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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Communications: Deploying a Cell-on-Wheels Unit Following a High-Profile Incident

SUMMARY

Emergency response agencies should consider requesting that private sector communications providers deploy a cell-on-wheels (COW) unit following a high-profile incident that may attract large media coverage. This will help to maintain cellular phone communication coverage during post-incident operations.

DESCRIPTION

On Saturday, January 8, 2011, at 10:10 a.m. Mountain Standard Time, a gunman opened fire on U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords and a group of citizens attending her "Congress on Your Corner" event in front of a Safeway supermarket in Tucson, Arizona. The gunman fired 31 rounds, killing 6 people and wounding Representative Giffords and 12 others. U.S. District Judge John M. Roll and Gabriel M. Zimmerman, a staff member for Representative Giffords, were among those killed. Citizens acted immediately to detain the gunman while congressional staff and two doctors, who were shopping at the Safeway, provided first aid to the victims. Pima County 911 operators received the first call from the incident scene at 10:11 a.m. A Pima County Sheriff's Department (PCSD) deputy arrived on site at 10:15 a.m. and detained the suspect. A second deputy arrived soon after and secured the shooter's weapon.

Soon after the incident, PCSD recognized that the mass shootings would generate significant media and public attention. It anticipated that Pima County residents, visitors, and media staff would increase cell phone use during response operations as well as during post-response events such as memorial services. The increased use could disrupt cell phone communications capabilities of response agencies.

PCSD requested that a private sector communications provider in Phoenix, AZ, deploy a COW unit to augment PCSD's communications capabilities. The COW unit arrived to the incident site within 15 hours of the incident and was operational by the next morning. This unit ensured that emergency communications were not disrupted due to the increased use of cell phones in the area. The COW unit enabled agency personnel to maintain communication capabilities throughout post-event operations, which included a heavy national media presence.



COW Unit

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CITATIONS

Duarte, Frank. Captain, Pima County Sheriff's Department. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 11 Aug 2011.

Gwaltney, Byron. Captain, Pima County Sheriff's Department. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 11 Aug 2011.

Kastigar, Richard J. Bureau Chief, Pima County Sheriff's Department. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 11 Aug 2011.

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A COW unit is a generator-powered mobile cell site that enhances coverage and communications capacities in a given area. It can accommodate both voice and Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) data services. For more information about utilizing COWs during special events, please also refer to the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Lesson Learned, [Special Event Planning: Incorporating Wireless Providers into the Communication Planning Process](#).