

Case Brief: El Paso Walmart Shooting

Introduction

On August 3, 2019, a shooter entered a Walmart in El Paso, Texas and fatally shot 22 people and injured 26 others with a WASR-10 AK-47–style semi-automatic rifle.¹ The victims were mostly Hispanic residents of El Paso and Mexico. The FBI is investigating the shooting as a hate crime and an act of domestic terrorism. The shooting has been described as the deadliest attack on the Hispanic community in modern U.S. history.

This case brief discusses the City of El Paso’s preparation for, response to, and recovery from the Walmart shooting in 2019, with an emphasis on Mayor Dee Margo’s role in all three phases.² The brief is based on a semi-structured interview with Mayor Margo, background conversations with national partners, and information gathered from online resources.

El Paso’s mayoral response is noteworthy for the Mayor’s ability to mobilize corporate and community partners, as well as the public, in key aspects of the response and recovery. Mayor Margo relied on his significant national media experience gained through the focus on El Paso as part of the debate about border security policy to advocate for the residents of El Paso. He also advocated for the speedy release of death notifications to grieving family members. The El Paso United Family Resiliency Center exemplifies an important public health resource and best practice.

City and Mayor Profile

El Paso is a border city of more than 650,000 residents situated on the Rio Grande across from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Mayor Margo, a Republican, served as Mayor from 2017 to 2021. Under El Paso’s council-manager form of government, the Mayor is a voting member of the City Council and presides over Council meetings and official city events and ceremonies. The City Manager oversees day-to-day operations of the city.

Preparation

Training and Experience

The El Paso police and fire departments participated in active shooter trainings prior to the shooting. The local hospital also conducted an exercise involving mass casualties just before the shooting. The Mayor cited the active shooter trainings and medical exercise as instrumental in the response.

In addition, El Paso’s Office of Emergency Management (OEM)—a joint effort between the city and the county—maintains the Emergency Management Basic Plan and conducts regular trainings and exercises to test emergency response capabilities.

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 El Paso 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 Walmart Shooting as an “indoor public accommodation” mass shooting.

The Mayor and his staff did not participate in any trainings relevant to the response to the Walmart shooting. The Mayor recommends that mayors should observe a law enforcement active shooter drill. Without such training, the Mayor admitted he had to devise his response as he went along. However, he had significant national media experience due to El Paso's border city status that he relied on during the response.

Response

Communication

Mayor Margo was in Austin at the time of the shooting. He made immediate arrangements to fly back to El Paso, arriving about three hours after the shooting. From the airport, the Mayor went directly to the Emergency Operations Center at the 9/11 Fusion Center, which was also the location of the Joint Information Center for the incident. The Mayor was briefed there by local police, the FBI, Public Safety, and Department of Justice officials. He then spoke with these officials outside the Fusion Center at a press conference that took place about seven hours after the shooting.

The Mayor's messaging emphasized the theme of love over hate. He contrasted the fact that the killer drove 700 miles to commit his hate crime with the peace-loving nature of El Paso's residents. He later explained in a press interview, "I've said from day one this [shooting] will not be a defining moment in our history. ... I want to relegate it to an asterisk footnote." After the first press conference, the Mayor delivered daily press briefings with the Chief of Police to update the public about the status of the investigation.

Victim and Family Assistance

The El Paso OEM, the FBI, the American Red Cross (ARC), the Salvation Army, and the United Way collaborated to open a Family Reunification Center at a local middle school on the afternoon of the shooting. Mayor Margo communicated with the governor and the assistant police chief, urging law enforcement officials to expedite crime scene processing so that the families could receive death notifications quickly.

The El Paso Independent School District staffed the cafeteria to offer food to the families and community members who arrived. The FBI Victim Services Division took witness statements and handled death notifications. They also maintained contact with area hospitals and trauma centers to update families about the location of their loved ones. The Mayor visited the Family Reunification Center the evening of the shooting and visited injured victims in the hospital the next day.

OEM and ARC opened the Family Assistance Center (FAC) three days later at a nearby convention center. It offered victims and families extensive services, including referrals to crime victim compensation, grief counseling, and legal services. Immigration and travel services were of particular importance given that seven fatalities were Mexican nationals (an additional resident of Ciudad Juarez who died was a German national). The FAC closed after 10 days. The El Paso United Family Resilience Center (RC) opened shortly thereafter to offer ongoing support to survivors (see below).

Blood donations were critically needed. Residents lined up for hours to donate in 100-degree heat, requiring a response by volunteer organizations to distribute water and sunscreen. The Mayor donated blood the day after the shooting and met with donors standing in line. He described the overwhelming response to the request for blood donations as a moving demonstration of the community's unity in the face of crisis.

Collaboration with Emergency Response

The EOC was located at the 9/11 Fusion Center, an all-crimes and all-hazards tactical information and intelligence hub for the El Paso Police Department and the region. The Center is a collaborative between local, state, and federal agencies in El Paso and Dona Ana County, New Mexico. The EOC was set up within an hour of the shooting and a countywide emergency alert was issued about 77 minutes after the shooting.

The OEM operates a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) to educate volunteers about disaster preparedness and train them in basic response so they can help support first responders during a disaster. However, the CERT was not activated as the emergency response needs were met by responding organizations.

Vigils

Many vigils were held in the days following the shooting, but were not hosted by the city. The largest vigil was a bilingual service held at the baseball stadium attended by 8,000 community members from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Mayor Margo spoke at this vigil and focused his remarks on the victims, “They represent generations of El Pasoans and Mexicans that have lived in unison and harmony throughout our 350-year history.” He reprised his healing message, telling mourners, “hate will never overcome our love.”

Presidential Visit

President Donald J. Trump visited El Paso four days after the shooting. The visit was opposed by some elected officials and residents. Nevertheless, Mayor Margo met with the President at the 9/11 Fusion Center, taking the opportunity to ask for “any and all federal resources available” to aid with response and recovery. Although he received substantial criticism and even death threats for welcoming the President, he considered hosting the visit an essential part of his duties. President Trump did not speak publicly. Instead, he met with first responders to thank them and visited with families of three survivors who agreed to meet him at the University Medical Center of El Paso (despite a petition signed by 1,000 medical staff opposing his visit).

Recovery

“One Fund El Paso”

The National Compassion Fund administered the victims’ fund, One Fund El Paso. The Fund was a collaboration between the city and local foundations: the Paso del Norte Community Foundation and the El Paso Community Foundation. The Mayor promoted transparency in fund administration through weekly updates in city council meetings. The fund organizers partnered with at least seven community organizations to help victims and family members apply for funds. Information about the Fund was provided in both English and Spanish. Community partners provided representatives to serve on a task force to oversee the donations and create the distribution protocol. The Fund ultimately disbursed \$11.8 million to 355 victims and victims’ family members. An additional \$50,000 was donated to the Resiliency Center (see next section).

Family Resiliency Center

Local and state agencies collaborated to establish the El Paso United Family Resiliency Center (RC) to help survivors and families recover from trauma caused by the attack. Initially funded by a Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grant, the RC opened three months after the shooting. As of 2021, the RC is still open and funded by the Office of the Governor and United Way El Paso. Notably, the RC provides services to community members beyond the victims of the 2019 shooting. To promote long-term community healing, the RC uses “resiliency navigators” to direct people to the resources of nearly 40 community-based organizations to provide individualized case management, referrals for counseling, financial planning, legal guidance, spiritual care, and more. The support of these partners made it possible for the RC to meet the changing needs of the community, facilitate programs tailored for specific populations, and reduce stigma around receiving mental health care through outreach and education.

Remembrances and Permanent Memorials

The items left by the community at a makeshift memorial at the Walmart were preserved at a local history museum. The city conducted focus groups with community members (including some family members of victims) to understand how they wanted to memorialize the shooting. The families wanted to concentrate the memorial in one location so as not to have a constant reminder of the tragedy. After these listening sessions, Walmart held a private event to unveil its “Grand Candela” memorial, a 30-foot obelisk honoring the victims with a “beacon of light.” At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic limited the City’s ability to host the one-year remembrance of the shooting. An online event in August 2020 was described as “not ideal” for healing because of the lack of in-person contact.

State Crime Victim Compensation and Reimbursement for Recovery Costs

The State of Texas provided \$5.5 million in funding to the City of El Paso for a range of services, including psychological first aid, state behavioral health services, county reimbursements related to the prosecution, school-based mental health services, and the Family Resiliency Center to meet the ongoing mental health needs of survivors.

Funerals

The Mayor attended every funeral except those in Mexico. He took care to emphasize that many of the victims and grieving family members were Mexican citizens.

El Paso: Key Takeaways

- Crisis communications should focus on the unique characteristics of the community to help residents overcome trauma and unite in solidarity.
- Community partners can play a vital role in fund establishment, vigils, family assistance and resilience centers, and memorials.
- Promote transparency and inclusivity when establishing the victims’ fund.
- Blood donations need to be well-organized to protect the wellbeing of donors.
- States are an important source of funding for the response and recovery costs.
- The El Paso Resiliency Center is a model for other cities.