

Case Brief: Dayton Oregon District Shooting

Introduction

In the early morning hours of August 4, 2019, a young man fatally shot nine people and wounded 17 others with an AR-15 style pistol outside a bar in the “Oregon District,” Dayton’s downtown entertainment area.¹ The shooter was fatally shot by law enforcement officers, who responded within one minute of the first shot.

This case brief highlights the preparedness actions taken by Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley in advance of the Oregon District shooting, immediate actions she took in response, and further actions she took to help her community recover from the trauma.² PHAI researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with Mayor Whaley, Dayton Police Chief Richard Biehl, and Chief of Staff Torey Hollingsworth.

Dayton’s mayoral response is noteworthy for the Mayor’s effective communication strategy, her close relationship with the Chief of Police that aided in the response and recovery, and for her handling of the visit of President Donald J. Trump, who was a divisive figure for many in her community.

City and Mayor Profile

Dayton is the sixth largest city in Ohio with more than 140,000 residents. Mayor Whaley, a Democrat elected in 2013, serves alongside four other City Commissioners. Together they appoint a City Manager to lead the city’s executive functions (a “Council-Manager” form of local government). The Mayor announced she would not seek re-election in 2021. She is now running for governor of Ohio.

Preparation

Training and Experience

Dayton officials cited a range of training and experience that was useful during their response to the Oregon District Shooting. The Dayton Police Department participated in active shooter trainings through the National Tactical Officers Association and the Ohio Tactical Officers Association, though the Mayor and her staff were not involved. The Fire Department/EMS conducted tabletop exercises to prepare the Mayor’s staff to respond to municipal emergencies such as water main breaks and natural disasters. Though helpful in coordinating key emergency support functions after the shooting, these exercises did not include planning relevant to the recovery phase of a public mass shooting. However, the Mayor said crisis communications training she received through a private group helped prepare her for effectively communicating with the public after the shooting. She also mentioned that a previously established relationship with the Montgomery County Alcohol Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services (ADAMHS), one of 50 boards formed to oversee alcohol/drug treatment and behavioral health services in the state, was helpful in crafting the city’s messaging.

¹ We report the total victims and fatalities that Mother Jones reports as of May 27, 2021. Note there are many databases tracking mass killings; some report different victim counts. See James Fox & Jack Levin, *Mass confusion concerning mass murder*, 40 THE CRIMINOLOGIST (2015).

² Dayton is one of six cities researched by the Public Health Advocacy Institute in 2020-21 to inform a Mass Shooting Protocol & Playbook PHAI developed for mayors, city managers, and their staff. PHAI classified the Oregon District Shooting as an outdoor public mass shooting.

Response

Communication

Mayor Whaley considered communication her primary responsibility after the shooting. She scheduled regular updates to the media every three hours and conducted the briefings on schedule even if no new information was available. She explained this is important to prevent the development of misinformation. From the Joint Information Center (JIC) located at the Dayton Convention Center, the Mayor's Chief of Staff and city communications professionals coordinated their messages with police and FBI Public Information Officers (PIOs). The PIOs and the Mayor's team agreed to hold press conferences jointly: the Chief of Police and law enforcement officials communicated about the investigation while the Mayor communicated messages of resilience and unity. Additionally, the Mayor managed the speaking roles and duties of other elected officials, as well as the visits of dignitaries including the President. The communications team worked overtime for a prolonged period after the shooting responding to the high volume of media requests.

Victim and Family Assistance

The Family Reunification Center (which later served as the Family Assistance Center) was co-located with the JIC at the Dayton Convention Center. This proved to be a problem because the press and city staff in the JIC could hear the cries of grief as family members were notified of the deaths of their loved ones. Further, family members were not adequately protected from the media. Therefore, the Mayor emphasizes the importance of separating the Family Reunification and Assistance Centers from the JIC and the press.

The Victim's Advocates Team at the County's Prosecutor office provided victim and family assistance services at the Family Assistance Center. Unlike in other cities, the FBI Victim Services Division and American Red Cross were not the lead coordinators of victim services in Dayton. The Mayor's staff coordinated services initially and directed victims and families to the responding organizations as they reached out. Everytown For Gun Safety provided "lighter touch" services for those who were not ready to seek formal mental health services or grief counseling. The Mayor kept a respectful distance from victims and families but called those who contacted her office.

Collaboration with Law Enforcement

The Mayor and the City Manager benefitted from a close working relationship with each other and with the Police Chief. This relationship was fortified through previous initiatives to combat opioid use, respond to natural disasters, and address local immigration issues. The Dayton Police had primary jurisdiction over the shooting, with the FBI providing additional support. The Mayor said she trusted both agencies during the response and investigation based on her previous experience working with them. The effective flow of information between law enforcement officials and the Mayor and her staff is noteworthy. Based at the JIC, the City Manager received tactical updates from Dayton Police via the law enforcement PIO and relayed those to the Mayor's communications staff to craft messaging for press conferences.

Vigils

Faith communities privately organized a vigil on the afternoon of August 4, 2019, the day of the shooting. The “Downtown Dayton” business association, in partnership with several City Commissioners, organized a candlelight vigil that evening. Mayor Whaley said she invited the Commissioners to participate in the organization of the second vigil to ensure they played a substantive role in the response. The Dayton Police provided security for the event. A crowd of several hundred mourners at the candlelight vigil sang songs, participated in prayers, and chanted “do something.” Mayor Whaley spoke at the candlelight vigil.

Presidential Visit

President Trump visited Dayton on August 7, 2019 before traveling to El Paso, where another mass shooting had occurred just hours after the Dayton shooting. The Mayor discouraged the President from visiting the Oregon District, anticipating his visit would be divisive in her community. Instead, she welcomed the President at the tarmac and directed him to visit with victims in the hospital, where his presence might have a healing effect. Though the visit was short, the planning and coordination responsibilities for the visit were a heavy lift for Mayor Whaley’s small staff, who worked overtime in the days following the shooting.

Recovery

“The Tragedy Fund”

Within 12 hours of the shooting, Mayor Whaley asked a private charity, the Dayton Foundation, to establish a fund to receive donations from the public. Relying on the best practices of other cities that have responded to mass shootings and terror attacks, the Foundation established the “Tragedy Fund.” The Mayor was not directly involved in overseeing the Fund. The Foundation appointed a community oversight board, which determined how to allocate payouts to victims and family members. The Mayor designated a city staffer to serve as a non-voting member on the Board; this staffer kept the Mayor informed.

The Fund collected nearly \$4 million and distributed 100 percent of the donations to 47 applicants (victims and family members). The Dayton Foundation waived all administrative fees associated with the Fund. The allocation was: approximately 70 percent of the funds went to the families of the deceased, 20 percent went to injured victims who were hospitalized for 48 hours or more, and the remaining 10 percent went to victims who were treated and released from the hospital in less than 48 hours.

State Crime Victim Compensation

The Ohio Attorney General’s office paid \$102,731 in state crime victim compensation to 29 victims of the shooting. However, at least 19 victims who applied did not receive victim compensation from the state. These victims were denied assistance due to past felony charges having nothing to do with the shooting or because they had drugs in their system when they were injured. Mayor Whaley advocated for changes to state law to ensure all victims of mass shootings receive the compensation and services they need. Recent legislative proposals in Ohio aim to expand the definition of “victim” to cover more affected individuals, increase the maximum claim for grief counseling, and lower barriers to receiving compensation.

Funerals and Benefit Events

The Mayor further supported victims by attending all the funerals to which she was invited and supporting events to benefit victims and families. Singer John Legend (in coordination with Everytown) hosted a private event for families and survivors in the Oregon District a week after the shooting. The Mayor met with him to discuss advocacy for gun violence prevention but did not attend the private event. She spoke publicly when Dave Chapelle gave a public benefit concert a few weeks after the shooting. Volunteers helped staff the event and the Dayton Chamber of Commerce raised funds for event security. The Mayor issued a proclamation declaring August 25 “Dave Chapelle Day” in Dayton.

Mental and Behavioral Health

Mayor Whaley emphasized the importance of understanding the long-term mental health needs of victims and family members, law enforcement officers, city staff, and the broader impacted community. The Mayor worked with ADAMHS to ensure the city’s messaging was trauma-informed and healing, building on past work with this group developing an approach to the opioid crisis. Mental health resources for victims and families were provided through the County Prosecutor’s office. The Mayor worked to secure services for first responders as well. She also modeled the importance of seeking mental health care by personalizing her messages and explaining that she was visiting a therapist in the aftermath of the shooting.

One Year Remembrance and Permanent Memorial

The one-year remembrance of the event was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The city and community partners offered socially distant and virtual activities under the banner of #DaytonShines. Activities included a memorial tree planted in the Oregon District on which notes of remembrance and seed packets could be placed, an online photo mosaic, and nine minutes of silence starting at 8:04 PM, during which the city shared a video tribute live on Facebook (no elected officials spoke). Community partners and the city continue to collaborate on a potential permanent memorial.

Dayton: Key Takeaways

- The Family Assistance Center and Joint Information Center/press area should be separate. The perimeter of the Family Assistance Center should be secure.
- Advocate for adequate state crime victim compensation for all affected victims and family members.
- Schedule regular and frequent press briefings and conduct the briefings on schedule even if you do not have all the answers.
- Develop partnerships in advance with mental health experts and seek their guidance for help crafting trauma-informed messaging during a crisis.
- Establish a victim’s fund as quickly as possible, ideally on the day of the shooting.
- Direct VIP visitors to activities that can promote healing in the community and avoid situations in which VIP visitors could be divisive for the community.
- Ensure first responders obtain appropriate mental health support.