

Case Brief: Orlando Pulse Nightclub Shooting

Introduction

On June 12, 2016, a shooter fatally shot 49 people and wounded 53 at Pulse, a gay nightclub celebrating Latin night.¹ The shooter, who declared allegiance to ISIS, used a Sig Sauer MCX semi-automatic rifle and a Glock 17 semi-automatic pistol. He took hostages and engaged police in a three-hour standoff before he was killed by law enforcement officials. FBI investigators declared the event a terrorist attack.

This case brief highlights preparedness actions taken by Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer and his staff before the Pulse shooting, and actions they took during the response and recovery phases.² PHAI researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with Mayor Dyer, Chief of Staff Heather Fagan, City CFO Christopher McCullion, Deputy Chief Venues Officer Craig Borkon, and Director of Strategic Partnerships Kathy Devault. The researchers also arranged background conversations with subject matter experts and reviewed online resources.

The Mayor's response to the Pulse shooting illustrates a well-coordinated response by a large city with sophisticated policing and municipal resources. The Mayor's tabletop exercise before the attack is noteworthy, as is his management of key operations, including the OneOrlando fund, the Family Assistance Center, and the Orlando United Assistance Center (a Resiliency Center). The Mayor empowered his staff to act while focusing on his role as a voice for unity and healing on the international stage. Recognizing the challenge of responding to a mass shooting, the Mayor sent city staff to aid other mayors in their response to mass shootings in Las Vegas and Parkland.

City and Mayor Profile

Orlando is Florida's third largest city with over 263,000 residents. Mayor Dyer is a registered Democrat and has served as Mayor since 2003. The city government is of the "strong mayor" structure, in which the Police Chief and city agencies report to the chief executive, the Mayor, who also sits on the City Council.

Preparation

Training and Experience

The Mayor hosts an annual tabletop exercise. Prior to the shooting, the Mayor and city officials conducted a tabletop exercise on the theme of civil disobedience. The Fire Department operated the exercise; city staff from emergency support functions (ESFs) participated. During the tabletop, the team developed a social media protocol that was used during the response to the shooting. The Mayor and his staff cited this exercise as highly instructive for the coordinated interagency response to the shooting.

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 Orlando 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 Pulse shooting as an indoor public accommodation mass shooting.

Additionally, city staff participated in joint exercises with the county, as emergency management is a function of county government in Florida. Local law enforcement participated in tactical trainings involving active shooting scenarios, including at school sites and the football stadium. Finally, city officials had significant experience responding to natural disasters, such as hurricanes. They relied on their emergency communications experience during the Pulse shooting response.

Response

Communication

Because the shooting took place in the middle of the night and there were concerns about explosives, the Mayor and law enforcement officials postponed the first press conference until the scene was secured. The Mayor then negotiated with the FBI about who would take the lead at the initial press conference. The Mayor felt the first message about the attack and security status should come from the Mayor, because he is trusted by the community, rather than an unrecognized FBI agent. After the Mayor spoke, law enforcement officials provided details about the investigation. The press area was moved after elected officials from outside Orlando spoke to the press even though they lacked information about the attack. Recognizing the importance of coordinated and accurate messaging, the Mayor recommends securing the press area.

Public Records Requests

City staff received hundreds of public records requests. The city promoted transparency and reduced the impact of repetitive requests by hosting a webpage on which all public documents relating to Pulse Nightclub and the shooting were published and regularly updated. The city also sought clarification from a court before releasing 911 calls and transcripts. TheCity released these within a week of receiving a court order that clarified which calls and transcripts needed to be redacted to protect victims' personal information. Pulse-related records remain online today.

Victim and Family Assistance

Family reunification was initially provided at a nearby hospital but was soon overwhelmed and moved to a nearby community center. Recognizing that the site could not accommodate the large number of victims, family members, and friends, the Mayor asked city staff to stand up a Family Assistance Center (FAC) at Camping World Stadium. The FAC opened the next morning. The stadium was chosen for its size, secure perimeter, and ample parking. Both the American Red Cross and the FBI Victim Services Division helped city staff establish and operate the FAC. Nearly 40 community-based organizations and businesses provided services. Local law enforcement provided security. Services included mental health care, immigration and travel services, child and pet care, and funeral services. Volunteer lawyers from the local bar association provided pro bono legal services. Importantly, service providers were received at an intake area that was separate from the entrance for victims and families. After operating the FAC for six days, the city transitioned services to the Orlando United Assistance Center (OUAC) in collaboration with Orange County and Heart of Florida United Way. The OUAC continues to support survivors with referrals to mental health care and other services five years after the shooting.

Collaboration with Law Enforcement

The Orlando police, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, FBI, and hostage negotiators were involved in the response. Mayor Dyer based himself in the mobile Command Center with his Chief of Staff Heather Fagan and kept an appropriate distance from law enforcement operations. This uncommon arrangement (mayors are often based on the Joint Information Center) allowed the Mayor to stay informed in real time and base his communications on firsthand knowledge of the response. The mayor's station in the Command Center was made possible by pre-established personal relationships and mutual trust with law enforcement officials.

Emergency Declaration and Disaster Aid

In consultation with the Mayor, Governor Rick Scott declared a state of emergency in Orange County and Orlando following the shooting. According to the Mayor, this declaration relaxed rules related to police overtime and allowed full deployment of emergency response staff. Due to the Mayor's experience responding to hurricanes, he believed the declaration would also make FEMA funding possible for excess costs incurred by the city during the response. However, the Governor's request for \$5 million was denied, in part because the state failed to demonstrate the response was beyond the capacity of state and local government. However, the Small Business Administration (SBA) approved \$353,000 for an Economic Injury Disaster Loan, which provided support for small businesses impacted by the shooting. The declaration of emergency was necessary for the city to be eligible for this loan.

Vigils

City staff coordinated with faith leaders and community organizations that serve the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities to host an interfaith vigil. Because the event was declared a terrorist attack, Mayor Dyer invited a respected local Muslim leader—Muhammad Musri, senior Imam of the Islamic Society of Central Florida—to attend the vigil and press conferences to speak about his community's rejection of hate crimes. This was done to prevent possible retaliation attacks against the Muslim community. At the vigil, Musri declared the support of the Muslim community for the victims of the tragedy, saying "we condemn the ideology of hate and death and destruction and we call for all Muslim leaders and communities across this nation and across the world to stand up and to deal with this cancer and to remove it once and for all."

Recovery

The "OneOrlando" Fund

The city had an existing 501(c)(3) charitable entity. After receiving offers of sizable donations from local corporate donors, including Disney, city staff quickly made adjustments to that entity so it could receive donations from the public. On the advice of Boston officials who established the victims' fund following the Marathon bombing, city staff contacted attorney Kenneth Feinberg. He offered *pro bono* services on the condition that existing funds be consolidated into one, unified fund. City staff heard from family members of previous shootings that 100 percent of the money donated should go to victims and families; the city followed that recommendation. The fund's distribution protocol prioritized the families of deceased victims for the highest payouts, injured victims for payouts in accordance with the length of their hospital stay, and victims present at the scene but not physically injured for the lowest amounts.

Mental and Behavioral Health

The Mayor recognized the far-reaching mental health impact of the shooting. In addition to the trauma experienced by families and survivors, city staff were also traumatized by the event. For example, staff who operated the Family Assistance Center were not prepared for the emotional impact of providing services and had difficulty transitioning back to their normal duties after the Family Assistance Center closed. The Mayor advocated for group therapy sessions for them and the use of therapy animals in City Hall.

Remembrances and Permanent Memorials

Immediately following the shooting, the city hosted vigils and events that prompted local, national, and international participation and mourning. The Pulse Foundation was established to provide a place for reflection and to preserve photographs and items left at the site of the shooting. Staff from the History Center worked around the clock to archive items left at the site by community members, such as flowers, candles, and photographs. One year after the shooting, city staff worked with Orange County and the onePULSE Foundation to host Orlando United Day. Buildings throughout Orlando and central Florida were lit in rainbow colors. Events were also hosted by the University of Central Florida and other colleges. Tens of thousands of community members attended Lake Eola Park Amphitheater for an evening of prayer, live music, inspirational dance, and a moment of reflection for the victims. The city was involved in planning and provided the security for the Lake Eola event. In June 2021, five years after the shooting, the city and its partners again planned a week of remembrance events to honor the victims. The former site of the Pulse Nightclub was designated as a permanent memorial in 2021, five years after the shooting.

Orlando: Key Takeaways

- Conduct a tabletop exercise to plan the interagency response to a mass shooting.
- Secure the press area to prevent the spread of misinformation by uninformed speakers and elected officials.
- Post public information online to efficiently respond to intensive and repetitive public records requests.
- Venues used for family reunification and assistance need to be scalable and secured to accommodate the potentially large number of affected victims, family members, and (importantly) friends of the victims.
- Public mass shootings may not be eligible for FEMA funds.
- Establish a 501(c)(3) in advance. It can be used for many things, including for a victims' fund following a mass casualty event or natural disaster, or to receive donations for the families of fallen first responders.
- Family members from previous shootings advocate that 100% of the money raised should go to the victims and their families.
- Mental health services and other forms of support may be needed by survivors, family members and friends for years after the shooting. In addition, plan to provide mental health services for city employees who work on the response.