

6 Lessons We Learned from Our Active Shooter Exercise

Appropriate planning, training and awareness will help your campus community become more resilient during an emergency. **By William C. Malone**

YOU ARRIVE AT YOUR DESK with your morning coffee, turn on your computer and get ready to start your day when all of a sudden you hear people screaming and something else that sounds like firecrackers. But it's not; it's gunfire from an active shooter. Panic sets in, what do you do? What's your plan? Unfortunately this scenario has played out far too often across North America. This reality has led many organizations to develop a plan to mitigate risk and keep people safe.

The prospect of a mentally unstable or angry individual entering a workplace and indiscriminately killing and maiming innocent people is frightening. These actions are carried out for a multitude of reasons, including exacting retribution for some perceived grievance, slight or injustice. Regardless of the reason, the end result is often very tragic. The question then becomes, can this sort of event be prevented? The short answer is probably not. However, the good news is that these events are rare and there are proactive steps people, businesses and organizations can take to mitigate risk, increase resiliency and improve their chances of survival.

In February, the National Institute of Health (NIH) and National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) tested their emergency response to an active shooter at the Research Triangle Park (RTP) campuses. This is part of the organization's ongoing risk assessment and mitigation efforts. MMA was tasked with working with the NIEHS Operations and Security Branch and its key partners in the RTP, Raleigh-Durham, N.C., campus to plan, develop and conduct an exercise on the NIEHS campus.

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The NIEHS campus is located near the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) campus. As a result, the NIEHS security team invited the EPA to participate in the exercise. Additional exercise participants included the private security contractor for both institutions, the Durham County Sheriff's Department, the Durham Police Department and the Durham Emergency Communications Center (9-1-1). The exercise was designed to test and evaluate the emergency response to an active shooter event and the NIEHS incident recovery processes through the implementation of its Continuity of Operation Plan (COOP).

On June 17, after four months of planning, the live exercise, codenamed Operation SLEIPNIR, was conducted. At approximately

9:30 a.m., the exercise began with the assailant moving through the NIEHS facility. In the early stages of the scenario, a number of casualties occurred in a lab area, which also resulted in a chemical spill. This added complexity of a HazMat situation required close coordination between the security guards, the NIEHS Health and Safety branch and the police in order to safely clear the area. The exercise continued throughout the morning and resulted in the capture of the suspect by the EPA security officer force and law enforcement.

As soon as the threat had been eliminated, the NIEHS COOP was initiated and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was stood up to start the recovery phase.

There were several lessons learned from the exercise.

1. Employees need to know emergency plans and protocols to understand what they need to do in a crisis.
2. Communications become chaotic and uncoordinated. It is important that organizations and their employees have the right communication tools and are familiar with notification methods. This also extends to the radio communications between the campus security teams, local law enforcement agencies and emergency first responders. Institutions must ensure that communications systems and equipment are working and are able to reach the entire campus community.
3. Emergency plans must be reviewed, updated and exercised on a regular basis, e.g. every 12-24 months.
4. Work with your local law enforcement and emergency first responders. They can help provide valuable information and assist with emergency planning and response.
5. An incident command system is an absolute must to ensure a coordinated and effective effort. Time is of the essence and the more coordinated the effort, the sooner the incident will come to an end.
6. The importance of the Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) post incident is critical. An organization or institution will have significant issues to address and will need to be prepared. Notifying or helping next-of-kin, caring for injured personnel, crime scenes, loss of workspace and equipment, people traumatized and unwilling to return to work and crisis communications (internal/external) are just a few of the issues.

Through appropriate planning, training and awareness, people can and do become more resilient, confident and quickly realize that they are not helpless in a crisis. Armed with the right information and training, people will be able to make important and timely decisions that will significantly improve their chances of survival. **CS**

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