

Case Brief: Pittsburgh Tree of Life Shooting

Introduction

On the morning of October 27, 2018, a shooter opened fire during Shabbat services at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood. He used a Colt AR-15 SP1 semi-automatic rifle and three Glock .357 SIG handguns to kill 11 victims and wound six others.¹ The shooter was apprehended by law enforcement officials and will stand trial for murder. The attack was declared a hate crime and is one of the deadliest attacks on the Jewish community in U.S. history.

This case brief highlights the City of Pittsburgh's preparation for, response to, and recovery from the Tree of Life shooting, with an emphasis on the role Mayor William Peduto played in all three phases.² PHAI researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with Mayor Peduto, Pittsburgh Public Safety Director Wendell Hissrich, FBI Special Agent in Charge Robert Jones, and the Mayor's Chief of Staff, Daniel Gilman.

The response to the Tree of Life shooting illustrates the benefits of advance planning and deployment of federal resources. The City's Emergency Management Agency (OEMHS) organized active shooter training for first responders and at risk-communities. Multiple law enforcement agencies, led by the FBI, marshalled a well-coordinated, multi-layered response to the attack. The Mayor's response is noteworthy for his singular focus on meeting the needs of the victims and family members, his effective communications management, and for the relationships established in advance with the Jewish community that made it possible for law enforcement officials to warn synagogues throughout the city of the attack even when phone contact could not be established because it was the Jewish Sabbath.

City and Mayor Profile

Pittsburgh is the second largest city in Pennsylvania with over 300,000 residents. The Mayor manages the city's executive functions (a "strong mayor," Mayor-Council form of local government). The Chief of Staff serves as de facto Deputy Mayor and plays a key role advising the Mayor. The Police Chief is appointed by the Mayor, approved by the City Council, and reports to the Chief of Staff. Mayor Peduto, a Democrat, served on the City Council from 2002 to 2014 and as Pittsburgh's Mayor from 2014 to 2021.

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 Pittsburgh 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 Tree of Life shooting as a "place of worship" mass shooting.

Preparation

Training and Preparedness Actions

The Pittsburgh Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS) is responsible for the city's emergency management. OEMHS works with city, county, regional, state, and federal government partners to develop all hazards plans for natural disasters and human-caused events. In advance of the Tree of Life shooting, OEMHS organized active shooter trainings for Public Safety staff and police. The Mayor's Chief of Staff (COS) observed one of these trainings. Training for the Mayor's office was also scheduled but had not taken place at the time of the shooting.

OEMHS coordinates with community organizations, businesses, and schools to help them develop plans to respond to an active shooter. As part of this preparedness planning, the police department, in coordination with the FBI, did walk-throughs with the Jewish Community Center to assess its security and make recommendations. Lines of communication were established for use in the event of a shooting or other emergency. As a result, the Public Safety Staff had a list of all the locations of synagogues and Jewish sites in the city. Because the attack took place on the Jewish Sabbath, these sites could not be contacted by telephone. The police used the list to go physically to each site to warn of the attack and secure the site.

According to COS Gilman, the Mayor's role in these activities was to provide budget priority, clear vision for OEMHS responsibilities, and effective oversight of police department operations.

Partnerships

The Mayor's staff emphasized the importance of personal relationships during the response and recovery. Important local partners included the Jewish Community Center, the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, and Pittsburgh's universities and medical centers. National partners included the FBI and the American Red Cross.

Response

Communication

The FBI Public Information Officer (PIO) assembled the Mayor, the FBI Special Agent in Charge (SAC), and the Chief of Police to define their speaking roles at the press conferences. Visiting officials, including the Governor and a U.S. Senator, were not initially given speaking roles. At the first press conference, the Mayor spoke about public safety and what the city was doing to meet the needs of victims and families. Law enforcement officials spoke about the investigation. Throughout the response, the COS filtered media requests and coordinated calls between the Mayor and elected officials. On social media, the public safety PIO released updates. The Mayor's account and other city accounts amplified these updates. This disciplined, coordinated approach allowed the City to communicate to the public with a unified voice.

Victim and Family Assistance

Initially, the FBI set up a Family Reunification Center (FRC) at Chatham University, but the Jewish Community Center also provided similar services. COS Gilman recommended locating the FRC at one location to prevent confusion. The Jewish Community Center was ultimately chosen because it was a

familiar place to the affected community. Its perimeter was secured so that its staff could protect families from the media. Specialists from the U.S. Attorney's Office and FBI's Victim Services Division provided services ranging from the return of personal effects, to death notifications, to referrals to local mental health resources. The Mayor met with the families at the FRC, visited the victims in the hospital, and attended funerals upon request. He prioritized meetings with families over other commitments, including interviews with the press.

Collaboration with Law Enforcement

Multiple law enforcement agencies responded to the attack. It was soon apparent that the incident fit the definition of a federal hate crime. Therefore, the FBI was given jurisdiction and took over the crime scene and investigation. The County began a parallel investigation because the shooter was shot by law enforcement responding to the scene. Law enforcement leaders relied on established working relationships to coordinate the investigation and communicate with the Mayor and elected officials. However, at times the Mayor's staff had difficulty obtaining the updates they needed. Therefore, COS Gilman recommends requesting that a law enforcement official based in the command unit or Emergency Operations Center be designated as the point person whose sole function is to regularly brief the mayor and elected officials.

Vigils

On the night following the shooting, the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh hosted a large community vigil at the Soldiers and Sailors War Memorial. Mayor Peduto, the Governor, and other officials spoke at that event. The Mayor also attended an event with Tom Hanks at Point State Park a week later, organized by the city. Vigils were also organized by Jewish communities and took place around the country.

Recovery

"Victims of Terror" Fund

The Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh established a fund to collect donations for the victims. The Federation appointed an independent committee to oversee the distribution of the fund. According to press reports, \$6.3 million was raised. Most of the money, \$4.8 million, was distributed to victims and family members. However, \$500,000 was provided to injured police officers and their families, \$450,000 went to the Tree of Life congregation to rebuild the severely damaged building, and some funds went toward memorials and education connected to the massacre. The Mayor was not involved in the establishment or administration of the victims' fund but helped establish a separate trust fund for large donations from sports teams and other institutions. He obtained City Council approval for this step.

Mental and Behavioral Health

City officials and the FBI anticipate that victims and family members will need mental health care during the upcoming criminal trial, which has the potential to retraumatize them and the affected community. The FBI Victim Services Division will return to Pittsburgh before the trial begins to liaise with family members and connect them to local mental health services and other resources as needed.

The Mayor spoke of the need to ensure mental health services are available for first responders and city officials. In Pittsburgh, the Public Safety Department has its own peer program, established because its employees are believed to be less likely to seek professional help. Services for FBI agents are available via an FBI Employee Assistance Program. Mayor Peduto urged other mayors to take care of themselves

so that they can take care of their constituents. He recommended seeking counseling and learning how to manage when one chooses to reflect on the incident. For example, in the post-recovery phase it may be necessary to turn down interviews about the shooting.

Funerals and Burials

Jewish burial customs require someone to stay with a body until it is buried, and that all remains (including blood) must be buried with the body. Once informed, law enforcement officials worked to balance these faith customs with standard crime scene procedures. The FBI also requested the coroner to make positive identification at the scene rather than at the morgue after autopsy. This helped speed the process of victim identification and ease the burden on family members and volunteers from the Jewish community who stayed in vigil with the bodies. The Public Safety Department provided security for the funerals, which in some cases involved thousands of people who turned out and participated in outdoor processions.

Remembrances and Permanent Memorials

Discussions about a permanent memorial remain underway, in parallel with discussions about reopening the Tree of Life Synagogue for in-person services. In partnership with the Jewish Community Center, the Mayor's office has tried to coordinate planning discussions between the city, the Jewish community, a person representing the interests of the victims and families, and the wider community.

Pittsburgh: Key Takeaways

- A mayor's primary role is to focus on meeting the needs of the victims, their families, and the affected community.
- Active shooter training for law enforcement and the mayor's office is a best practice, as is working with community organizations, schools, and businesses to help them assess threats and develop security plans consistent with the city's Emergency Operations Plan.
- The mayor should meet with law enforcement officials and public information officers before the first press conference to define roles. It is important to speak with a unified voice.
- Another best practice is to designate a point of contact within the Emergency Operations Center or command unit whose sole responsibility is to keep the mayor's office informed of the investigation in real time.
- When minority and religious groups are targeted, it is important to understand their customs related to funerals and burials and to balance them with law enforcement protocols.
- The FBI successfully negotiated a way to bypass coroner's office procedures to speed death notifications.
- Established relationships with leaders of the affected community, local service providers, and national organizations such as the FBI and the American Red Cross proved to be essential during the response and recovery.