

# Case Brief: Parkland School Shooting

## Introduction

On February 14, 2018, a troubled student opened fire on his classmates with an AR-15 rifle at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, killing 17 people and injuring 17 others.<sup>1</sup> The shooter was arrested an hour later in nearby Coral Springs. He was charged with 17 counts of murder and 17 counts of attempted murder.

This case brief discusses the City of Parkland's preparation for, response to, and recovery from the Parkland shooting, with an emphasis on Mayor Christine Hunschofsky's role in all three phases.<sup>2</sup> The case study is based on findings from one semi-structured interview, background information obtained via phone calls with experts and review of online materials, and a review of the National Police Foundation's after-action report on lessons learned from the incident and recommendations, which involved comprehensive information gathering.

The Parkland case illustrates the unique issues posed by a school mass shooting, which command national attention and are especially traumatizing for children and families. PHAI's research found that advance preparation is especially important in smaller cities that lack the resources of larger cities for comprehensive emergency management planning, and where school shootings are more likely to take place. Smaller cities responding to a school shooting may also face the challenge of coordinating multiple divisions of government that do not report to the Mayor. Parkland's mayoral response is noteworthy for the Mayor's compassionate leadership during a tragedy that affected community members she knew personally. The city's planning for the first annual remembrance event is also noteworthy as a best practice.

## City Profile

Parkland is a small, suburban city in Florida with 30,471 residents at the time of the shooting. The city has a Commission-Manager form of local government. The City Commission has five voting members: Mayor, Vice Mayor, and three Commissioners. Unlike the "strong mayor" form of local government, the Mayor's authority is limited and co-equal to that of the other Commissioners. The Mayor cannot direct staff or city resources. That is the role of the professional City Manager, who has operational authority for city functions. Mayor Hunschofsky, a Democrat, served as mayor from 2016-2020. In 2020, she was elected to the Florida House of Representatives.

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> Parkland 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 Parkland shooting as a school shooting.

## Preparation

### Training and Experience

The City of Parkland contracts with the Broward County Sheriff's Office for law enforcement services and the Coral Springs Fire Department for fire/EMS services. Law enforcement and EMS officials report to the City Manager, who in turn reports to the Mayor and the City Commission. The National Police Foundation (NPF) found that Broward County and the city had comprehensive emergency management plans, but these plans did not include provisions for managing the response to an active shooter incident. The Mayor, the City Manager, and the City Commissioners had not participated in a tabletop exercise or other training related to a mass shooting.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School is operated by Broward County Public Schools (BCPS), which is independent from both the city and the county. BCPS is overseen by a superintendent and school board. BCPS had a district-wide safety plan and each school had a safety plan and emergency code procedures, but these plans were not accessible for review by the NPF. Though city officials had engaged with individual schools and attended PTA and other public meetings related to school security, they had no direct authority over the schools nor input on issues such as threat assessment, active shooter drills, or student mental health services.

## Response

### Communication

Because no communication protocol had been established between city public information officers (PIOs) and law enforcement PIOs in advance, the Mayor, the City Commission, and staffers had difficulty obtaining real-time information about the law enforcement response. In fact, according to press reports, officials at City Hall received updates from television coverage and Twitter. The Mayor was not included in press conferences, which instead were handled by State and state officials, Broward County officials, and school officials. However, individual reporters contacted the Mayor directly. She focused her messages to the community rather than to national audiences and emphasized the importance of mental health and community support. According to the NPF's after-action report, the city's lack of unified messaging with all involved agencies created a vacuum filled by divisive messages that at times "overshadowed messages of unity and resilience, which also hampered the ability of the entire Broward community to focus on a collaborative recovery process."

### Victim and Family Assistance

A Family Reunification Center (FRC) was quickly established by local law enforcement agencies at a nearby Marriott Hotel after the Coral Springs City Manager called the hotel to see whether it was available. Over eight hundred people signed into the FRC and made statements to law enforcement officials. Parkland's City Manager deployed city staff to support the FRC. The Mayor visited the FRC the evening of the shooting to comfort families waiting for information about their loved ones. The operation was reportedly uncoordinated and chaotic, as multiple community-based organizations showed up to offer blankets, water, and other resources. The process for issuing death notifications was drawn out by law enforcement protocols, adding to the anguish experienced by the families at the FRC. According to the NPF, "Increased, regular communication with families awaiting reunification or notification may have helped to ease the chaotic environment at the FRC."

The City of Parkland, assisted by the American Red Cross and local organizations, established a Family Assistance Center three days after the shooting to provide comprehensive mental health and other services. On February 24, 2018, services for survivors and family members were transferred to the Broward County Resiliency Center (see below). The Mayor attended all public meetings about victim and family services to keep herself informed, to provide oversight, and to communicate the needs of family and community members with whom she stayed in regular contact.

## **Collaboration with Law Enforcement and Emergency Response**

Multiple law enforcement agencies responded to the scene, including Coral Springs and the Broward County Sheriff's office, agents from Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and the FBI. Unified command was not established at the scene for about an hour, which negatively impacted communication and later compromised the operations of the Family Reunification Center. According to the NPF report, "Broward County partially activated the County Emergency Operations Center (CEOC) and the City of Parkland [referring to the City Manager] activated a modified municipal EOC (MEOC) during the response to the MSD shooting, but both played a minimal role during the response and in the immediate aftermath because they did not receive timely information from the scene."

Unlike in other mass shooting cases, where mayors were either physically present in the incident command post or operating with their staffs out of the emergency operations center or joint information center, Mayor Hunschofsky did not have access to the initial response infrastructure and therefore learned the details of the investigation at the same time as the public. Notably, the Mayor, who personally knew many impacted families and members of the school community, stationed herself at the school to offer comfort to them and direct them to the FRC.

## **Vigils**

The initial candlelight vigil in Pine Trails Park was organized by City of Parkland staff. The event was described as traumatizing to the families of the victims because some elected officials delivered divisive/political messages rather than messages of unity and healing. There were also traffic control issues due to the thousands of attendees. Many other vigils, marches, and events were held in the days and weeks following the shooting, which the under-resourced city staff did their best to support. Partnerships were established with community-based organizations and the American Red Cross to assist with volunteers and logistics.

## **Recovery**

### **Marjory Stoneman Douglas Victims' Fund**

Within two days of the shooting, the Broward Education Foundation started a fund using GoFundMe. The National Compassion Fund helped establish the distribution protocol, which was based on thoughtful engagement with survivors and families. The Mayor attended listening sessions to stay updated so that she could share information about the fund with the affected families and members of the school community and amplify their views. According to press reports, 100 percent of the \$10.5 million was distributed to survivors and family members of the victims.

## **Mental and Behavioral Health Services**

The Mayor attended meetings about students' mental and behavioral health needs after the shooting. The Broward League of Cities established a school and community public safety task force with stakeholders including the Children's Services Council, Broward Behavioral Health Coalition, law enforcement, representatives from other cities, and representatives from the school system. The Children's Services Council's Executive Director helped raise funding and obtain grants for initiatives to promote mental health in Broward County public schools.

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, a campus wellness center with a range of services was established at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. (Additional services were offered to the broader community at a separate location.) However, concerns remain that the services offered to students were not appropriate for those experiencing severe trauma. For example, services were offered in a setting that lacked privacy and utilized talk therapy (generally not indicated for people who have recently experienced trauma). As a result of this mismanagement, in-home services later offered by the Broward Behavioral Health Coalition were under-utilized by those in need of care, despite efforts by the Mayor and others in the community to promote the availability of the services. Although not a substitute for appropriate, trauma-informed therapy, therapy dogs were used successfully at schools, community sites, and City Hall. The dogs were important for those who were not yet ready to talk about their experience and became an important and lasting aspect of community care.

The Broward County Resiliency Center was later established to provide grief counseling, referrals to community resources, and specialized group counseling for those impacted by the shooting. The Center is no longer operating, but family counseling is offered at two school-based sites in the community. Online mental health resources are also available through the Broward County Public Schools website.

## **One Year Remembrance**

Parkland community members and city staff organized events centered on unity and volunteerism for the first annual remembrance of the shooting. The "Day of Service and Love" offered "something for everyone," recognizing that people process grief in different ways.

Notably, events were intentionally free of political messaging at the behest of the Mayor, who wrote a letter inviting elected officials to attend, but not to speak, at the City's remembrance ceremony on February 14, 2019. Throughout the day there were activities for students and community members, such as painting stones for an outdoor memorial, playing with therapy dogs, and packing meals for children experiencing food insecurity. There were art projects, including a Temple of Time project created by an artist in collaboration with the community. The school opened for a half day: some students attended school events, participated in a moment of silence, or performed a community service project. Others chose to stay home. There was a breakfast for first responders. Communal prayer vigils and candlelight ceremonies were held throughout the day.

## Parkland: Key Takeaways

- City emergency management plans should include active shooter events.
- A tabletop exercise is recommended to plan for a school shooting. In a city with a Commission-Manager form of government, the City Manager, the Mayor, the other City Commissioners, and City staff should all attend and clarify their roles during the response. County, school, and law enforcement officials should be included to promote intra-agency cooperation.
- As part of this exercise, potential locations for a Family Reunification Center (FRC) in different parts of the city should be identified. Each potential location should have a secure perimeter and space for private meetings.
- A communication protocol should be developed in advance with POIs and law enforcement that ensures that the City Manager, Mayor, and City Commission are all regularly briefed by law enforcement officials during the response to a mass shooting.
- As the city's official representative to the state, the nation, and internationally, the Mayor should be included in press briefings.
- Schools, cities, and counties should work together on school security issues, including threat assessment, active shooter drills, and student mental health services.
- Commemorations should be in the spirit of unity and healing. Elected officials should be discouraged from making divisive remarks.
- Compassionate city leadership and trauma-informed messaging can help promote trauma recovery for victims, families, and the affected community.
- After action-reporting and evaluation can lead to system improvements and better emergency planning practices.