WHAT 9-1-1 TELECOMMUNICATORS SHOULD EXPECT WHILE DISPATCHING DURING A POLICE AMBUSH

By David Bradshaw

According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), four factors typically define an ambush attack:

- An element of surprise;
- Assailants who conceal themselves, their weapons or their intent;
- The suddenness of the attack;
- A lack of provocation

According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, 64 law enforcement officers were shot and killed in 2016. That is more than double the number of those shot and killed in 2015, with ambush attacks accounting for 21 of those killings. This is the highest number of ambush killings of law enforcement officers in more than 20 years. The threat of deadly violence against law enforcement officers continues to escalate. Since May 2016, the governors of Louisiana, Kentucky, Mississippi and Texas have signed laws that make attacking on-duty law enforcement officers a hate crime.

ROUTINE TO CHAOS IN A SPLIT SECOND

You have sat at your console a thousand times, processed call after call, mostly routine, some action-packed chases and foot pursuits. Suddenly, the silence of the night is broken with one phone call. The panicked caller states, “There are two officers sitting in their patrol car near the intersection of Jones Street and Adams Street and it looks like they have been shot. I think they are dead.”

Waves of adrenaline flood your body as you spring up in your seat asking the caller to repeat themselves. Your mind scatters as you enter the call. You think, “This can’t be true. I have no calls for service on the screen, no traffic stops or domestics, nothing at all.”

The caller offers nothing; she didn’t see anybody or anything. She is frantically telling you to send help. You only have 10 officers on duty, most of whom are personal friends of yours. They are all responding as fast as they can to the scene. You dispatch fire and EMS, who quickly respond with multiple units.

Two officers have just been assassinated. Responders have a perpetrator to catch, a major crime scene to manage and a complex investigation to start. As a telecommunicator, you will perform a major role in assisting with each of those functions. It’s just you
on the channel, and if you are lucky, you might have another radio operator. And, if your tone and demeanor are out of control, it could negatively affect your ability to manage the incident.

BEFORE THE EVENT
Although difficult to prepare for, every communications center should have a plan in place for these situations and should train to the plan. Effective planning and training will enable you to identify weaknesses and stress points. For example, agency administrators should test the plan at 2 a.m. on Saturday when staffing is minimal, rather than 2 p.m. on a Monday. Plans should allow for flexibility and empower the telecommunicator to make decisions based on the dynamics of the event. Many of a telecommunicator’s actions in response to an officer ambush will be similar to their actions in an active shooter or similar mass violence incident.

DURING THE EVENT
“No one turns smart under stress.”
—Sean McKay, North American Rescue

As soon as you recognize there is an actual event, the supervisor or senior telecommunicator needs to assess the functionality of the center. In many small communications centers, the “backup” are people that work in other areas of the center or building. Can your front office secretary take calls, or is the public works dispatcher in the building trained in any capacity to help? Consider a recall of telecommunicators as soon as possible. Ensure that plans are in place for a “one call recall”. That is, the telecommunicator or supervisor is able to send one page, one text message or one phone call that recalls all 9-1-1 telecommunicators. During an event like this, there will not be any time to use the traditional phone tree or attempt to personally contact each employee.

From the start of this call, there are numerous responsibilities that the telecommunicator and responders must undertake and many must happen simultaneously. An event like this will require a significant law enforcement response. Telecommunicators need to prepare for both massive on-duty and massive off-duty responses. In addition, telecommunicators need to prepare for the large number of responders that will self-dispatch. Expect every law enforcement agency in the area to respond.

If you live in an area that allows concealed carry weapons, you may experience armed citizens who are either on-scene or are responding to the scene to “assist.” To avoid additional tragedy it is imperative to get a clothing description of off-duty officers or plainclothes officers responding. Such a tragedy occurred in Prince Georges County, Maryland in 2015. During an attempted ambush of the police station, a narcotics officer arrived at the station as the shooting started. The narcotics officer drew his weapon and was subsequently shot by another officer.

The importance of accurate information is paramount, because misinformation will be prevalent. Responders need accurate information to determine the scope and nature of the ambush. Incident commanders will make tactical decisions based on the information provided by telecommunicators. It is critical to constantly update on-scene commanders about changing situations or resources.

As the event continues, expect an increase in 9-1-1 calls, as everything in the nearby community suddenly appears suspicious. Imagine how many 9-1-1 calls would come in if law enforcement released a press statement alerting the community that the perpetrator fled in a black SUV.

In nearly every active shooter after-action report, the report references communication problems. In many events, the radio system could not handle the volume of radio traffic. In some cases, 9-1-1 telecommunicators were unable to communicate with many of the agencies that responded. Telecommunicators should always be ready to improvise and think outside of the box but still follow their agency’s policy and procedures.

THE HARDEST CALL OF YOUR CAREER
As telecommunicators, we frequently hear things no one should ever have to hear. Just as it is hard to erase what the eyes have seen, it is just as hard to erase what the ears have heard. The calls recognized as the most stressful for a 9-1-1 telecommunicator are the death of a child, the fatality of an officer/responder or the online suicide of a caller. Although sending responders directly into harmeful situations is a daily stressor, doing so is considered among the most stressful aspects of the job.

A 2015 study published in the Journal of Traumatic Stress found that approximately 24 percent of 9-1-1 telecommunicators have clinical PTSD. This study recognized the three major stressors contributing to PTSD for telecommunicators as: being treated as second-class responders; not knowing the outcome of patients; and the inability to release or—“dump”—adrenalin at the end of a call. (Responders, however, can dump adrenalin through physical activity at the scene.)

As mentioned earlier, a call involving an ambushed officer would no doubt be the hardest call of your career, especially if you work in a small department, in which you know all your officers by face and by name. You might very well even be related to some. And, you may likely be the last voice an officer will ever hear. This is an unfortunate reality of the job that can take its toll on even the most seasoned telecommunicators.

Many events of this magnitude will produce insightful after-action reports (AARs). Make sure your telecommunicators are included in the after-action report process and provided the report to read. Also, ensure that all telecommunicators involved in the event have the opportunity to attend a critical incident stress debriefing (CISM).

Following the Pulse Nightclub shooting, Orlando Fire Department Fire Chief Roderick Williams stated, “One of our biggest mistakes after the event was that we forgot to include our dispatchers, administrative staff and responders’ families in the CISM debriefings.” Our physicians often tell us to eat better, exercise more and get more rest. While that may help for some things, it is simply a Band-Aid. If we don’t face our demons, our demons will face us.

David Bradshaw is the Social Media Specialist for Threat Suppression, Incorporated. David specializes in the use of social media in mass violence events and large-scale disasters. He is currently a Communications Supervisor for a large metropolitan fire department. He has worked in communications for 21 years including time as a dual police/fire dispatcher. David was working in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area on 9/11 and he was directly involved with the response to the Pentagon attack. David has also served as a volunteer firefighter for nearly 18 years, reaching the rank of captain.

References:
1. According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), one factor that typically defines an ambush attack is an element of surprise.
   a. True
   b. False

2. According to Orlando Fire Department Chief Roderick Williams, what was one of the biggest regrets after the Pulse Nightclub shooting?
   a. Not calling in enough dispatchers
   b. Not having enough ambulances
   c. Not including dispatchers in the CISM
   d. Not training dispatchers to deal with a mass shooting

3. Critical incident stress management requires more than just advice such as, “rest and eat better.”
   a. True
   b. False

4. In 2016, how many officers were shot and killed?
   a. 64
   b. 65
   c. 43
   d. 71

5. The fatality of an officer/first responder is not recognized as one of the four most stressful calls for a 9-1-1 telecommunicator.
   a. True
   b. False

6. During an ambush or active shooter event telecommunicators still need to provide continuity of coverage for an entire city or town.
   a. True
   b. False

7. How many state governors have signed laws that make attacking police because of their occupation a hate crime?
   a. 8
   b. 7
   c. 14
   d. 4

8. “No one turns ______ under stress.”
   a. Nice
   b. Mean
   c. Smart
   d. Around

9. Many of the actions taken by a telecommunicator during an officer ambush will be similar to those taken in an active shooter or mass violence incident.
   a. True
   b. False

10. What state had a blue-on-blue shooting during the ambush of a police station?
    a. Ohio
    b. Tennessee
    c. Maryland
    d. New Jersey

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