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LESSON LEARNED

Special Event Planning: Developing a Regional Event Public Safety Plan

SUMMARY

Planners should consider developing a formal risk assessment process to determine the required level of planning for special events. This assessment should include coordination requirements, resource requirements, and the necessity for a regional public safety plan. This process can help response agencies develop a plan that addresses mutual aid during a regional special event.

DESCRIPTION

The city of Vancouver, Canada, hosts a variety of major sporting and entertainment events that require law enforcement personnel to manage large and potentially disruptive crowds. In 1994, Vancouver law enforcement personnel had difficulty suppressing riots after the Vancouver Canucks lost the National Hockey League (NHL) Stanley Cup championship in New York City. The rioting caused approximately \$1.1 million (Canadian) in property damage to Vancouver. Based on this and other experiences, Vancouver decided to establish public viewing areas to manage large crowds when it hosted the XXI Olympic Winter Games in 2010. These areas allowed spectators to watch the sporting events on large screens and enabled law enforcement personnel to monitor fans effectively. No instances of rioting occurred during the 2010 Winter Games.

Vancouver is located in the Province of British Columbia in the southwest corner of Canada. The city has a population of 578,041 as of 2006, while the surrounding metropolitan area has a population of over 2.1 million, making it the third largest city in Canada.

2011 Stanley Cup Playoffs' Planning Phase

After the Vancouver Canucks qualified for the 2011 Stanley Cup Semifinals, the Vancouver Department of Emergency Management Contingency Planning Committee met to discuss and coordinate regional public safety and crowd management. The committee included representatives from the region's public safety agencies. The committee examined live viewing area logistics, regional information sharing coordination, and deployment of law enforcement assets. Planners decided to use two live viewing areas for the Stanley Cup Semifinals and the first three games of the Final round, should the team qualify. Further, planners selected to use only one viewing area with an expanded perimeter for the last four games of the Final. The expanded viewing area had a capacity of approximately 39,000 people. Law enforcement personnel successfully monitored the fans and enforced crowd control procedures in the expanded viewing area during the semifinals as well as games 4, 5, and 6 of the Final.

The NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs is an elimination tournament involving 16 teams. The tournament consists of 4 rounds of best of 7 series.

Day of the Game

On June 15, 2011, prior to the start of game 7 in Vancouver, law enforcement officials met to finalize coordination of public safety strategies and crowd control procedures. However, these officials did not clarify onsite coordination mechanisms and areas of responsibility. Officials agreed that the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) would deploy 446 law enforcement personnel to support its onsite personnel several hours before the game began at 5:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time (PST). Further, VPD would be the commanding agency and could deploy all the participating agencies' assets. However, each participating agency would manage its resources that were deployed to the viewing area.

City personnel assembled a large television screen in downtown Vancouver on the intersection of West Georgia Street and Homer Street on the morning of the game. Vancouver law enforcement personnel cordoned off the viewing area in front of the screen for fans to gather and watch the game. Thousands of fans began arriving to the viewing area and surrounding streets in the morning and early afternoon before the VPD began deploying personnel to the area. The absence of security personnel allowed fans to breach the viewing area's protective barricades unhindered. More than 150,000 people crowded the viewing area and the surrounding downtown streets during the game.



Live viewing area in downtown Vancouver

Consequently, law enforcement personnel encountered difficulties managing the larger-than-expected crowds during the game.

Rioting

Toward the end of the game, as the Canucks were losing by a large margin, approximately 40 people in the viewing area started fighting and lighting trash cans on fire. At 7:46 p.m. PST, the Vancouver Canucks lost to the Boston Bruins, which caused additional fans to begin rioting. Rioters started fighting, looting, throwing bottles and other projectiles, overturning cars, and lighting fires.



Rioters clash with law enforcement personnel

VPD quickly deployed law enforcement officers from other jurisdictions to supplement onsite personnel. The department deployed 928 law enforcement personnel to the riot zone, including the VPD Emergency Response Team (ERT), 44 Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) Tactical Troops, and 12 members of law enforcement agencies from across the region. The VPD reported shortly after midnight that all large-scale rioting had ended and declared the streets safe shortly thereafter.

Riot response operations suffered from miscommunications due to a lack of clarity about onsite responsibilities. For example, VPD ERT and RCMP Tactical Troops personnel deployed to the same area during the riot; however, the RCMP commander lacked authority over the VPD personnel on the scene and could not locate the VPD commanding officer. This hindered the ability of the RCMP commander to employ onsite personnel effectively.

The rioting caused widespread property damage to vehicles, buildings, and businesses. Rioters overturned several vehicles and lit them on fire. In addition, rioters broke the windows of stores and looted merchandise. Countless fights occurred in and around the downtown area. The British Columbia Ambulance Service transported 144 people to St. Paul's Hospital for riot-related injuries. According to Canadian media sources, damage from the fires, vandalism, and looting cost the region approximately \$5 million (Canadian).

The Independent Review of the 2011 Vancouver Stanley Cup Playoffs Riot states that jurisdictions should develop a risk assessment process that incorporates a wide variety of circumstances and allows flexibility for response agencies during changing environments. The review concluded that "VPD's operational plan was the most detailed of all the event plans but even it did not identify criteria that automatically trigger adaptive responses." In addition, the Independent Review recommends that response agencies develop a safety plan following the risk assessment phase. This plan should incorporate mutual aid partnerships in order to provide a greater range of capabilities to response operations.

For more information about special event planning before sporting events, please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing Lesson Learned, Special Event Planning: Conducting a Full-Scale Exercise Prior to a Special Event*.

Planners should consider developing a formal risk assessment process to determine the required level of planning for special events. This assessment should include coordination requirements, resource requirements, and the necessity for a regional public safety plan. This process can help response agencies develop a plan that addresses mutual aid during a regional special event.

CITATION

Furlong, John; Keefe, Douglas J.; Government of British Columbia. *The Night the City Became a Stadium: Independent Review of the 2011 Vancouver Stanley Cup Riot*. 31 Aug 2011.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=53034>

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