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PRACTICE NOTE

Mass Casualty Incidents: The Pima County, Arizona, Sheriff's Department's Use of a Special Weapons and Tactics Liaison to Share Information with Hospitals After the January 8, 2011, Shootings

PRACTICE

The Pima County, Arizona, Sheriff's Department (PCSD) used a doctor assigned to the Pima Regional Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team to liaise with area hospitals after the January 8, 2011, Tucson, AZ, shootings. The use of the doctor as a liaison enabled incident command and area hospitals to share critical information in a timely and effective manner following the incident.

DESCRIPTION

The January 8, 2011, Mass Shootings

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, AZ. The gunman fired 31 rounds, killing 6 people and wounding Representative Giffords and 12 others. U.S. District Judge John Roll and Gabriel 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 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.



Mass Shootings Incident Site

The Medical Liaison

Following the shooting, a doctor assigned to the PCSD SWAT unit self-deployed to the incident command post. This doctor is primarily employed by the University Medical Hospital. However, the doctor has training in SWAT tactics and operations and deploys with the team regularly to provide medical treatment to victims in non-secured zones. As a result, the doctor was familiar with hospital, SWAT, and PCSD procedures.

Based on this background, the doctor served as a medical liaison between the incident commander and several area hospitals throughout response operations. The doctor's familiarity with the hospitals and active shooter incidents helped facilitate information sharing and improve situational awareness of hospital personnel and the incident commander. In addition, this helped command staff control rumors and provide the media and the public with reliable information about the victims soon after the shooting.



Pima County Regional SWAT Team

Information Sharing Between Incident Command and Area Hospitals

Immediately after the shootings, emergency medical service personnel transported unidentified victims in critical condition to several area hospitals. These hospitals provided such information as the victims' identities and their status to the medical liaison. This sharing of information enabled PCSD to provide accurate and timely information to the families of the victims. In addition, the department was able to answer questions from President Barack Obama and other members of Congress about the condition of the victims.

The medical liaison provided area hospitals with information about the incident that facilitated the care of the wounded. For example, the doctor notified hospitals that the shooter fired a semi-automatic GLOCK® 19 handgun with .308 caliber bullets. Receiving critical information from incident command helped make hospital personnel more prepared and knowledgeable about the wounded before they performed trauma surgeries.

PCSD deputies utilized Individual First Aid Kits (IFAKs) to treat the wounded immediately after the shooting. The IFAKs saved at least three lives on that day. For more information about the IFAKs, please refer to the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS.gov) Good Story*, [Mass Casualty Incidents: The Pima County, Arizona, Sheriff's Department's Development and Use of Individual First Aid Kits](#).

Rumor Control

On the day of the shooting, a media outlet erroneously reported that Representative Giffords had passed away. Other media outlets also reported the story and sent email news alerts to their subscribers. PCSD command personnel quickly corrected these erroneous reports by sharing information that the medical liaison had received from hospital staff. PCSD Deputy Clarence Dupnik told reporters, "I am 100 percent sure [that Representative Giffords is alive], because our SWAT doctor is at the hospital where she is, and just five minutes ago reported that she's still alive." Media outlets corrected their reports soon after the interview with this official.

Benefits of Using a Doctor as the Medical Liaison

The pre-existing relationship between the doctor and the area hospitals was critical to the success of sharing information between incident command and area hospitals after the shootings. According to PCSD Captain Frank Duarte, "Relationships are the key to making these things work." Prior to the incident, the doctor built strong relationships with both PCSD personnel and area hospital personnel. As a result, she was able to leverage her existing relationships and familiarity with hospital procedures and personnel to contact hospital staff during response operations.

According to PCSD Captain Byron Gwaltney, the doctor “knows all the secret numbers, the administrative lines, and the command lines into those emergency rooms [ERs].” These officials noted that if a liaison did not know this information, then he or she would have to call a hospital’s public telephone numbers to share information with hospital personnel during a response. Captain Gwaltney noted that throughout response operations, “Even our officers at the hospitals were encountering difficulties getting specific data because of the chaos. But when another ER doctor calls in and speaks as a peer to the ER physicians, she [the liaison] was able to streamline that information.”

CITATIONS

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