washington program. We can make a difference by staying informed on current events and legislation that impact telecommunications, for that is our future and our profession.

Conclusion

I hope I have provided you with some resources that may help in the event that you find yourself in the midst of a horrific event within your community. I just know that if it wasn’t for the love and support of the telecommunications family as well as some to whom we owe people right in your state and across the country (and I sure hope you all know who you are), surrounding us (and me) with your love and strength and support, our days could have been much darker. We are strong, but know it’s OK to lean on other shoulders for support; we are resilient and know that every day is a new day and we will get brighter. We can make a difference through legislation, training and education. We do not have the right or the luxury to wallow in self-pity or feel we are forgotten, for we can come home to our children or family when others cannot. Remember, it is not a matter of if it could happen to you, but when.

MAUREEN A. WILL, RPL is the director of communications for the town of Newton, Conn., and president-elect of the Atlantic Chapter of APCO International.
4. According to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), public safety telecommunicators in many states are not entitled to overtime for all hours worked in excess of 40 in a work week. Telecommunicators should be eligible to meet the requirements for exemption under FLSA section 13(a) or other subsections as it pertains to the work schedule of a center. More information available at www.wagehour.dol.gov.

5. According to state DOT grants for 911 spot checks, backdrop for telecommunicators is not eligible. Many DOT grants are only available to designated first responders. Each state has its own specific grant wording, which either exclude or include public safety telecommunicators.

CDE EXAM #38943: THE SANDY HOOK ELEMENTARY TRAGEDY

1. One of the challenges in a school shooting is that events may happen rapidly.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Due to the number of shootings in recent years, schools have become hardened targets.
   a. True
   b. False

3. The call center serving Newtown, Conn. can be described as:
   a. A large regional PSAP facility
   b. A major metropolitan PSAP facility
   c. A medium-sized suburban facility
   d. A small call center

4. When a disaster strikes, only the governor of the state can decide when the PSAP will request assistance.
   a. True
   b. False

5. In a school shooting situation, a telecommunicator may need to monitor several radio channels at the same time.
   a. True
   b. False

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APCO Instructor Certificate #
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The summary article is available online!
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account online!

You can now access the CDE Exam online! Go to http://apco-remote-learner.net/login/index.php to create your username and password. Enter “article” in the search box and click on “2015 Public Safety Communications Magazine Article Exams,” then click on “The Sandy Hook Elementary Tragedy (38943)” to begin the test. Once the test is completed with a passing grade, a certificate is available by request for $15.

REFERENCES
1. The state is finalizing all paperwork needed to be recognized for TERT deployment. The overseeing agency is being selected and additional TERT training continues to be held.