



The Role of Police Executives in Assisting Victims of Mass Violence: Lessons from the Field

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POLICE EXECUTIVE
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Acknowledgments

Mass shootings and other incidents of mass violence are challenging for police chiefs and sheriffs because most of them, fortunately, do not have any direct experience with such events. That is why it is important to understand the experiences of police executives who *have* been through these horrific incidents and learn from their successes and mistakes. This report provides these perspectives.

This project would not have been possible without the support and commitment of the nine police executives who agreed to be interviewed in depth by PERF staff about the mass violence incidents in their communities:

- Charleston, SC Chief of Police Luther Reynolds;
- Clemson University Chief of Police Greg Mullen (former Charleston, SC chief);
- Dayton, OH Chief of Police Richard Biehl;
- Orange County, FL Sheriff John Mina (former Orlando, FL chief);
- Orlando Chief of Police Orlando Rolón;
- Retired San Bernardino, CA Chief of Police Jarrod Burguan;
- San Bernardino Chief of Police Eric McBride;
- Retired Virginia Beach, VA Chief of Police Jim Cervera; and
- Virginia Beach Chief of Police Anthony Zucaro.

Also participating in the interviews were Charleston Police Lieutenant Robert Gormorra, Dayton Police Lieutenant Jason

Hall, and Virginia Beach Police Lieutenant Scott Wichtendahl, who provided valuable operational insights into the management of victim issues.

All of these police executives generously gave their time to be interviewed, and provided detailed, perceptive, and sometimes emotional reflections on the mass violence incidents in their communities. This report benefited greatly from their candor on what their agencies did well and what they could have done better.

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Interviews were conducted by PERF Senior Principal Alexa Daniels-Shpall, Senior Research Associate Matt Harman, and Research Assistant Jessica Calahorrano. Calahorrano also performed background research and helped to transcribe the interviews. Senior Research Associate Sarah Mostyn oversaw development of the structured interview instrument that was used and provided project management support. Daniels-Shpall and Harman were the primary authors of the report, which was edited by Communications Director Craig Fischer. Chief Program Officer Kevin Morison managed the overall project and assisted with report preparation. Dave Williams designed and laid out the final report.

Executive Summary

Mass violence incidents are relatively infrequent events. Of the approximately 40,000 people who die by gunfire in the United States each year, about one-quarter of 1 percent are killed in mass shootings.¹

When mass violence incidents do occur, however, they have an outsized impact on a wide range of people in addition to the victims who are slain. These include survivors of the attack; family members and friends of those who were killed or injured; the community at large (as well as particular segments of the community if they were specifically targeted or impacted by the event); and the police officers and other personnel who responded to and investigated the incident. These other victims experience a range of effects and have different needs.

Police chiefs and sheriffs play an important, multi-faceted role in the response to mass violence incidents:

- They direct the immediate response and follow-up investigation.
- They frequently serve as the official public spokesperson regarding the incident, providing the news media and the public with information.
- And they must ensure that the victims impacted by the attack get the assistance and resources they need.

Most police executives have training and experience in managing the first two of these roles. While they may not have previously directed the response to a mass violence incident, they have likely participated in or managed major crime scenes

during their careers, and they have probably received training in active shooter incidents. Similarly, addressing the news media is something most police chiefs and sheriffs do on a regular basis.

But managing the response to victims of mass violence may be new territory for police chiefs and sheriffs.

This report is designed to help police executives understand the tasks and strategies involved in responding to the needs of victims following a mass violence incident.

The report also provides practical advice to chiefs and sheriffs on how to prepare for and manage this role, in the event that their community experiences a tragedy of this type.

How the report was developed

To produce this report, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) partnered with the National Mass Violence Victimization Resource Center (NMVVC) to identify the lessons learned by police executives who have experienced a mass violence incident in their jurisdiction.

The report draws on the experiences and insights of police executives from five jurisdictions: Charleston, SC; Dayton, OH; Orlando, FL; San Bernardino, CA; and Virginia Beach, VA. (See pages 7-8 for a summary of the mass violence incidents in these five cities.)

We specifically focused on issues related to how the police chiefs and their agencies responded to the needs of victims, survivors and their families following an

1. *Reducing Gun Violence: What Works, and What Could Be Done Now*. Police Executive Research Forum (March 2019). <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/reducinggunviolence.pdf>

incident, as well as how they managed the needs of their own personnel. The report does not examine tactical or investigative considerations in responding to an event.

PERF staff conducted structured interviews with the police chiefs serving at the time of each incident. Because mass violence incidents continue to impact individual victims and communities long after the tragedy, staff also interviewed the current chiefs in the cities where a new chief took office sometime after the mass violence incident.²

Key considerations

All of the police executives were asked about the actions their agencies took in the immediate aftermath of the event, as well as in the weeks, months, and years that followed. They were also asked to consider the preparations that other police departments and sheriffs' offices should take to prepare for such an incident.

Partnerships are key: No one agency can possibly manage every aspect of a mass violence incident. That's why partnerships with other agencies are so important. These partnerships need to be developed and tested before an incident occurs.

Role as spokesperson: As the top spokesperson of the department and the city in the aftermath of a mass violence incident, chiefs do more than simply provide facts and figures. The chief's presence – before the news media and in the community – is important to helping victims and the general public comprehend what happened, and gain some reassurance that steps are being taken to help them recover.

Meeting with family members of victims:

Chiefs also have a critical role in working directly with those most affected by the incident. The chiefs interviewed by PERF said it is important to meet in person with family members of those who were slain and brief them on new developments before they are made public.

“We had really been evolving in these partnerships over the years. So when this event occurred, everybody knew one another. When we showed up, there was not anyone there that we didn't know, that we had to start building relationships with. All of those resources truly worked well together for one common purpose, which was to provide excellent service to the families and to the survivors.”

CHIEF (RET.) GREG MULLEN, CHARLESTON, SC

This was particularly important in Dayton, OH, because two of the people killed in the shooting had been struck by gunfire from both the assailant and the responding officers, although coroners determined their deaths were not the result of police gunfire. Chief Richard Biehl said it was critical that the family members get those details from the police department before hearing about them from the news media. This can help to reassure family members that the police are not hiding any information.

Details matter: Many of the insights offered by the police leaders involved specific responses that may seem minor compared to the magnitude of the tragedy but are important to ease the suffering of victims. These included knowing best

2. In four cities, there has been a change in leadership since the mass shooting. In three of those cases, the current chief was a member of the police department at the time of the incident, so they offered interesting perspectives on both the incident and its aftermath.

practices for quickly establishing a family assistance center where family members can receive information about victims, helping survivors and family members of victims with handling news media inquiries, and being prepared to address language barriers. Interpreters were especially important at the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, where many of the victims and survivors spoke Spanish as their first language.

Volunteers and donations: The police executives interviewed also identified challenges that police agencies need to manage in the aftermath of a mass violence incident, such as handling large numbers of volunteers who may show up to help, or recommending trustworthy charitable organizations to receive donations.

Watch after your own personnel: All of the police executives whom PERF interviewed discussed how mass violence incidents affect the employees in their agencies. Officers, detectives, supervisors, dispatch personnel, and the chiefs themselves can face emotional difficulties after an incident. The chiefs said it is important for agencies to plan for and provide additional mental health and support services for their personnel, and make sure employees know the services are available.

In San Bernardino and elsewhere, the police department *mandated* that officers participate in debriefing and counseling sessions at pre-determined intervals in the months following the shooting. This was designed to prevent any stigma that officers might feel about seeking help, and to ensure that everyone was receiving assistance.

One important point that all five chiefs made was that while mass violence incidents can seem all-consuming, the other responsibilities of a police department do not go away when a critical

incident occurs. Everyday police operations must continue, even as the agency works to recover from a mass shooting and support the victims. Police chiefs and sheriffs need to be prepared to manage this full range of responsibilities and the likelihood that other challenges will emerge.

For example, on the weekend following the Municipal Center shooting in Virginia Beach, there was a large music festival, followed by a marathon the next month, which required extensive police attention and resources. In Dayton, Chief Biehl said that since the Oregon District shooting in 2019, the police department has had to deal with a string of challenging events, including an incident in which multiple children were killed or injured in a traffic crash, an officer line-of-duty death, the COVID-19 pandemic, and protests following the death of George Floyd.

Continuing to investigate the mass violence incident and support the victims, while at the same time performing everyday police work and managing any other unexpected events that may arise, is a challenge that agencies should prepare for.

Each mass violence incident is unique, and there is no single policy on how police executives and their agencies should respond. This is especially the case when it comes to assisting victims. Each incident will have a unique cohort of victims who will respond differently to the incident. But there are some common challenges and approaches that agencies should anticipate.

A key takeaway from all the chiefs who have been through a mass shooting is that, even if the statistical likelihood of such an incident occurring in a given city or town is low, the impact is unfathomable, and the quality of a police department's response will depend on how well its leaders understood all of the myriad activities they would need to do in such a crisis.

Introduction

The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) partnered with the National Mass Violence Victimization Resource Center (NMVVRC) to identify the lessons learned by police chiefs who have experienced a mass violence incident in their jurisdiction. We specifically focused on issues related to how the police chiefs and their agencies responded to the needs of survivors and victims' families following an incident.

Some of these lessons were based on things that the agencies did right, and others were learned from missteps or missed opportunities. The experiences compiled in this report serve as a resource

for law enforcement executives to prepare for the possibility of a mass violence incident in their jurisdiction.

In June and July 2020, PERF staff conducted structured interviews with the chiefs from five cities that experienced a mass violence incident between 2015 and 2019. The chief who was the head of the agency at the time of the incident was interviewed. In four of the cities, that chief had subsequently retired, and the current chief was interviewed as well. The following is a list of the police leaders interviewed for this project, along with their city and incident information:

Incident	Location	Incident Date	Chief at Time of Incident	Current Chief
Emanuel AME Church Shooting	Charleston, SC	June 17, 2015	Chief Greg Mullen ³	Chief Luther Reynolds ⁴
Inland Regional Center Shooting	San Bernardino, CA	Dec. 2, 2015	Chief Jarrod Burguan (ret.) ⁵	Chief Eric McBride
Pulse Nightclub Shooting	Orlando, FL	June 12, 2016	Sheriff John Mina ⁶	Chief Orlando Rolón
Municipal Center Shooting	Virginia Beach, VA	May 31, 2019	Chief Jim Cervera (ret.) ⁷	Chief Anthony Zucaro, Jr. ⁸
Oregon District Shooting	Dayton, OH	Aug. 4, 2019	Chief Richard Biehl ⁹	(same)

3. Chief Mullen Retired from the Charleston Police Department in 2017 and now serves as the Chief of the Clemson University Police Department

4. Chief Reynolds was joined by Lieutenant Robert Gormorra for the interview.

5. Chief Burguan retired from the San Bernardino Police Department in 2019.

6. Sheriff Mina retired from the Orlando Police Department in 2018 and now serves as the sheriff of Orange County, Florida.

7. Chief Cervera retired from the Virginia Beach Police Department in 2020.

8. Chief Zucaro was joined by Lieutenant Scott Wichtendahl for the interview.

9. Chief Biehl was joined by Lieutenant Jason Hall for the interview.

“We redefined who the victim is. The victims are the people who are injured or killed. But we expanded the victimology to members of our staff, not only the first responders, but our support staff because they were exposed to the radio communication. We felt as we were moving forward with our wellness effort and our recovery, that we wanted to be all-inclusive.”

CHIEF ANTHONY ZUCARO, VIRGINIA BEACH, VA

This report addresses issues confronted by these leaders in the immediate aftermath of the mass violence incident, as well as in the months and even years that followed the event.

The report does not examine tactical or investigative considerations in responding to an event. Rather, the focus is on how chiefs and their agencies handled issues related to survivors and victims’ families, as well as how they managed the needs of their own personnel who were involved in the incident.

Each police chief or sheriff was asked questions related to: the agency’s preparedness prior to the event, including any relevant policies, training, or partnerships; the mental health impacts on department personnel who were involved in the response; addressing the needs of

survivors and victims’ families, including providing information, resources, and services; community engagement efforts; news media strategies; participation in remembrances or memorials; and the impacts of the events years later.

At the end of this report are five key takeaways for current police leaders to act on now, before an event occurs, to prepare their agencies for a successful response in the event they face a mass shooting or similar incident.

One important consideration mentioned by all of the chiefs was that in mass violence incidents, the term “victim” likely encompasses a wide range of people who are impacted by the event. They include not only those who were killed, but also their family members, people who survived the attack, those who witnessed it, and the broader community that was impacted. The chiefs also said it is critical to consider all of police personnel who were involved – the officers and supervisors who initially responded to the scene, the follow-up investigators, the call-takers and dispatchers who managed communications, and even the chiefs themselves. All of these “victims” are likely to respond to the incident differently, and they will have varying needs in terms of assistance.

The Five Mass Violence Incidents

This report is based on the experiences and insights of the police executives who helped to manage these five mass violence incidents.

Charleston, SC

Emanuel AME Church Shooting – June 17, 2015

Dylann Roof, a white 21-year-old man, entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church during a Bible study class and shot and killed nine African-American parishioners and staff members. Emanuel is one of the oldest AME churches in the southern United States and is a historical center of the civil rights movement. The shooter had posted a white supremacist manifesto online and attended the Bible service for an hour before opening fire. Roof was convicted on 33 federal charges in December 2016 and sentenced to death in January 2017.

Dayton, OH

Oregon District Shooting – August 4, 2019

Shortly after midnight, Connor Betts, age 24, opened fire near the entrance of the Ned Peppers Bar located in the Oregon District, a historic commercial and residential neighborhood near downtown Dayton. Nine people were fatally shot and 17 were wounded. Another 10 individuals were injured in other ways during the melee. Betts used a semi-automatic pistol with an extended magazine to fire 41 rounds into the crowd within approximately 30 seconds. Responding officers on patrol in the district engaged Betts within 20 seconds and shot and killed him within 30 seconds. The investigation revealed that Betts had expressed an interest in mass shootings, but as of August 2020, FBI investigators have not completed their investigation into the event or announced findings regarding a motive.¹⁰

Orlando, FL

Pulse Nightclub Shooting – June 12, 2016

Omar Mateen, age 29, killed 49 people and injured 53 others inside Pulse, a nightclub with a largely LGBTQ+ clientele. On the night of the killing, the club was hosting a “Latin night” event, and most of the victims were Latinx. Police engaged with Mateen in a three-hour standoff before crashing into the building with an armored vehicle and killing the gunman. Mateen had pledged allegiance to ISIS and had said U.S. policies in the Middle East triggered the attack.

10. “Oregon District shooting: FBI continues combing through investigation.” WHIO TV7, August 4, 2020. <https://www.whio.com/news/local/oregon-district-shooting-fbi-continues-combing-through-investigation/TRLPXKTY3VG4ZFG6F6JXG34CKQ/>

San Bernardino, CA

Inland Regional Center Shooting – December 2, 2015

Syed Rizwan Farook, 28, and Tashfeen Malik, 29, a married couple, carried out a mass shooting and attempted bombing at the Inland Regional Center, where the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health was holding a training event and holiday party. Fourteen people were killed, and 22 others were seriously injured. Farook, who worked for the health department, and Malik fled the scene. Approximately four hours later, police stopped their vehicle and engaged in a gun battle. Both Farook and Malik were killed, and two officers were injured.

Virginia Beach, VA

Municipal Center Shooting – May 31, 2019

DeWayne Craddock, age 40, shot and killed 12 people and wounded four others in and around the Virginia Beach Municipal Center. An engineer in the Virginia Beach public utilities department, Craddock had submitted his resignation via email just hours before carrying out the attack. He shot one person in the parking lot and another at the entrance to the building before entering and shooting people on multiple floors of the facility. Craddock was shot dead by responding police officers.

Immediate Aftermath: Providing a Prompt, Compassionate Response to Families and Survivors

In the immediate aftermath of a mass violence incident, police leaders must accomplish numerous tasks. Duties related to the tactical response and criminal investigation typically receive the most focus, but other work is also crucial for addressing the needs of all who were affected by the event.

This project focused on those tasks that address the needs of the survivors and families of those who were killed in the attack, as well as keeping the public informed. The law enforcement executives who experienced these events identified the following elements of their response in the hours and days following the incident.

Setting up a family assistance location and information hotline

One crucial component of the immediate response is facilitating the reunification of survivors of the attack with their loved ones, and also providing notification to the families of the deceased. For all five incidents discussed in this report, a family assistance center was established after the incident at a location near where the event took place. The chiefs whom PERF interviewed cited several lessons based on their experiences.

Location: The first consideration is the location of the facility. It is important to provide a space for people to wait for news of their loved ones away from the command post or site of critical operations, and also away from any news media.

Adequate space: Second, it is critical to ensure the facility has sufficient space to accommodate the many people who will come to wait for news of their loved ones. This includes providing separate areas, so families will have some privacy when receiving their notifications.

In Dayton, Chief Richard Biehl emphasized the importance of establishing the victim assistance center away from the area of critical operations. It also became important for the families to be spread out if possible, and not be gathered in the same area. Victim notifications were made over the course of several hours in Dayton, and as families were notified and began to leave, it became more visually apparent who might receive bad news about their loved one. Additionally, people throughout the convention center (where the Family Assistance Center was located) could hear the wails and screams from those who had

“I can tell you that having the victim assistance center located near critical operations was not the best of strategies. The longer somebody sat and other people left, it became more and more clear that the news was not likely going to be good. You could literally hear the wails and the screams throughout the convention center when families learned they had lost a loved one. That is really a challenging experience to have going on, while there are so many critical operational functions being completed within that same facility. So the two need to be separate.”

CHIEF RICHARD BIEHL, DAYTON, OH

been given bad news, which was unsettling to the families.

Similarly, in San Bernardino, the approach taken for releasing survivors resulted in a situation where the families of the deceased inadvertently learned that their loved ones probably were not among the survivors, because they did not get off a bus that transported survivors to the family assistance center. The situation in San Bernardino was complicated by the fact that many of survivors had raced out of the building without their cell phones, so they were unable to immediately contact loved ones.

Immediately following the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Sheriff John Mina (who was Orlando police chief at the time) noted that families were initially directed to the hospital where many victims had been transported. However, the hospital was not equipped for such large numbers of people to wait for a prolonged period of time.

Later, a Family Assistance Center was established to move people away from the hospital, but this caused a delay in victims receiving assistance. According to the current Chief of Police, Orlando Rolón, the community center that was used also proved to be too small to accommodate all the victims' families and support personnel. Furthermore, the news media had staked out the entrance to the center and began to overwhelm the people coming there.

Prior to the Emanuel AME Church shooting, Charleston already had a policy in place for setting up a Family Assistance Center and was able to do so within an hour of the incident occurring. This response plan also facilitated the arrival of important support staffers, including victim advocates, police chaplains, and mental health clinicians. As discussed later

in this report, many of these personnel had strong, collaborative relationships from working together previously. Police Chief Greg Mullen reported that this allowed for a well-coordinated response from the start.

Communications technology: Once a location has been selected, police chiefs pointed out that it is important to equip the facility with the technology people might need to communicate with loved ones. After the attack in San Bernardino, many survivors had left their cell phones in the building, so they could not immediately communicate with loved ones to let them know they were safe. Additionally, there was a delay in releasing the witnesses due to concerns about a bomb threat.

In San Bernardino, a telephone hotline was established to provide information to families inquiring about their loved ones. According to Chief Jarrod Burguan, this hotline was quickly opened after the attack, but was initially understaffed to meet the demand.

Putting a system in place for notifications

Adequate staffing: Police chiefs and sheriffs learned several lessons about the process of notifying victims' families. First, it is important to properly staff this team and not leave this responsibility to only a few officers. In Virginia Beach, one captain and his aide were responsible for notifying all the families of the deceased victims, which was emotionally trying. Chief Jim Cervera suggested that setting up a rotation of officers to deliver these notifications might have been a better approach. Additionally, he suggested that having a team of counselors available would have helped, so the officers providing the notifications would not become overwhelmed.

Language barriers: In the Orlando mass shooting, many of the victims were Latinx and had non-English-speaking family members. According to Chief Rolón, it was a challenge to quickly identify trained personnel to provide language assistance. He and other city employees were called upon to assist, but many had not been trained to handle such a responsibility, and some suffered from trauma as a result.

Chiefs also experienced challenges related to determining which family members should be notified. In San Bernardino, Chief Burguan recounted a story in which a victim's mother was notified, but the father was not notified and became very upset when he learned the news. The department had followed protocol by notifying the victim's emergency contact, but Chief Burguan recommended that officers try to be sensitive to any considerations that may be present in a wide range of situations.

Identifying all victims and survivors

Many people flee the scene: Depending on the circumstances of the event, it may be difficult to identify all the survivors and witnesses. Knowing who the survivors are is necessary for providing them with critical information and support. The attack in Dayton occurred in a busy commercial district, and when the shooting began, many people fled the area. According to Chief Biehl, it took approximately four weeks to get a full account of everyone who had been shot, because people who were injured went to different hospitals, or if they were less seriously injured, did not go to a hospital immediately.

Psychological injuries: Furthermore, many people in the Dayton incident were not shot or otherwise physically injured, but they were exposed to the violence of the attack and may have been traumatized psychologically. These individuals were still being identified by the police department several months after the event. Chief Biehl said these situations revealed the

“Our country is very blessed to have people from all over the world that make up our communities. That is something that must be kept in mind when these incidents happen. You must take into account that you may be dealing with individuals who can best provide details or ask for information in their native language. They just may not know or understand the English language enough to assist you, or for you to be able to assist them, during the initial crucial time when an unfortunate situation like this happens.”

CHIEF ORLANDO ROLÓN, ORLANDO, FL

need to have a better system for identifying victims in these types of cases. To help address this challenge, a local mental health service provider set up a storefront in the area where the incident occurred and offered mental health services to victims for several weeks after the event.

Trauma among police employees: Chief Anthony Zucaro of Virginia Beach said that his department altered its definition of “victim” for mass violence incidents, expanding it to include police department members and other city employees who were exposed to the traumatic event. In this way, support and wellness services can be offered to employees and their families who may have impacts to their mental health and well-being.

Informing the news media, the public, and affected communities

Mass violence events attract significant media attention from local, national and international news outlets. In these situations, it is the police chief who is uniquely positioned to address the media. Chiefs do more than just provide information. They can also serve as a voice of calm and reassurance for the people directly impacted by the incident and for the broader communities who are upset and afraid.

In the immediate aftermath of a mass violence incident, it is critical for chiefs to release timely information as details emerge. The chiefs interviewed for this project made several observations about how best to disseminate critical information during a high-profile event.

Traditional news media briefings: Press conferences were central to the communications efforts in all five incidents. While the responsibility for informing the public about police activities was not new to these leaders, they told PERF about lessons they learned that are particular to mass violence incidents. Even though the chiefs

“I encourage you to give press conferences, to get out in front of the camera. When a story is breaking like that, and you’ve got the sea of media out there, there are no seven-second sound bites. Your entire press conference is going to be carried live to your entire community, your entire state, the entire nation, and to some degree, the world. That is your opportunity to make sure that anything that you want to say to your community gets out there, because the media will not have the opportunity to edit your statements while you are live.”

CHIEF (RET.) JARROD BURGUAN, SAN BERNARDINO, CA

often had only preliminary details, they said it was critical to get that information out in a timely manner to help reassure the community.

Immediately following the Inland Regional Center shooting in San Bernardino, Chief Jarrod Burguan found that his press briefings were carried live and in full on television, which afforded him the opportunity to share with the public everything he wanted them to hear, without being edited by the media covering the event. After the shooting, the San Bernardino Police Department created a professional public affairs unit to better manage the agency’s media needs.

Eric McBride, who became chief in San Bernardino after the mass shooting, said that while police chiefs play a lead role in communicating with the media, it is also important that sworn Public Information Officers be available to help the chief to communicate with the media, because of the high volume of inquiries. PIOs can also help ensure that important information gets out in real time, between formal news conferences. Chief McBride said it is critical to make sure that sworn PIOs stay focused on their public information duties, and don’t get assigned to the on-scene operational response unless absolutely necessary.

Aim for transparency: Based on their experience in San Bernardino, both Chief Burguan and Chief McBride emphasized the importance of being transparent in sharing information with the community. According to Chief McBride, it is critical not to avoid difficult questions, because that can cause people to think you are hiding information. Instead, focus on providing information that you can release.

Chief Biehl shared this philosophy of being as transparent as possible, but he also noted there may be times when

releasing certain information is not in the public interest, especially when it involves the privacy of witnesses or victims.

And all of the chiefs emphasized that even as they aim for transparency, it is essential that the family members of victims hear news about their loved ones directly from the police department, and not through the news media.

Social media: Many chiefs noted the value of using social media to disseminate information quickly and efficiently.¹¹ Chief McBride said that social media can be used to quickly provide updated information between official media conferences. Social media can be accessed equally by the news media and the general public. In addition, social media automatically creates a public record and timeline of the department's announcements that everyone can see, which promotes an impression of openness and transparency.

Chief Zucaro cited two benefits to using social media for these types of incidents. First, the agency can ensure that information is communicated accurately, and second, departments can quickly address issues as they come up, including responding to rumors or correcting inaccurate information. Chief Burguan noted that to be useful during a crisis, a department's social media accounts must well-established ahead of time, so that the news media and the public are familiar with them; and police spokespersons must be experienced in using them effectively.

Other channels for disseminating information: Some of the chiefs discussed the use of alternative methods for disseminating information to specific communities and stakeholders following an incident. In Charleston, Chief Mullen found it valuable to provide community messaging through local faith leaders, in addition to regular media briefings. Chief Mullen recognized that many faith leaders have strong personal connections within the community, so communicating with these faith leaders was an effective way to spread information to the Charleston community.

In reaching out to the Virginia Beach community, Chiefs Cervera and Zucaro both presented to the city's Human Rights Commission, and Chief Cervera also briefed the Pastor's Roundtable. Alternative outlets are also important for communicating with segments of the community who are most affected by a mass shooting. The Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando had a large impact on both the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities, so it was important to ensure that the police department's messages reached those groups. The police department's existing LGBTQ+ liaisons utilized their preexisting relationships to share relevant information. While there was great emphasis on communicating with this community, the Latinx community initially felt a similar effort was not made with them. The department made special efforts to reach out to news media serving those communities, such as Spanish-language outlets.

11. The Boston Police Department's use of social media following the bombing at the 2013 Boston Marathon has been singled out as being extremely robust and effective. See Davis, Edward F. III, Alejandro A. Alves and David Alan Sklansky, *Social Media and Police Leadership: Lessons From Boston*. New Perspectives in Policing Bulletin. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 2014. NCJ 244760. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/244760.pdf>

Additionally, several of the Orlando victims were foreign nationals. Chief Rolón indicated that the department was not adequately prepared to address requests from international news media organizations. The department also was not prepared for releasing information about these victims (both surviving and

deceased) to the appropriate embassies or consulates. Sheriff Mina, who was chief in Orlando at the time of the incident, said that making these connections was important for notifying the families, and may also have helped survivors and victims' family members to learn about and obtain services.

Post-Event Recovery Efforts: Focus on Internal and External Needs

Once the initial response to a mass shooting has been concluded, police operations will turn to additional tasks, which mainly are about helping those affected by the event to recover from the trauma. For each mass violence incident, there are three main groups of people who felt the impact: the survivors and victims' families; the community in which the event occurred; and the police personnel involved in the response.

Maintaining ongoing contact with survivors and victims' families

Keeping survivors and victims' families

informed: In the aftermath of a mass shooting, it is critically important to maintain systems for ensuring that survivors and family members of those who were killed are kept informed about the ongoing investigation and support services that are available to them.

Among the five agencies PERF interviewed, this responsibility fell to different entities.

For most agencies, **homicide detectives** were the main point of contact for families seeking information about the ongoing investigation and trial, if there was one. With respect to accessing support services, this was typically facilitated through **victim support agencies**, who are not employees of the police department.¹²

For example, the victims of the Inland Regional Center shooting were San Bernardino County employees. Therefore,

the county, rather than the municipality, provided access to victim support services. In Charleston, since the attack was being prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office, Chief Greg Mullen said the FBI's Victim Services Division was available for survivors and victims' families.

"The first thing that we did was assign a liaison to every family, and the liaison was an honor guard member of either the police department or the fire department. Who better to talk to a family than honor guard members? Honor guard cops truly believe in what they do, and they have a level of compassion and understanding. Being that family liaison was their job, for as long as it took. Some of the families have said that they've 'adopted' whoever their liaison officer was. Just be aware that from an officer wellness perspective, it put a lot of emotional stress on the liaisons, so make sure to give them a break from their family liaison duties from time to time."

CHIEF (RET.) JIM CERVERA, VIRGINIA BEACH, VA

Some agencies provided **liaisons** to the survivors and victims' families as additional emotional support. In Virginia Beach, members of the police and fire department honor guards were assigned to each family for one-on-one support and to provide important information about city resources. Chief Jim Cervera believed that the honor guard members were a good fit for this assignment, because they have

12. Because the focus of this report is on the response by police leaders, we do not go into detail about the efforts of outside support personnel.

a high level of compassion and are often involved in funerals and similar events.

In Charleston, Chief Mullen, who was chief at the time of the AME church shooting, said officers were assigned to each of the families, in addition to a victim advocate, for the duration of the criminal trial. Chief Luther Reynolds, who took office later, emphasized the value of providing families with timely updates and continued support throughout the court process, which lasted nearly two years following the church shooting. In Orlando and elsewhere, **police chaplains** also served in a victim support role.

Make sure survivors and family members receive information before the news media:

One key point made by several chiefs was that victims' families should receive updates on the case before such information is shared with the news media.

In the Oregon District shooting in Dayton, several of the rounds fired by responding police officers had inadvertently struck some of the victims. The coroner determined that the wounds caused by these rounds were non-fatal, and that the fatal shots had been fired by the perpetrator. Prior to releasing this information to the public, Chief Richard Biehl felt it was important to personally brief the families of those victims. He said it was helpful for the coroner to attend this briefing to explain the consequences of those wounds to the families.

In San Bernardino, group updates were provided to the families within a couple days of the event, then again 2-3 weeks later, and several more times over the course of the first year. In each session, families were provided information about the investigation and had an opportunity to ask questions. Additionally, Chief Jarrod Burguan said that anyone

within that group who had questions at other times received answers and was provided individual support if needed. In Charleston, the shooter was arrested the next day by another agency; Chief Mullen made sure the families received that information soon after the Charleston Police Department was informed.

Visiting the site: Some of the agencies allowed the victims' families to visit the site where their loved ones had died. According to Chief Cervera, the families appreciated the chance to see where their loved ones had worked at the Municipal Center and had spent their final moments. Family members were escorted within the building and permitted to pray, sing, write on the walls, and leave items to establish a symbolic connection with their departed loved one. Chief Biehl said a similar opportunity was extended to the families of the victims in the Dayton shooting. Family members were able to visit the scene and ask questions of the investigating detectives.

Chiefs' personal interactions: PERF asked all the chiefs about their personal interactions with survivors and victims' families. **There was variation in terms of how much one-on-one contact the chiefs had with these individuals, but a common theme was that the level of contact should be driven by what the survivors and family members wanted.**

Chief Biehl said his interactions were taken on a case-by-case basis according to each individual's needs.

Chief Cervera asked the honor guard members assigned to the families to inquire about whether they wanted to meet with him, and he also spoke directly with the survivors. He felt this was important for letting them know that they were not forgotten.

Chief Mullen visited the survivors of the Charleston attack frequently and stayed in contact with some of them over the years.

Sheriff John Mina, who was chief in Orlando at the time of the Pulse Nightclub shooting, reported interacting with the survivors and victims' families at various vigils, fundraisers, and community events.

Helping survivors and family members handle media inquiries: Agencies also supported survivors and victims' families by assisting them with inquiries from the news media. In a few instances, the media reached out to families who did not want to be contacted, and the police representatives contacted the media on their behalf to ask them to respect the family's privacy. For families who lived outside of San Bernardino, Chief Burguan notified those local law enforcement agencies to ensure they were aware and could provide security for any families facing pressure from the media.

Monetary donations: Following a mass violence incident, it is not uncommon for individuals and groups to begin collecting money, often through online sources such as GoFundMe, for the victims. Sometimes, the organization and management of these funds are not fully thought-out in advance, and issues can arise when it comes time to distribute the funds. Three of the chiefs described issues that came up related to the management and distribution of monetary donations among the survivors and victims' families. While this was not the police department's responsibility, the conflicts that ensued complicated the departments' relationships and communication with some individuals.

Ensuring that impromptu memorials are safe, accessible, and do not interfere with the investigation

Following a mass violence incident, it is common for the community to create impromptu memorials to express their grief and support for the victims, survivors, and their families. One of the issues encountered by the chiefs we interviewed involved the locations of these memorials. Memorials sprang up in a variety of sites, including a government building, a nightclub, a popular commercial district and a church. Agencies had to find ways to keep the crime scene secure while also allowing the public to express its grief.

Orlando Chief Orlando Rolón said it is important to plan ahead and make sure any impromptu memorial does not create a public hazard or impede access to the crime scene by investigators. He anticipated large numbers of people wanting to visit the Pulse Nightclub site and knew that if they fenced off the entire property, it could result in people overflowing into the street. To preempt this safety issue, the department arranged for part of the parking lot next to the club to be made available for an on-site memorial.

Similarly, Chief Cervera said the day after the shooting in Virginia Beach, members of the community began a makeshift memorial at the Municipal Center building. This soon became an issue as the building was still an active crime scene with investigators moving in and out. The department decided to move the memorial to the front of police headquarters because it was on a main street with plenty of parking nearby. This made the area safer and more accessible for those coming to visit, and at the same time ensured memorial activities would not impede the investigators.

Offering reassurance to the community

In the aftermath of mass violence incidents, communities usually feel vulnerable. In response, many of the chiefs directed and participated in organized community reassurance efforts. For several weeks after the Virginia Beach shooting, Chief Cervera, along with other officers, maintained an active presence and made himself available for questions from members of the community. For him, police visibility in the community was very important.

Chief Biehl visited the area where the Oregon District shooting occurred, on the weekend following the shooting, to meet with community members. To provide reassurance to the LGBTQ+ community in Orlando, Sheriff Mina met with the owners and managers of other nightclubs in the area who were worried about being targeted. He also directed additional security patrols in the area for several months after the incident.

The impacts of the attack in Charleston rippled throughout that community.

“There was a group of officers and other first responders who were there at the shooting who developed a lessons-learned type of presentation. And they included several victims in the presentation. I think for some of the victims, depending on their comfort level, it was beneficial to give their story to other people. Of course, some people don’t want any involvement; some don’t even want to talk about it. But for those who were willing to go around and give presentations with our officers, I think that was a little bit of rehabilitation for them. They wanted to do the presentations, and they did a lot of them.”

CHIEF ERIC MCBRIDE, SAN BERNARDINO, CA

To address those needs, Chief Mullen partnered with the United Way to establish a hotline for members of the community to call and receive information about available mental health resources.

Community support was also made available through a support center established at Emanuel AME Church where the incident occurred. To support the community’s healing process in the years following the shooting, Chief Luther Reynolds believed it was important to demonstrate leadership as a community advocate. In addition to attending community memorial events, he spoke out against hate crimes and worked to strengthen relationships with various communities.

Anticipating unexpected challenges

Many of the chiefs we spoke with described several challenges they had not expected.

Volunteers: At the victim assistance center in San Bernardino, Chief Burguan said they were unprepared and quickly became overwhelmed by the number of people who showed up to offer help.

Feelings of mistrust and anger: Despite the best efforts of the police in the immediate aftermath of these events, some in the community developed strong feelings of mistrust and anger toward the police. In some incidents, the community was angry that the investigation never determined the suspect’s motives.

In Virginia Beach, for example, the police faced criticism from some members of the community who felt the criminal investigation had failed to uncover corruption and workplace hostility that may have prompted the suspect’s actions. As a result, an independent after-action

report was done with the purpose of providing an objective assessment of the police response.¹³ That report, however, was unable to shed any additional light on the suspect's motive.

The San Bernardino and Orlando attacks were also the subjects of independent reviews.¹⁴ In Orlando, Sheriff Mina intentionally decided not to conduct an internal after-action report, but rather to leave this to an external entity. Doing so, he believed, allowed for an impartial and fair investigation of the police response and demonstrated transparency to the victims' families and community.

Addressing the mental health and wellness of police personnel

One focus area for chiefs in these situations is the well-being of their own personnel who were involved in responding to the incident. Who qualifies as "involved personnel" is an important consideration, and several of the chiefs interviewed emphasized how important it was to be inclusive for the purpose of providing support. In addition to the officers on scene who engaged the suspects, provided aid to the wounded, or processed the crime scene, departmental debriefs often included non-sworn personnel, such as dispatchers who were also involved in the response.

To make sure he could reach all department staff who may have been affected by the Municipal Center shooting

in Virginia Beach, Chief Cervera created a video for all department staff thanking them for their efforts.¹⁵ Additionally, mental health resources were made available to other city employees and the families of department personnel who also may have been impacted by that event.

Debriefing and counseling sessions:

Several chiefs discussed holding debriefing and/or counseling sessions with the staff involved in the incident response. There was general consensus about the benefits of making these sessions mandatory.

According to Sheriff Mina, mandatory mental health sessions were held at key points for officer wellness and recovery following the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando. This included one-on-one counseling sessions as well as group sessions that were provided at the six-month and one-year marks. Chief Rolón supported such sessions being mandatory in the future as well.

Officers involved in the Oregon District shooting in Dayton attended a debrief within 24 hours, and multiple sessions after that.

Chief Burguan said many San Bernardino police officers were initially reluctant to seek support services following the Inland Regional Center shooting. As a result, he implemented mandatory debriefs three months after the incident for each group that had been involved, and a counseling team was also brought in again at the one-year

13. Virginia Beach: <https://www.vbgov.com/government/departments/city-auditors-office/Documents/Hillard%20Heintze%20Final%20Report%20for%20Virginia%20Beach%2011-13-2019.pdf>

14. San Bernardino: <https://www.policefoundation.org/bringing-calm-to-chaos-a-police-foundation-review-of-the-san-bernardino-terrorist-attacks-2/>

Orlando: <https://www.policefoundation.org/publication/rescue-response-and-resilience-a-critical-incident-review-of-the-orlando-public-safety-response-to-the-attack-on-the-pulse-nightclub/>

15. Chief Cervera's "Virtues of Policing" video is available here: <https://www.wavy.com/virginia-beach-mass-shooting/virginia-beach-police-chief-video-on-virtues-of-policing/>

“At about the three-month point, we came up with a strategy with our service provider to do some mandatory debriefs with our employees. We made everybody who was involved come in and do some group sessions. If that one group session resulted in some follow-up individual sessions, that was good – that was the goal. We also brought the Counseling Team in at the one-year anniversary. Again, they went around and met with people. They attended briefings, and they talked about the fact that there are certain things that happen, where anniversaries become trigger points for certain emotions. And they wanted to make sure that everybody understood that it was perfectly normal and there was nothing wrong with that.”

CHIEF (RET.) JARROD BURGUAN, SAN BERNARDINO, CA

anniversary. He said it’s beneficial to ensure that employees are aware of the available mental health resources and to mandate counseling sessions.

In Virginia Beach, Chief Cervera said he and other commanders purposefully did not join some of the debriefs, so that officers might feel more comfortable attending and sharing their experiences.

Include supervisors and command staff: In some cases, wellness efforts were focused on front-line staff, and less so on supervisors. In Charleston, Chief Mullen emphasized that it is important to give command staff members the same support services as the responding officers. He said the command staff were so focused on checking in on their people that they forgot to take care of themselves in the same way.

At an incident commander training in Charleston, a lieutenant who had managed the response to the Emanuel AME Church shooting shared his experiences as a way

to help participants prepare themselves mentally for a mass violence event – not only regarding what they would need to *do* in this type of incident, but also regarding what it would *feel like* to be in charge of such a horrific incident. Because mass shootings are rare events, it may not be something that commanders often think about.

Communicating about available services: The police chiefs emphasized that an important step in supporting officers’ well-being is letting them know what services are available to them. Virginia Beach Police Chief Anthony Zucaro said it is important to build robust communication and messaging to inform officers about mental health services. The department created an internal webpage where officers can review program offerings. Additionally, officers are reminded about the available mental health resources when anniversaries of traumatic events are approaching.

Similarly, the Charleston Police Department made a video to inform employees about the department’s mental health partners and options and to remind employees that services are free and confidential.

In-house and external mental health care: Some of the chiefs discussed the benefits of having in-house mental health professionals, while others mentioned bringing in specialized resources from outside the department. In Dayton, the police department’s wellness unit has in-house mental health professionals on hand when critical incidents occur. To assist his officers in Charleston, Chief Mullen brought in the same mental health professionals who had provided support after the April 2007 mass shooting at Virginia

Tech University. In Virginia Beach, Chief Cervera was able to tap into a regional program staffed with counselors who were officers from other agencies and specially trained to provide critical incident debriefs.

Prepare selected officers for removing victims' bodies: One issue highlighted by Chief Rolón was the trauma experienced by officers who had responsibility for removing deceased victims from the crime scene. Prior to the event, these personnel had no specialized training in this task or screening for their suitability. Some of those involved experienced residual mental health issues related to that experience. The chief suggested that specialized personnel should be designated for this task and that those employees be specially trained and screened ahead of time.

Prepare for victim transport via police cars: Similarly, there was a delay in getting rescue personnel to victims of the Oregon District shooting in Dayton because of a possible second shooter and suspicious

vehicle. So police officers began transporting victims to the hospital themselves. Although the Dayton officers had not been trained to do this ahead of that event, Chief Biehl stressed how important it is for officers to be prepared for this scenario.

Be aware of the cumulative effect of tragic events: Support resources are critical for police personnel not just for the impact of a single mass violence incident, but for any significant events that may follow it. Chief Biehl described two tragic events that followed the Dayton incident, which significantly impacted the members of that department. Two weeks after the shooting, two young children were killed and nine more were injured in a traffic crash caused by a suspect crashing a stolen police car into a utility pole. A few months later, a veteran narcotics detective was killed in the line of duty. The resources and programs available to officers must adequately address the cumulative impact of events such as these.

Preparing for the Unthinkable

No one can predict when a mass violence incident will occur, but there are steps police agencies can take to prepare themselves for such an event. The police chiefs PERF interviewed emphasized that preparations must go beyond the active shooter training that many agencies provide to recruits and experienced officers. Active shooter training is a critical component of the law enforcement response, but it is not the only aspect of a mass violence event for which law enforcement leaders must prepare their agencies.

An effective and comprehensive response to a critical incident requires leaders to build relationships with partner agencies, plan for logistical and communications challenges, and ensure that there is a strong culture of wellness in the department.

Develop relationships, and train with partners

Several chiefs noted that it is important for law enforcement leaders to build relationships with the other agencies they will work with when responding to a mass violence incident. Agency heads should be familiar with the nearby resources and regional partners who will play a role in the response. These can include local Fire/EMS departments; other local, county or state law enforcement; federal law enforcement agencies; the state medical examiner's office; emergency communications centers; district attorneys' offices; and regional victim assistance centers.

Training with Fire/EMS entities can help decrease the time it takes to reach and administer medical attention to victims on the scene of a shooting. In Virginia Beach, Police Chief Jim Cervera said the police train for these incidents with the fire department and paramedics. Training with these agencies gives everyone experience responding to scenes in a coordinated effort. During the Municipal Center shooting, the rescue squad was able to make contact with victims on the scene very shortly after police entered the building. The training gave both entities an understanding of how each responds to a critical incident, and it enabled the paramedics to safely and rapidly begin treating and removing the victims from the scene.

In another example, Chief Orlando Rolón said that because the Orlando region experiences so many natural disasters, regional agencies regularly come together to train by conducting tabletop exercises. These tabletop scenarios allow leaders to become familiar with the resources and capacities of their regional partners. Chief Rolón said the existing partnerships among regional agencies helped the Orlando Police Department facilitate a coordinated response to the Pulse Nightclub shooting.

Sheriff John Mina noted that there could have been better initial coordination with federal partners following the Pulse Nightclub shooting to ensure a more effective, victim-led response. Both local and federal agencies were working with victims' families but were not familiar with the efforts the other agency was making.

After the first few days, the agencies noticed the overlap and also found gaps in the response to victims' families. Once the gaps were discovered, the Orlando Police Department and the FBI used the Family Assistance Center to ensure that all services were in one location, were not being duplicated, and there were no gaps in the services offered to the survivors and victims' families.

Chief Greg Mullen said that strong partnerships with other organizations, established long before the Emanuel AME Church shooting, helped the Charleston Police Department to respond to the needs of survivors and victims' families. These partnerships included mental health agencies, the faith community, and schools. For example, the police department was able to call upon nine victim advocates from other counties, which allowed the police to assign officers and victim advocates to each of the families. The advocates provided survivors and victims' family members with updates on the investigation and the trial, as well as information about support services.

Chief Mullen also said that prior to the shooting, the police department had a family assistance center policy in place. This enabled the department to quickly set up the center and have police chaplains, mental health clinicians, and victim advocates respond within an hour of the shooting.

In addition, Chief Mullen stated that the Charleston Police Department had already been working with the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) on training programs regarding sexual assaults and interpersonal violence. MUSC also works with families of homicide victims, so it was able to provide resources to the department, survivors, and victims' family members.

Plan ahead to establish logistical and communications systems you will need

A police department's response to an incident of mass violence will be better if the department has carefully thought in advance about what it would want to accomplish and what it would need to achieve those goals.

Several chiefs said it was important to plan the location of family assistance centers prior to a mass violence incident.

Family assistance centers are critical locations because they allow victims' family members to report to one location to receive information from police, stay sequestered from media, and ultimately reunite with survivors. These locations must be able to accommodate large groups of people, while also having private rooms for families to receive notifications from police.

Police leaders should incorporate plans for a family assistance center in policy and in training for a mass violence incident. During a particularly large mass violence incident, victims may be taken to multiple hospitals. Planning for one facility to receive victims' family members will reduce confusion about

“As part of the family unification center that we stood up, there was every entity that you could imagine, from victim services to faith-based organizations. There were a number of people from the large Hispanic and LGBTQ communities. There was also the American Red Cross, mental health, and transportation entities, and the different consulates. It was pretty comprehensive. Anything that you could possibly imagine, it was all located in the one center.”

SHERIFF JOHN MINA, ORANGE COUNTY, FL

where families should respond and allow police to communicate directly with victims' family members in a consistent manner.

Chiefs said that multiple department spokespersons should be trained in preparation for a mass violence incident. An agency's senior executive and top public information officer will play a large role in communicating with the media and public. However, other spokespersons need to be trained, so that all of the communications tasks do not fall on one or two people.

Chief Cervera said that there should have been more trained people to help notify the 12 families of the deceased victims in the Virginia Beach Municipal Center shooting. And in the case of the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting, since there were few Spanish-speaking officers trained to make notifications, Chief Rolón himself translated many of the updates to family members. Chief Rolón said that he and others experienced trauma when making notifications to family members. Their experiences demonstrate the need for specialized training prior to a mass violence incident.

Many police agencies have become adept at using social media to share a wide range of news and other information to the public and the news media. A Facebook or Twitter account can be extremely efficient in immediately disseminating information to anyone who is interested in receiving it. News media reporters have become accustomed to the idea of social media being an official source of information about police activities, and reporters routinely check social media accounts of police or sheriffs' departments or other agencies they cover.

But a crisis is not a good time to create social media accounts. A police department's use of social media during a critical incident is most effective when "followers" already are familiar with the various accounts of the police department. In fact, large police departments often have many different accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and/or other platforms, to provide specialized information about particular aspects of police work, crime data specific to districts or precincts, etc.

So for many reasons that go beyond the response to incidents of mass violence, police and sheriffs' departments should have social media accounts and policies in place as a general matter. Multiple personnel should be trained and authorized to post updates.

And agencies should post information on their social media accounts, perhaps on a daily basis, in order to become familiar with how social media works, and to build an audience of people who routinely "follow" the police. (Social media also is a two-way street; community members can post comments or ask questions regarding social media posts by the police.)

In this way, if a mass shooting or any other type of critical incident occurs, police will be able to focus on the content of their messages, not on the mechanics of how to disseminate their information. And news media reporters and the public will already know where to find the police department's messages on social media.

Cultivate a culture of wellness in the department

Mass violence incidents have a profound impact on the community, as well as within a police agency. In recent years, the law enforcement profession has begun to look more seriously at the need for officer health and wellness programs for their members, and especially in light of the emotional toll that critical incidents have on officers.

All of the law enforcement executives interviewed for this report said that developing a culture of wellness is essential for the health and well-being of officers who respond to mass violence incidents.

Creating that culture involves more than telling department members about mental health resources that are available to them. Officers must feel comfortable taking advantage of those resources.

Charleston Police Chief Luther Reynolds emphasized that establishing a culture of wellness helps employees to be proactive in their decisions to participate in wellness programs. As Chief Mullen put it, officers in Charleston were more comfortable accessing mental health services because of outreach efforts that were made prior to the Emanuel AME Church shooting. The department had instilled a philosophy that asking for help was a sign of strength, rather than weakness.

Virginia Beach Police Chief Anthony Zucaro expressed the same sentiment. Because the police department had a robust officer wellness program before the Municipal Center shooting, officers were more accepting and open to the expanded services that were provided after the shooting.

Virginia Beach Lieutenant Scott Wichtendahl said the department has traditionally had strong peer support, chaplains, and employee assistance programs. The department also had a history of performing critical incident debriefs and after-action reports. Consequently, the department culture became more responsive to candid feedback, talking about lessons learned, and being open to talking about negative experiences. The department also considers officers who respond to traumatic scenes as victims, comparable to survivors of a critical incident.

Even with this strong wellness culture, Chief Zucaro and Lieutenant Wichtendahl said members of the department are still dealing with the trauma they experienced while responding to the 2019 shooting. They are encouraged, however, that many of the officers and family members have embraced the support services available to them. They believe that the services for officers and the critical incident debriefs have helped the department manage and recover from the shooting.

Learning from the Experiences of Others

Peer-to-peer learning is a valuable resource for law enforcement executives. This can be especially true with mass violence incidents, because they are “low-frequency, high-severity” events – the type of scenario that may tend to be overlooked in the daily rush of responding to crimes and incidents that occur every day. For police chiefs and sheriffs, connecting with colleagues who have experienced a mass shooting is an opportunity to learn about what to expect, challenges to look out for, and lessons learned about the agency’s response to the incident.

Even in the midst of a crisis, it can be worthwhile to take a few moments to seek advice from peers. For example, at the time of the Municipal Center shooting in Virginia Beach, Chief Jim Cervera contacted colleagues who had responded to the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech. Their feedback helped guide some of his actions.

After the Emanuel AME Church shooting in Charleston, Chief Greg Mullen said that his agency worked with people who responded to the Virginia Tech shooting. The Charleston Police Department was able to bring mental health professionals who helped at Virginia Tech to assist Charleston officers who responded to the church shooting.

Shortly after the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, then-Chief John Mina spoke with Chiefs Dan Oates¹⁶ and Michael Kehoe,¹⁷ both of whom had led

the response to mass violence incidents. They gave Chief Mina guidance on, among other things, what to expect from a mental health perspective, both personally and with regard to the officers who responded to the shooting.

To prepare for any mass violence incidents in the future, Mina, now serving as Sheriff in Orange County, FL, worked with the neighboring Seminole County Sheriff’s Office. Orange County “borrowed” heavily from Seminole County’s school shooting response guidelines, which can be applied to other mass violence incidents outside of schools. Sheriff Mina said his department has implemented several ideas from Seminole County into policy, such as how to direct and communicate with family members who respond directly to the scene of a shooting.

In addition to learning from others, the chiefs we interviewed said it was important for them to share their experiences with other agencies. Sheriff Mina said the Orlando Police Department sent personnel to help the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department set up its family assistance center after the Route 91 Harvest Music Festival shooting in October 2017.

Dayton Police Chief Richard Biehl said he spoke at the Major Cities Chiefs Conference in October 2019 about his agency’s response to the Oregon District shooting, as did police executives from Virginia Beach and El Paso. Chiefs Eric

16. Chief Dan Oates was the Chief of the Aurora (CO) Police Department at the time of the Aurora Movie Theater Shooting on July 20, 2012.

17. Chief Michael Kehoe was the Chief of the Newtown (CT) Police Department at the time of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting on December 14, 2012.

McBride and Jarrod Burguan have also traveled around the country sharing their experience in San Bernardino to help other agencies respond to mass violence incidents. Chief Burguan has spoken at PERF's Senior Management Institute for Police (SMIP) leadership training program.

Chief Luther Reynolds made an important point for police executives who come from outside an agency and take over command following a mass violence incident. Even though the Emanuel AME Church shooting happened three years prior to his arrival in Charleston, Chief Reynolds made it a priority to learn about the incident, because the effects linger for years. He recommends that chiefs who are new to an agency should learn the history of any mass violence event and listen to those who experienced the incident – both the officers who responded and family members of victims.

Because the Emanuel AME Church shooter intentionally targeted Black residents, Chief Reynolds said he needed to listen carefully to the African-American community to understand racial tensions in Charleston. He said that this helped him connect with the department and the community, and has helped him maintain relationships that were in place prior to his arrival.

“I was able to talk in-person to two chiefs from previous mass violence incidents: Chief Michael Kehoe from Newtown, Connecticut, and Chief Dan Oates, who was the chief at the time of the Aurora, Colorado theater shooting. I was able to learn what they had done in regards to mental health for their personnel. That was very helpful. They reminded me that I wasn't going to be dealing with this for a few months, but I'm dealing with it for years in some cases, depending on the employee.”

SHERIFF JOHN MINA, ORANGE COUNTY, FL

The Illumination Project in Charleston

The Illumination Project was created in response to the Emanuel AME Church shooting in Charleston, SC. The intent was two-fold: to honor the victims of the attack and to strengthen police-community relationships.¹⁸ The project centers on honest, candid conversations among residents, police, business and civic leaders, organizations, and other stakeholders interested in creating safer, more just communities.

Within days of the shooting, the Charleston Police Department engaged the community by conducting several small-group listening sessions. The department heard ideas from community members about how police and residents could improve their relationship. The candid and emotional conversations shed light on some of the underlying issues in Charleston, especially among community members who distrust police. The Emanuel

AME Church shooter had targeted the Black community with the intent of starting a race war.¹⁹ These conversations between the police and residents helped ease tensions in the community, because they demonstrated the police department's determination to acknowledge and address racial issues.

Chief Luther Reynolds said that while there is much work left to do, the Illumination Project has helped continue the healing process. Based on its successes in Charleston, the Illumination Project has gone to other cities across the country to help build trust and perceptions of legitimacy between communities and police agencies.

“It’s a very basic concept, but the communities that often need us the most are the ones that trust us the least, so we have to build bridges before events occur. Even during the best of times, we have to build relationships with our community. Relational policing, problem solving, being present, working with the youth, working with local leaders, and doing so many different things.”

CHIEF LUTHER REYNOLDS, CHARLESTON, SC

18. <http://theilluminationproject.org/our-story-looking-back/>

19. “Dylann Roof Said He Wanted To Start A Race War, Friends Say.” NPR, June 29, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/2015/06/19/415809511/dylann-roof-said-he-wanted-to-start-a-race-war-friends-say>

Conclusion: Five Key Takeaways for Creating a Victim-Focused Response

Mass violence incidents are complex, traumatic events that require police leaders to address several challenges immediately, and for months and even years to come. The police response to mass shootings generally has focused on tactics, equipment, and strategies for neutralizing the shooter and minimizing casualties. There also has been a focus on preventing such incidents, for example, with “red flag” laws to remove guns from potentially dangerous persons.

However, as the nine law enforcement executives interviewed for this project explained, there are several other important aspects that need to be managed well, during the immediate response to a mass violence incident and its aftermath.

Following are five key takeaways for agencies that are committed to a victim-centered response. It is important to have policies in place and officers trained before a mass violence event occurs, so that officers, first-line supervisors, and department leaders are prepared to meet the needs of victims should the unthinkable happen in their community.

1. Have a Detailed Plan for Establishing a Family Assistance Center

Agencies should plan to quickly establish a family assistance center immediately following a mass violence incident. To minimize victims’ families’ exposure to the crime scene, the investigation, and the news media, the assistance center should be located away from the incident command post, in a place where families

can be sequestered from the news media. The facility should be big enough to accommodate the large number of people who will wait for news and hope to be united with the survivors. It should also have private rooms for families to receive information about deceased loved ones.

A family assistance center is important because it gives families one place to go to receive news about their loved ones. In mass violence incidents with a high number of casualties, victims could be transported to multiple hospitals. Without a single, centralized assistance center, it is difficult for families to locate their loved ones, challenging for police to connect with family members, and taxing on overburdened hospitals that are not equipped to accommodate crowds of people who do not need to be at the hospital.

Greg Mullen, who was Chief of the Charleston Police Department at the time of the 2015 Emanuel AME Church shooting, noted that fortunately, his department had a policy on creating a Family Assistance Center. This allowed the department to set up and properly staff the center immediately. Because this policy was in place prior to the shooting, it helped the department facilitate a well-coordinated and victim-focused response.

2. Pay Particular Attention to How Victims' Families Are Notified

Notification of victims' families is one of the most difficult and emotionally taxing responsibilities that police departments and sheriffs' offices have following a mass violence incident. Police executives emphasized that it is important to have several agency members who are trained to notify victims' families after an incident. In Virginia Beach, the police department had only one person and an aide responsible for notifying all 12 of the deceased victims' families. Retired Chief Jim Cervera acknowledged that was too large of an emotional burden for two people.

Agencies should ensure that victims' families are notified privately and in-person. This can be challenging. In San Bernardino, deceased victims' families were not separated from the families of surviving victims at the assistance center. Because of this, the families of the deceased learned their loved ones were likely not among the survivors, when they did not get off a bus that transported survivors to the assistance center. Agencies need to think through how their unification centers are structured and where notifications are made, in an attempt to provide as much privacy and room to grieve that families may need. The more spacious the facility, the better in most cases.

To address language barriers, departments should identify trained members to provide language assistance. In the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting, many of the victims were Latinx and had family members who did not speak English. Chief Orlando Rolón said city employees with little training were asked to assist in making notifications, because

the department was unable to quickly identify enough trained personnel to provide language assistance.

3. Utilize a Variety of Methods for Communicating with the News Media and the Public

Police chiefs and sheriffs play a crucial communications role following a mass violence incident. Beyond providing informational updates, chiefs and sheriffs are often the voice of calm and reassurance to the community that is shaken and afraid.

Law enforcement agencies can use several strategies to work with the news media and communicate important information to the public. Chiefs and sheriffs should address traditional news media outlets in the immediate aftermath of an incident to provide timely and accurate information, and to dispel any rumors that may be circulating. Retired San Bernardino Chief Jarrod Burguan said that he found it useful that his press briefings were conducted live on television and radio, because he was able to communicate everything he wanted the public to hear, without being edited by the media outlets covering the event. Chiefs should also ensure that Public Information Officers are available to manage media logistics and to communicate and provide information in real time between formal briefings. Unless absolutely necessary to save lives, PIOs should avoid becoming involved in the on-scene response to the event, so they can focus on their communications responsibilities.

Social media is an extremely effective way to get information out quickly to the news media and the community. Information can be posted continuously, as soon as it becomes available and is

verified, and anyone who is interested can read the police department's statements, and also view photographs and video footage that the department wishes to release.

But it is important for police departments to have a well-established social media presence for a wide range of purposes, not just for sharing information during critical incidents. Departments that post information on their social media platforms on a daily basis become familiar with how social media works, and they build a following of people who routinely view their messages – and thus will know where to find information during a crisis. News media reporters who cover criminal justice and policing make a practice of following police agencies' social media posts.

Police executives also discussed the benefit of using alternative outlets for disseminating information to specific communities following an incident. Chief Rolón said his department's LGBTQ+ and Latinx liaisons communicated the department's messages to those communities following the Pulse Nightclub shooting. Charleston Police Chief Greg Mullen said it was valuable to provide information to local faith leaders who could share it with their broad community networks.

4. Create a Culture of Wellness within the Agency

All of the police executives interviewed by PERF emphasized that mass violence incidents take a toll on the personnel in their agencies. Not just responding officers and investigators, but also first-line supervisors, call-takers and dispatchers, and command personnel (including chiefs) are impacted.

“One of the really important things we did prior to this event was try to instill a philosophy in our department that if you feel like you need to ask for help, that’s not a sign of weakness but really a sign of strength. I think we saw that quite a bit during this event. We had a number of intervention systems and provided sessions where officers did come and talk about what was going on, and there were individual sessions as well.”

CHIEF (RET.) GREG MULLEN, CHARLESTON, SC

The police executives said that developing a culture of wellness throughout an agency is essential to the health and well-being of all members, and especially to officers and commanders who respond to a mass violence incident. Creating that culture involves more than making programs available to officers. Officers must feel comfortable taking advantage of those resources. A wellness culture will help officers overcome any stigma they may feel about seeking help.

Several chiefs said that even with a robust wellness culture, mass violence incidents will affect those who responded for a long time.

5. Rely on Other Partners, But Manage the Process

Police departments and sheriffs' offices cannot provide a victim-focused response on their own. All of the police executives interviewed by PERF cited other agencies, community leaders, and business partners who assisted in their community's response in the immediate and long-term aftermath of a mass violence incident.

Managing these partnerships can be challenging. During a mass violence incident and in the immediate aftermath,

there will be a flood of assistance from other law enforcement agencies, Fire/EMS departments, other government entities, community resources, and volunteers. In some incidents, police found it difficult to manage the resources that showed up to assist. Police chiefs and sheriffs need to prepare by having their officers train with other first responders, develop relationships with community and business leaders who can assist in recovery efforts, and develop protocols that will connect survivors, victims' families, and responding department personnel to victim advocates and wellness resources.

Before a mass violence incident occurs, law enforcement leaders should focus on building relationships with potential partners. Agencies should include input and participation from these other organizations when developing policies and training. The Charleston Police Department's family assistance center is an example of how quickly police and community resources were able to respond to the Emanuel AME Church

shooting, because a policy created with community input was already in place. Whenever possible, it is advantageous for police agencies to train for mass violence incidents with other partners that are likely to be involved in the response to victims.

While these five recommendations were identified by the police executives as especially important, there are other steps that police departments and sheriffs' offices should take to prepare for and respond to a mass violence incident in a victim-focused manner. This report has summarized these recommended actions, based on the insights of police chiefs in five cities that have learned from experience.

Having strong, victim-focused policies in place ahead of time, along with an internal culture of wellness and resiliency, will help agencies cope with the full range of challenges they will face after a mass violence incident. Leadership from the top is critical to making all of this happen.



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