

The Sandy Hook Elementary Tragedy

CDE #38943

Our experience & what I learned

by Maureen A. Will

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 comm centers 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

The events 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. 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



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

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 calls 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

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, criminal investigations and staffing shortages. But nothing can prepare you for the onslaught of communiqués coming in from the media, community and law enforcement from across the state as well as federal authorities. All wanting the same thing: 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 between three people at the main console area, and that did not 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 media calls and they 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 telecommunications than the local PSAP can handle. For times when the need arises to rapidly expand capability in the face of a disaster, APCO International and NENA have partnered and developed the National Joint TERT Initiative (NJTI) Telecommunicator Emergency Response Taskforce (TERT). TERT is a comprehensive program that helps states develop training and deployment plans that support preselected, fully trained mobile teams of telecommunicators who can deploy into major incidents to support local PSAPs in the affected area. The TERT deployment process is highly dependent on effective and direct communication between multiple local, state and federal agencies.

When a disaster strikes and a PSAP determines outside assistance is necessary, the PSAP will identify the specific needs and make a formal request through established local and state channels. These needs will be coordinated between various states and at the federal level. Telecommunicators in the assisting state will be identified and teams will be created to deploy and assist the requesting PSAP in the disaster area.

At the time of the Sandy Hook shooting, Connecticut was not a TERT state. Yes, we had many wonderful people across the state trained in TERT procedures, but we were not sanctioned. Within 24 hours it was obvious that my staff was not going to be able to handle it by

themselves; I needed additional help. One criterion that was imperative was that whoever came in had to have certification as an emergency telecommunicator as well as COLLECT/NCIC certification. I contacted the chairperson of the Managers of Emergency Communications Centers Association (MECCA) here in Conn. (executive director of Northwest CT Public Safety, Susan Webster) who made the call to the one person we knew who could coordinate this effort: Kevin Webb from Litchfield County Dispatch. By 10:00 the next morning, Sue was here with the coordination staff, making calls and handling scheduling. We had 24-hour coverage straight through the new year.

The personnel who came from across the state were the best of the best—it took them no time to figure out our CAD system and they were dispatching calls and handling the phones as if they had worked here for years. They were there for my staff, letting them talk or vent or do whatever was necessary to get through the day and they did it with grace and dignity and the highest level of professionalism there was.

Two days before the one week anniversary of the event I was notified that all Newtown officers would be given a 24-hour period off and that out-of-town officers would be patrolling the town. This meant a large coordination of our mobile data terminals, mapping and other logistical issues that involved dispatch. At the same time, arrangements were being made to have crisis counselors in the building for my staff. While all this was going on, 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 my office and telling them I would handle the communications aspect of the outside deployment and then asked them to leave. The next phone call I made was to Sue and I had my “moment.” Within 20 minutes she was there with an extra-large coffee from the local donut shop.

The beautiful thing about TERT is that there are people there for not just the line dispatchers, but for the supervisors and managers too. A wonderful man by the name of Clayton Northgrove was there for me so that I could have a day off to gather my thoughts and gain the strength that was needed to continue. What most people don't know is that I live right across the street from Sandy Hook Elementary, so access to my own home was very difficult. When I got there the lights and the noise from the media and the multitude of people was right there, almost the same as it was at work.

Not having a formalized TERT program in this day and age is doing a disservice for our communities. The TERT initiative has proven itself time and time again across this country. When most people think of TERT

they think Hurricane Katrina or major events such as tornadoes or earthquakes. Some think, “What's the point? I have a large staff with plenty of people.” But consider if you are a small staff or an agency that has a line of duty death, be it police, fire, EMS or one of your own. The ability to call upon trained professionals to come in to your center and handle communications because they are familiar with the equipment (example being our COLLECT/NCIC and 9-1-1 and radio) as well as CAD system can make the difference in the emotional wellbeing of personnel.

After the events of 12/14, we all took a long hard look at why we were not part of the TERT initiatives.¹ I now have three members of my staff trained in TERT, and one has taken the supervisor training. To those of you who are TERT members, remember you are the best of the best and if you are selected to be trained in TERT, know that the decision to send you was not taken lightly—you have shown the qualities and dedication that are needed for this particular assignment. TERT initiatives should not be taken lightly by our centers and they need to be supported. We should not hesitate to utilize them when necessary. For more information, go to the National

The TERT initiative has proven itself time and time again

Joint TERT Initiative website at www.njti-tert.org.

In the aftermath of an event such as ours, it didn't end when the media left our community, it didn't end when our angels were laid to rest and the

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 issues that we faced, not only within our own group but within the community. Each person's needs are different and personal to them. These needs can be very difficult to predict and react

quickly to.

Written into our active shooter policy are mandatory debriefings. Many of our centers do not hold debriefings after events; yet, they are a matter of course for police, fire and EMS. A debriefing is the process of receiving an explanation of a study or investigation after participation is complete. The intended participants are those who were there during the event, in our case the dispatchers who answered the calls for help. These are sometimes called critical incident stress debriefings (CISDs). They are normally held within a short period of time following an event.

Following Sandy Hook, there were two separate interventions done: one for the two primary dispatchers and myself who were there at the beginning of the event, and one held for staff who arrived after the event and in the days that followed. But herein lays a problem: this divided my staff into “us and them.” There was no intent for this, it was a matter of coordination and meeting specific needs, but it was a lesson learned. Every effort needs to be made to ensure that all members of our staff feel that they are important, because they are, and no one person's feelings or reaction to an event is more important than another's.

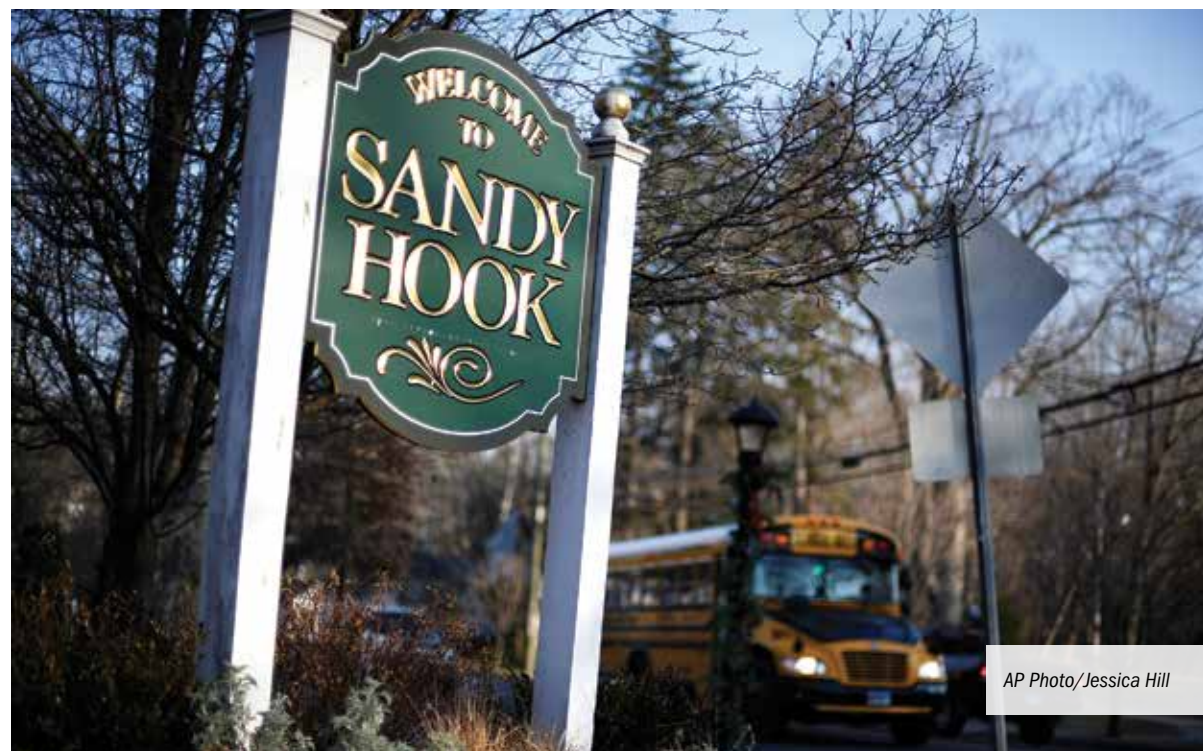
Connecticut has a critical incident stress management team that was immediately notified and responded, however it's not enough in an event of this magnitude. Whereas police, fire and EMS have the ability to meet and coordinate efforts shortly after an event, with communications you cannot just pull a dispatcher off the console to attend a meeting in the facility, just as we can't have unauthorized or uncredentialed personnel sitting inside the comm center. Comm center needs are different and there has to be space set aside within our centers to accommodate needs such as a quiet room, or a room that can be used for private conversations where you are not removing someone from their work area.

One wonderful resource that we utilized at the time and continue to use today are therapy dogs. (Sometimes they weren't dogs, but little ponies or potbellied pigs!) There is something inherently calming about an animal that is just there to give you comfort, and I have seen firsthand the response from staff when those wonderful handlers come in.

Much has been written about stress in public safety—you just have to open any APCO magazine, or go online and view the many articles written about stress, or join the forum on PSConnect. However, there still is work that needs to be done. One thing we can do is recognize that stress does occur, learn what the signs and symptoms are, and educate ourselves by reading articles such as the one printed in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* and commented on by Past President Gregg Riddle.² We can also recognize that sometimes we are part of the problem that brings on stress. Do you engage in idle gossip

because you're bored, or comment on other staff members whom you don't like for some reason? Do you criticize the supervisor, manager or director because you don't like their management style? Do you constantly question why, without offering constructive methods of change other than "that's the way we've always done it"? You could be part of the stress. Now add a tragic event into the mix and you will see the lasting effects.

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.



AP Photo/Jessica Hill

What was brewing in our center was contract negotiations, a potential change in shift configurations, an already short staff with mandatory overtime for coverage, changes in policy and procedures and, of course, those darn chairs. Yes, it came to a boil and we suffered, but we still managed to somehow keep going. Many of us received needed and necessary counseling and support outside the agency; others made a decision not to be part of the negativity. We all changed after that December day, some for the better and others, unfortunately, not so much. Instead of always complaining, being critical or negative, let your voice be heard. Remember: You are the front line and if something is not working in your center, only you can offer suggestions on how to improve it. Offer advice and counsel when needed and don't let your feelings stay bottled up. Stress doesn't just come with major events; it's everyday stressors that may begin at home that are brought to work. The cycle continues until we recognize it or maybe someone else sees it. It is a cycle that can be broken, but only when there is

communication between all parties.

I learned a new term after Sandy Hook: "The Forgotten." It is with this term in mind that I developed a new passion to create change. As a profession, telecommunicators are often forgotten, unless we make a mistake and then we are right there at the forefront. Accolades are placed (rightfully so) on our police, fire and EMS, as they are classified as first responders. However, public and the media forget about the "first" first responders who answered the call and helped to coordinate the response, because we are not seen.

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 all know as the head of an agency you must not show weakness. I didn't always see the little things and I didn't always take care of myself. As a result, staff was hurt and morale suffered.

Here are a few resources that I consulted and found extremely helpful: PTSD Treatment Help (www.ptsd-treatmenthelp.com) and Heart 9-1-1 (www.heart9-1-1.org). I encourage you to review their websites to see what they can offer before an event occurs.

The Effects of Anniversaries & Milestones

The anniversary of any tragic event is never easy. Our first year was especially difficult as it was the year that marked the first birthdays and holidays without the victims. I was told that as these milestones occurred,

there was the potential that unresolved issues (past or present) could resurface as the event was rehashed. As these anniversaries occurred, I did begin to see behavioral and personality changes in my staff and throughout our community as expected. Some of these changes I was not prepared for.

It seemed each milestone was marked in the press. The first week was marked by moments of silence, the first month with more information on the investigation, at six months there was a remembrance vigil, and then finally the one year mark. Holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, milestones like the first day of school and birthdays all took on a different meaning in 2013. Signs in store fronts stated "We are Newtown" and "We Choose Love" were all over the community as ever-present reminders of loved ones who were not there.

Every move that was made was documented and reported on, which resulted in new phone calls into the center that were answered by staff. Decisions to be made about the school (demolish or renovate?), the release of the reports from the police and prosecutor's office about the event and the shooter, release of the 9-1-1 tapes, and what to do about the death certificates were all hot topics. To an extent, we were prepared for these onslaughts. Mental health professionals were made available to our responders and staff in the event they needed to talk, and we had many other resources available such as therapy dogs. For some, it was like reliving the event all over again each time something aired on the news, so much so that many of us stopped watching the news. As managers, 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 the Broad Occupation Group of Dispatchers (43-5030) and under the Major Group, Office and Administrative Support Occupations (43-0000).³ 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 may 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.⁵

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 (www.missingkids.com/9-1-1).

Most importantly, 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 very special people right here at home 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 it 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.

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.
2. APCO International. (March 30, 2012) APCO International commends study on 9-1-1 dispatchers and PTSD symptoms. Retrieved on April 7, 2015, from psc.apcointl.org/2012/03/30/apco-international-commends-study-on-9-1-1-dispatchers-and-ptsd-symptoms/.
3. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (March 11, 2010) 43-5031 police, fire and ambulance dispatchers. Retrieved on April 7, 2015, from www.bls.gov/soc/2010/soc435031.htm.

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 7(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 DUI spot checks, backfill for telecommunicators is not eligible. Many DOJ grants are only available to designated first responders. Each state has its own specific grant wording, which will either exclude or include public safety telecommunicators.

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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 shooter situation, a telecommunicator may need to monitor several radio channels at the same time.
 - a. True
 - b. False
6. In the first 24 hours after the school shooting, the Newtown, Conn. call center handled:
 - a. 100 calls per hour
 - b. 300 calls per hour
 - c. 500 calls per hour
 - d. 700 calls per hour
7. In response to the school shooting at Sandy Hook, an incident command structure was set up, including a Public Information Officer.
 - a. True
 - b. False
8. TERT is a program that deploys fully trained mobile teams of telecommunicators into major incidents to support local PSAPs in the affected area.
 - a. True
 - b. False
9. Anniversaries and holidays following a tragedy can be difficult for those who lived through the event.
 - a. True
 - b. False
10. The author of the article calls for training all levels of PSAP personnel to prepare for active assailant situations.
 - a. True
 - b. False

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