

# Appendix B: Managing Visits from Elected Officials

## Overview

This Appendix is intended to supplement Chapter 1 on Communications by providing best practice tips for managing visiting VIPs. All the mayors we interviewed spoke of the influx of elected officials in the aftermath of a mass shooting. These visitors included the U.S. President (POTUS), U.S. senators, state representatives, governors, local officials from the region, and city counselors. These elected officials often want to speak at press conferences, meet victims, and visit the crime scene. Their arrival may burden your overstretched staff and pose a messaging challenge. Without advance planning, their very presence can politicize the shooting and divide victims and their families when unity is most important. Nevertheless, hosting these visitors is an important part of your role and can provide an excellent opportunity to communicate your city's needs and advocate for action. Directed properly, elected officials can contribute to healing the community.

## Advance Planning

As part of preparedness planning for a mass shooting, think about how your city will manage a POTUS or high-level VIP visit. Your planning can include communications, staffing, security, accommodations, itinerary, and advocacy. Consider the messages the VIP could deliver, or actions the VIP could take, that would benefit your community. Engage with community partners (e.g., school officials, victim services providers, and others) to solicit their input (and notify them immediately if a visit is scheduled). Evaluate resource, funding, and staffing needs.

## Communications

The question of whether visiting VIPs will be permitted to speak to the press should be part of any communication protocol you develop. As elected officials, they will naturally want to speak to the press. As “communicator-in-chief,” you should determine whether that would be appropriate. Above all, your goal is to prevent the remarks of elected officials from politicizing the tragedy. Your communications team can work with the VIP's staff to help set their expectations, coordinate messaging, and identify ways the VIP can serve the needs of your community.

### Mayors in Action: Managing VIPs at a Press Conference

Pennsylvania's Governor Tom Wolf, U.S. Senator Toomey, and other senior elected officials happened to be in Pittsburgh on the day of the Tree of Life shooting.<sup>1</sup> Mayor Peduto decided city officials should be the primary speakers at the first press conference. He spoke first, followed by law enforcement officials who spoke about the response and the investigation. The city PIO decided when visiting officials could speak at later press conferences. Visiting elected officials were invited to attend the first vigil the next day but were not invited to speak. Mayor Peduto spoke, as did Jewish community leaders and a visiting Israeli dignitary.



The mayors spoke of decisions they made to manage the communications challenges posed by visiting elected officials. These included:

- Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto chose not to allow state and national elected officials to speak at the first press conference and vigil.
- Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer recommended securing the site of press conferences to control the access of local elected officials to the press pool (they can still speak to the press one-on-one).
- Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley recommended that President Trump not visit the site of the shooting because she was concerned his remarks would be divisive.
- After witnessing the distress to family members caused by remarks given by elected officials at the city's first vigil, one mayor invited elected officials to the city's first annual remembrance but did not invite them to speak. The mayor explained, "if you let one speak, you have to let everyone speak."

### **Itinerary: Help the VIP to be Helpful**

Political polarization around gun violence is a reality in the United States. It is therefore important to consider how to prevent a VIP from sensationalizing the shooting for political gain. Mayor Whaley recommended focusing the VIP's visit on activities that could be healing to the victims or the greater community.

It may be prudent to manage the VIP's expectations before meeting with victims. Deputy Chief of Venues Officer Craig Borkon, who helped establish and operate Orlando's Family Assistance Center, spoke of the importance of preparing officials to meet with families. In Orlando, the American Red Cross briefed VIPs to help them understand what to expect and how to speak appropriately with victims' families.

## Managing a POTUS Visit

We heard from several mayors that a Presidential visit poses unique challenges. These visits require massive coordination and logistical support between city hall, local law enforcement, the White House Advance Team, and the U.S. Secret Service. This comes at a time when local law enforcement officers are working overtime on the investigation and fulfilling security needs and traffic control related to the shooting. In addition, the arrival of POTUS can be polarizing and bring unwelcome political attention.

If your city has previously hosted a presidential visit, you may have protocols and systems in place. If not, the following checklist summarizes what to expect and offers suggestions on how to manage a visit.

- Appoint a team to manage the visit. Its members should coordinate with White House staffers who are planning the visit. Involve your public safety and citywide emergency management team in the planning process.
- Assign a “control officer” to be the primary point of contact for the city.
- Discuss the city’s needs with the White House Advance staffer to help set expectations for the visit.
- Propose activities you assess will be useful to the city’s recovery, which could include meeting with families, staging a press conference, visiting the site, and/or meeting with local elected officials or community representatives.
- Assess possible venues where meetings or press conferences can take place. Start planning for crowd control, security, traffic planning, and free speech zones for protesters outside any site POTUS will visit.
- If overnight accommodations are required, identify hotels with adequate space and perimeter control.
- Significant police overtime may be required. Ask about reimbursement of security and other costs.
- Your communications team will need to coordinate with the press.
- Brief community leaders about plans for the visit. Ensure meetings with POTUS are as inclusive as possible. Invite victims and family members, representatives of impacted communities, other community leaders, and first responders, but first consult with them to determine whether they wish to meet the VIP.

## Key Resource: Preparing for a Presidential Candidate Visit



**Sarah E. Moss, “Local Government Preparation for Presidential Candidate Visits” Webinar:** (July 2021) a webinar describing how to prepare for a POTUS visit. Although the focus is on a campaign stop, the information may also be useful for planning a POTUS visit in response to a mass shooting. Presenter Sarah E. Moss, MPA, is a former public servant and former advance staffer for three presidential campaigns and the White House. Her co-presenter is Kerry O’Grady, a former Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Secret Service Denver field office, has protected presidential candidates and presidents.  
<https://elgl.org/event/webinar-local-government-preparation-for-presidential-candidate-visits/>

During a time of heightened political division, anticipate that some of your constituents will be angry if you host a POTUS visit. El Paso Mayor Dee Margo said President Trump’s visit triggered death threats against the Mayor. He explained his choice to welcome the President to El Paso as the “right thing to do” after a tragedy and felt he had little choice in the matter. Mayor Whaley’s decision to host President Trump likewise fueled anger from constituents on both the political left and the political right.

## Mayors in Action: Managing a Presidential Visit



President Trump’s visit to Dayton after the Oregon District shooting posed a challenge because it prolonged the intense media pressure and politicized the shooting. The Mayor later told the press her decision to join the President during his Dayton visit was not an easy one. She believed the President was a divisive figure whose presence could fracture her grieving city. Some residents protested the visit, holding signs that read, “Not Welcome Here.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the Mayor considered it her duty to greet him. She met briefly with the President and directed him to activities she believed would be healing, such as meetings with victims and medical staff at the hospital and with first responders.<sup>3</sup> She also used the opportunity to urge the President to “do something” to prevent gun violence. Illustrating the challenges mayors may encounter when handling the visit of a controversial leader, the President criticized the Mayor’s handling of the visit<sup>4</sup> and the Mayor received death threats following his visit.”



**Image 14:** President Donald J. Trump and First Lady Melania Trump are greeted by Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley Wednesday, Aug. 7, 2019, at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, and other state and local officials. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead).

## Security Cost Recovery

There will likely be significant police overtime costs associated with providing security for a POTUS visit. You may be able to negotiate an agreement to recover these costs with adequate documentation.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Amanda Reed, *Thousands gather at Sunday vigil honoring Tree of Life Synagogue shooting victims*, PITTSBURGH CURRENT (2018), <https://www.pittsburghcurrent.com/thousands-gather-at-sunday-vigil-honoring-tree-of-life-synagogue-shooting-victims/> (last visited May 25, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> John Seewer, *Dayton's pain: 'Do something'*, THE LIMA NEWS (2019), <https://www.limaohio.com/news/368343/daytons-pain-do-something> (last visited May 25, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Emily Davies, *How Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley became a national voice for gun control*, THE WASHINGTON POST, AUGUST 25, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-mayor-of-dayton-should-matter-how-nan-whaley-became-a-national-voice-for-gun-control/2019/08/24/a7abd752-bf5f-11e9-aff2-3835caab97f6\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-mayor-of-dayton-should-matter-how-nan-whaley-became-a-national-voice-for-gun-control/2019/08/24/a7abd752-bf5f-11e9-aff2-3835caab97f6_story.html) (last visited May 25, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Morin, *Trump's Ohio visit: Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley confused by Trump tweet*, USA TODAY (2019), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/08/07/trumps-ohio-visit-dayton-mayor-nan-whaley-confused-president-tweets/1946291001/> (last visited May 25, 2021).