How telecommunicators can be effective during protests that involve violence

By Renee Gordon, RPL, CPE

BALTIMORE CITY: FROM ARREST TO UNREST

On April 12, 2015, after a brief pursuit, Baltimore Police Department (BPD) officers arrest Freddie Gray. During the transport to the Western District Station, Mr. Gray sustains life-threatening injuries. On April 13, BPD holds a news conference to brief the public on the Freddie Gray incident. On Sunday, April 19, Freddie Gray succumbs to his injuries – 80% of his spine was severed. What ensues is 14 days of continuous civil unrest spanning Baltimore City neighborhoods, BPD stations and Baltimore City Hall. On May 3, the Mayor rescinds the city-wide curfew initiated on April 28 and the Baltimore City Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is deactivated (Johns Hopkins University 2015).

As Baltimore City’s Director for the Department of Emergency Communications during this time period, I can expand on my intimate experience with what happens in the center during such an event. Just as police have a tendency to self-dispatch, so does the telecommunicator. Therefore, scheduling the appropriate number of people per shift is important for continuity of the operation. The most memorable comments made by staff related to the devastation of the community we served.

Civil unrest, riots and protest can happen anywhere, anytime and can seem as spontaneous as a raging wildfire. In fact, it’s becoming more frequent as tensions rise over both past and current events.

• Between 1980 and 1989, there were 15 incidents of civil unrest documented in the U.S.
• Between 1990 and 1999 (11 incidents)
• Between 2000 and 2009 (24 incidents) (Armstrong 2018)
• Between 2010 and August 2017 there were already 32 incidents documented (Lewis, 2017).

What is civil unrest? According to Karen Sternheimer in her article Civil Unrest, Riots, and Revolutions, civil unrest involves a disruption of the typical social order; it can involve a strike or protest, and it can be peaceful or involve violence. Both riots and rebellions are forms of civil unrest. Civil unrest often occurs when a group strives to gain attention for something they feel is unjust (Sternheimer, 2012).

CHAOS AND THE PSAP

What does this chaos do to the PSAP? How about the employees of the PSAP? I found it hard to find an article on vicarious trauma related to public safety telecommunicators. However, I did find this definition. “Vicarious trauma is an occupational challenge for people working and volunteering in the fields of victim services, law enforcement, emergency medical services, fire services, and other allied professionals, due to their continuous exposure to victims of trauma and violence. This work-related trauma exposure can occur from such experiences as listening to individual clients recount their victimization; looking at videos of exploited children; reviewing case files; hearing about or responding to the aftermath of violence and other traumatic events day after day; and responding to mass violence incidents that have resulted in numerous injuries and death” (United States Department of Justice, 2018).

While telecommunicators are not recognized as victims of vicarious trauma, there are factors the organization should be cognizant of and be prepared to respond to with the appropriate assistance. Individuals can respond to vicarious trauma in different ways. Their world-view is certain to change. “People can either become more cynical or fearful, or they can become more appreciative of what they have, or both. Response to vicarious trauma can be negative, or positive; can change over time; and can vary from individual to individual, particularly with prolonged exposure” (United States Department of Justice, 2018).
What does this mean to the team of telecommunicators working an event of civil unrest? It means that emotions can run high. Remember, this is your community. Communities that may be destroyed are your communities. Stores being looted are the very stores you shop in. You may know people, officers, emergency medical services (EMS) and fire personnel that have been injured. The safety of family, friends, children and parents will become an issue. You may draw a total blank and forget how to remain calm and professional. The best practice in these events is to be prepared.

**PREPARE IN ADVANCE**

Again, never think it can’t happen to your community. Civil unrest can happen in any community and at any time. Prepare your center, train your people and conduct an exercise for the event(s). Be prepared for the long haul. Some events can happen over several days. Locate safe routes to and from the job and inform employees both incoming and outgoing. If possible, request police and fire department escorts. Do not wear uniform insignia. Dress down and be sure to travel incognito. Bring food, water and any necessities you may need for several days. Preset the parameters for when to suspend EMD if necessary (call volume increases, contact with the medical director, staffing shortages).

Prepare to understand how the police and fire/EMS departments’ operational structure will change. Take Incident Command Structure (ICS) and National Incident Management System (NIMS) courses. These events can be declared a State of Emergency and you will need to track your resources. Prepare checklists (notifications, mutual aid resources, event tracking).

Call volume quickly elevated from 100 calls per hour to 1100 calls per hour. Despite the unprecedented demands, stress and complexities, the staff remained professional and continued to take call after call.
Prepare for long and busy days. During the 2015 Baltimore City civil unrest, The Emergency Communications Center switched to 12-hour shifts to align ourselves with the police and fire/EMS structure. Call volume quickly elevated from 100 calls per hour to 1100 calls per hour. Despite the unprecedented demands, stress and complexities, the staff remained professional and continued to take call after call.

Staff frequently expressed emotion and disbelief at seeing and hearing reports of destruction. Yet, they were at their height of responsiveness. It is what we do and what we do best. We were kind to each other and looked out for each other. We checked on each other and made certain everyone had enough rest, food and water.

**TELECOMMUNICATORS EMERGING AS LEADERS**

Being a good leader starts with knowing how to follow. Not everyone can take charge of the same incident. You can still emerge as a leader by using your influence. True leadership cannot be awarded, appointed or assigned. It comes from the power to influence and it must be earned. If your influence is confidence that the team will get through the incident, then by all means, use your influence. People who emerge as leaders emerge because of these factors:

- **Character** – Who you are
- **Relationships** – Who you know
- **Knowledge** – What you know
- **Intuition** – What you feel
- **Experience** – Where you've been
- **Past success** – What you've done
- **Ability** – What you can do

(Maxwell, 2007)

During an incident of civil unrest, you may be surprised at the amount of emotion in the room. Keep in mind, this is the community you serve. You are familiar with the streets and intimate with each neighborhood. You shop at the very stores that may be destroyed. It becomes painful to watch the history you know so well being devastated. The gamut of emotions can range from sorrow to anger.

This is an opportunity to leave your differences behind. I use the word opportunity verses chance because deep wounds can heal during times like these. These coworkers become your family. You care for each other, you feed each other and you work hard together.

**WHAT NEXT**

Since Charlottesville in August of 2017, there have been similar incidents in Florida and Massachusetts. We are now in a climate that is ever-changing and more volatile. It is important that we are prepared. We must prepare an operations strategy and include in that strategy a way to care for our well-being both during the incident and after the incident is over. We can do this by understanding that these events do cause vicarious trauma for the telecommunicator and by preparing to take care of one another and ourselves.

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Enforcement Team, Director at the City of Baltimore during the 2015 civil unrest and Director of the City of Alexandria during the congressional shooting.

References:

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**CDE EXAM #47927**

1. The number of civil unrest incidents has more than doubled between 1980-1989 and 2010-2017.
   a. True
   b. False

2. According to Karen Sternheimer, civil unrest involves a __________ of the ____________; it can involve a strike or protest, and it can be peaceful or involve violence.
   a. Lack of; routine order of business
   b. Disruption; social order
   c. Disruption; established communication patterns
   d. Decrease; hours worked per shift

3. __________ is an occupational challenge for people working and volunteering in the fields of victim services, law enforcement, emergency medical services, fire services and other allied professionals, due to their continuous exposure to victims of trauma and violence.
   a. Variation in duties
   b. Variable hours
   c. Vicarious trauma
   d. Vicarious liability

4. The best practice in a civil unrest event is to __________.
   a. Be prepared
   b. Close shop
   c. Relocate to a remote location
   d. Use auxiliary power sources

5. Being a good leader starts with __________.
   a. Knowing how to negotiate
   b. Knowing how to navigate the system
   c. Knowing how to follow
   d. Knowing all the ropes

6. True leadership cannot be awarded, appointed or assigned. It must be earned.
   a. True
   b. False

7. People who emerge as leaders, emerge because of these factors: __________.
   a. Character, Relationships, Knowledge, Intuition, Experience, Past success, Ability
   b. Character, Resilience, Knowledge, Intuition, Effort, Persistence, Ability

8. During an incident of civil unrest, the gamut of emotions can range from __________ to __________.
   a. Joy to despair
   b. Eagerness to apathy
   c. Anxiety to acceptance
   d. Sorrow to anger

9. A civil unrest event is an opportunity to __________.
   a. Let others know how you feel
   b. Show what you can do
   c. Improve speed and accuracy
   d. Leave your differences behind

10. PSAPs should prepare an operations strategy and include in that strategy __________.
    a. During the incident and after the incident is over
    b. Physical and spiritual
    c. On-the-job and at home
    d. Here and now

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