

A REPORT BY  
THE 2017-2018 CONTRA COSTA COUNTY GRAND JURY  
725 Court Street  
Martinez, California 94553

Report 1807

# Minimizing School Casualties During an Active Shooter Incident

APPROVED BY THE GRAND JURY

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JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

Contra Costa County Grand Jury Report 1807

## **Minimizing School Casualties During an Active Shooter Incident**

**TO: Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors,  
Governing Board of the Acalanes Union High School District,  
Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Board of Directors**

### **SUMMARY**

Between the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre and May 18, 2018, there have been 240 School Shootings nationwide resulting in 148 individuals killed and 310 wounded. From January 2017 to May 11, 2018, California schools experienced seven active shooting incidents, resulting in three individuals killed and six wounded. The trauma of these events prompted law enforcement agencies and first responders across the country to search for solutions on how to minimize casualties in an active shooting incident.

No active shooting incidents have occurred on school campuses in Contra Costa County (County). The Contra Costa County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) conducted an investigation to determine what preparations law enforcement agencies have made to respond to such an incident in the County, should one occur. The Grand Jury reviewed current practices of County law enforcement and paramedics serving the County. The investigation focused on high schools, where most school shootings have occurred.

County law enforcement training procedures require the first officer or deputy who arrives at a school shooting incident to immediately enter the building to stop the shooter. Previously, procedures required waiting for other officers to arrive. The Office of the Sheriff has begun training Contra Costa County Fire Protection District (Fire District) and American Medical Response (AMR) paramedics to enter school buildings, escorted by law enforcement, to attend to injured victims before the entire structure is cleared of the shooter(s). In past shootings throughout the nation, delays in reaching injured victims have resulted in a loss of lives as wounded victims have died within minutes.

Fire District and AMR paramedics are currently prohibited from entering a school building during an actual active shooter incident due to lack of training and lack of ballistic protection equipment.

The Grand Jury surveyed the Acalanes Union High School District's four high schools (AUHSD), at one of which local police ran an active shooter exercise. The goal of the survey was to determine whether the AUHSD has provided teachers written guidelines on responding to an active shooter breaking into the classroom. Although most teachers and students have received verbal guidance on dealing with an armed classroom intruder, they have not received specific written instructions developed jointly by the AUHSD and the local police.

The Grand Jury recommends that the County Board of Supervisors (BOS) consider seeking funds to finance ballistic protection for Fire District paramedics. The Grand Jury further recommends that the BOS continue funding the County Sheriff's Office active shooter training program for paramedics and law enforcement. In addition, the Grand Jury recommends that the AUHSD Governing Board consider requiring its four high schools to work directly with local police to develop and implement specific written guidelines for teachers and students on how to handle classroom break-ins by an active shooter.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In the course of its investigation, the Grand Jury:

- Interviewed city police chiefs
- Participated in a County-run law enforcement/paramedic high school campus 'active shooter' training scenario
- Surveyed County school districts and law enforcement agencies
- Attended an 'active shooter' seminar given to teachers by a police chief
- Interviewed school district superintendents within the County
- Interviewed senior County Fire District staff members
- Interviewed a high school principal
- Interviewed high school teachers

## **BACKGROUND**

The Grand Jury investigated current County law enforcement and paramedic response procedures regarding active shooting incidents on high school campuses. The investigation focused on high schools, where most shootings occur. News media

reported that of the fourteen active shooter incidents that occurred in American K-12 schools between January 1 and May 18, 2018, eleven involved high schools.

County law enforcement agencies define an 'active shooter' as a person who fires a gun with the intent to kill individuals in a confined, populated public space without any prior demands. According to Gun Violence Archive, a nonprofit independent database that tracks gun violence, 2017 was the deadliest year of mass shootings in American history.

As of May 18, 2018, there have been 240 school shootings nationwide since a gunman killed 20 kindergarteners and six staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. In those episodes, 148 were killed and 310 people were wounded. Seventeen of the 240 shootings were classified as mass shootings, events in which four or more people are shot.

Seven active school shootings occurred in California from January 2017 to May 11, 2018. These incidents resulted in three deaths and six people injured.

Contra Costa County has not experienced an active shooter incident on a school campus. However, the County Sheriff's Office and local police departments are preparing for such an incident, should one occur, by revising and accelerating their active shooter training program. Some live law enforcement training exercises have been conducted jointly with paramedics from County Fire and AMR. Paramedics from AMR provide ambulance and paramedic services under contract with the County.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Traditional Emergency Response Procedures in the United States**

To date, shooters at high schools have been young males whose goal was killing as many people as possible in a short period of time. The challenge for paramedics during an active shooter incident has been to reach victims quickly. County law officials estimate that securing a school during a shooting incident can take two or more hours. Police consider a school secure only when they are certain that every space on every floor within that school is clear of a shooter.

Prior to 1999, federal and state response procedures required the first police officers on the scene to establish a perimeter and wait for SWAT units to arrive. Similarly, fire department paramedics were required to stage in a safe zone blocks away and wait for law enforcement to secure the school. This delayed the treatment of victims, who may have only minutes to live, and allowed the shooter to continue causing casualties.

The 1999 Columbine High School shooting incident in Littleton, Colorado, was a learning experience for law enforcement, according to David Billings, "EMS Under Fire: Manchester Fire/Rescue," (2014). When the first law enforcement officers and fire

department paramedics arrived at Columbine, they waited 45 minutes for SWAT. During that time, an additional ten people were killed.

Based on the experience gained from previous school shootings, law enforcement agencies across the nation have determined that assembling an officer entry-team takes too long. As a result, numerous law enforcement agencies have adopted a policy of immediately engaging the active shooter when the first officer arrives.

### **Current County Emergency Response Training Procedures**

Fire District and AMR personnel recognize the value of offering medical aid inside the school building, as soon as possible, even before the entire structure has been secured by law enforcement. However, the Fire District cannot set a policy allowing paramedics to enter an uncleared building with a police escort until all paramedics, including those employed by AMR, have been thoroughly trained and are provided with ballistic protection equipment.

In September 2017, Grand Jury members attended a County-run active shooter training exercise for law enforcement and paramedics. The exercise demonstrated the basic procedures for an active shooter scenario on a school campus.



Courtesy of DanvilleSanRamon.com

#### **Active Shooter Simulation at a Danville High School**

The exercise began with one or two officers entering the school to search for the active shooter(s). As additional law enforcement units arrived, they formed Protection Task Force (PTF) teams to stop the shooter and prevent further loss of life. PTF teams were instructed to bypass the wounded and seek out the shooter in order to protect other potential victims.

When Fire District and AMR units arrived, they formed a unified command with law enforcement. The joint command facilitated close coordination between paramedic Rescue Task Force (RTF) teams and PTF teams throughout the exercise. The PTF Command Officer made security assessments and decisions regarding the movement of RTF personnel within the threat areas.

RTF actions are based on the operational concept of threat zones. This concept is endorsed by the International Association of Fire Fighters, the United States Fire Administration and other organizations. It includes the following three threat zones:

- Hot Zone: the area where there is an immediate life threat and where RTF teams will not operate
- Warm Zone: the area where the threat to RTF members is greatly reduced but not absent
- Cold Zone: the RTF staging area near the building(s), where no threat exists



Photo Courtesy of E. Reed Smith

#### **Paramedics and law enforcement practice response in the Warm Zone**

The September 2017 active shooter exercise included the training of County paramedics for operations inside Warm Zones. PTF teams aided paramedics by radioing them the type of weapon and ammunition used on the wounded.

Responses to school shootings typically involve over 150 PTF and RTF personnel. The PTF Commander tracks the progress of all teams. An RTF member operates the radio inside the building with codes common to law enforcement and paramedics. A law

enforcement officer stated that communication among large numbers of task force personnel is a major challenge.

In 1999, the United States Fire Administration suggested that firefighters be outfitted with protective armor and escorted by law enforcement into Warm Zones to provide rapid medical interventions. In 2012, the New York City Police Counterterrorism Bureau examined over a decade of active shooter incidents. The study revealed that most deaths occur within six minutes from the time a shooting spree begins. Thus, the goal of County RTF teams is to gain access to Warm Zones as soon as safely possible, escorted by County PTF personnel.

The Fire District has not requested funds for ballistic equipment because their RTF Program has not been adopted by the County BOS. A new vest and Kevlar helmet set costs between \$600 and \$1300, depending on versatility, adjustability, comfort, weight, and level of protection. Provisioning all 126 paramedics currently serving with the Fire District would cost between \$75,600 and \$163,800.

AMR paramedics operate under contract with the County. Because AMR is a private company, it would have to fund its own ballistic protection equipment. AMR has no provision for allowing its paramedics to enter Warm Zones. According to senior AMR staff, paramedics employed by AMR would only be allowed to enter Warm Zones if they were trained, volunteered as private citizens, and had their own ballistic protection.

## **Guidelines for County School Districts in Case of an Active Shooter Incident**

### **Survey of County School Districts**

The Grand Jury surveyed all County school districts to understand the procedural guidelines they follow in the event of an active shooting incident.

- Most districts have annual active shooter/lockdown drills for staff and students at one of their high schools during school hours. Law enforcement and/or the fire department occasionally observes these drills.
- Most districts host annual active shooter training for law enforcement during non-school hours at one of their high schools. The fire department sometimes participates.
- Most districts are working with local police to understand the Run-Hide-Fight strategy to help teachers respond appropriately during an active shooter incident.
- A small number of teachers have received individual instruction from law enforcement on how to respond to an active shooter breaking into their classroom.
- Most districts have a police resource officer on duty at their high school(s). In case of an active shooter incident, these officers could immediately respond.

## **Run-Hide-Fight Strategy**

Numerous schools in the County have adopted the Run-Hide-Fight strategy recommended by local law enforcement as a means of responding to an active shooting on a campus. Actions under this strategy depend on an individual's proximity to the shooter. Based on the strategy, defensive actions are:

- Run: seek an immediate escape route and leave belongings behind.
- Hide: find an area out of the shooter's view and try to block entry to it.
- Fight: as a last resort, attempt to incapacitate the shooter with physical aggression.

The Run-Hide-Fight strategy is endorsed by federal preparedness and response organizations. These include the U.S. Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services. ("Mass Shootings and Why Lockdown Fails," SafePlans, 2017)

If a shooter suddenly becomes active on a school campus in the County, the school is immediately put on Lockdown. Teachers ensure their classroom doors are locked. Staff and students not in the classroom are advised to carry out the Run-Hide-Fight strategy.

Law enforcement experts recommend that teachers and students stay inside a secured room. However, if the shooter breaks into the classroom, teachers and students are advised to use the Fight strategy.

## **Survey of the Acalanes Union High School District**

The Grand Jury surveyed the four high schools comprising the Acalanes Union High School District (AUHSD) to determine whether teachers have received written guidelines on responding to a classroom break-in by an active shooter. The survey indicated that:

- One school provides general guidance to staff in the Lockdown section of its Emergency Handbook.
- One school uses guidance based on police briefings at faculty meetings.
- The other two schools are working with local police or the on-site resource police officer to develop more specific written guidelines for teachers.
- Most AUHSD teachers have received guidance on the Fight portion of the Run-Hide-Fight strategy.

At this time, there are no written guidelines for AUHSD students on how to counter an active shooter breaking into their classroom. Students have been given annual verbal guidance and one school is working with local police to formulate written guidelines for students.



## **FINDINGS**

- F1. The Fire District, through the Office of the Sheriff, has supported training to coordinate law enforcement and paramedic response to an active shooting incident at a school.
- F2. Fire District paramedics are unable to operate in Warm Zones because not all paramedics are thoroughly trained in joint operations with law enforcement.
- F3. Fire District paramedics are unable to enter Warm Zones because they lack ballistic protection equipment.
- F4. Deaths during active shooter incidents can be minimized if paramedics reach victims quickly.
- F5. As of April 1, 2018, the AUHSD had no written guidelines for teachers or students on how to counter an active shooter breaking into their classroom.
- F6. As of April 1, 2018, two AUHSD schools were working with local police to develop specific written guidelines on how teachers should respond to a classroom break-in by an active shooter.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1. The County Fire Protection District Board of Directors should consider seeking funds, in time for the FY2019-2020 budget cycle, to finance ballistic protection gear for Fire District paramedics.
- R2. The County Board of Supervisors should consider continuing to fund the training (provided by the Office of the Sheriff) of all Fire District paramedics to operate in Warm Zones.
- R3. The Governing Board of the AUHSD should consider requiring all four high schools, by November 1, 2018, to begin working directly with local police to develop specific written guidelines for teachers and students on how to respond to a classroom break-in by an active shooter.
- R4. The Governing Board of the AUHSD should consider implementing, by April 1, 2019, all active shooter guidelines jointly developed with local police.

## REQUIRED RESPONSES

Responder	Findings	Recommendations
Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors	F1	R2
Governing Board of the AUHSD	F5, and F6	R3, and R4
Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Board of Directors	F1, F2, F3, and F4	R1

These responses must be provided in the format and by the date set forth in the cover letter that accompanies this report. An electronic copy of these responses in the form of a Word document should be sent by e-mail to [ctadmin@contracosta.courts.ca.gov](mailto:ctadmin@contracosta.courts.ca.gov) and a hard (paper) copy should be sent to:

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