

Chapter 9: Commemorations

"People need to grieve."

– Mayor William Peduto, Pittsburgh PA

Chapter Summary

After a public mass shooting, community members will want to gather for many reasons: to show support for victims and families, thank first responders, process their grief and anger, and demand change. These feelings can be especially raw in the immediate aftermath and may linger for years beyond the tragedy.

Mayors told us that nothing will **prepare** you for the grief caused by a public mass shooting. The best you can do is include the hosting of a vigil in your preparedness planning so that you and other city agencies know what to expect. Meet with mental health experts for guidance on how to promote community healing (see Chapter 10 on Mental Health). Strengthen relationships with faith groups and other community partners who can help you quickly organize a vigil should the need arise (see Chapter 7 on Community Partnerships).

During the **response**, community gatherings often begin with impromptu memorials and vigils shortly after the shooting occurs. Your staff or community partners may host a vigil within a few days of the shooting. Here, your compassion and connection to the community will guide your planning. Note that police security may be required for large gatherings, which could delay when the first vigil can be scheduled.

During the **recovery** phase, as the community takes stock of the loss, other events—benefit concerts, community meetings, religious gatherings, political assemblies, and other forms of remembrance—will be planned. Mayors and their staffs say that one-year remembrances are particularly difficult because some members of the community have returned to a sense of normalcy while others are still very much traumatized by the shooting. Thus, it is important to consult with mental health experts and the families of the victims when planning or participating in these events.

Mayors offered the following advice for these gatherings: (1) take steps to avoid politicizing the shooting at remembrances, as it can retraumatize the families, (2) consider scheduling a variety of events that offer different avenues for people to grieve (including by staying home if that is what they need), and (3) speak from your heart.



Preparedness

No amount of preparation can diminish the grief you will experience and witness after a public mass shooting. The best you can do is include the hosting of a vigil in your preparedness planning so that you and other city agencies know what to expect. Consider potential venues for vigils and other commemorations and develop protocols for managing in-kind donations. Learn about messaging to traumatized communities. Finally, meet with faith groups, mental health experts, and other partners who can offer their guidance on how to promote community healing.

Response

Vigils

Vigils—perhaps organized by the city, the business community, local organizations, or faith groups—happen spontaneously shortly after the shooting. Whether or not the city hosts the vigil, the city may need to provide police security and designate the event’s location. Issues to consider for planning a vigil are those you would address for any large public gathering: traffic control, security needs, crowd control, parking, issuing the necessary permits for use of public spaces, among others.



Image 10: Vigil and memorial following the Walmart shooting in El Paso (Ruperto Miller).

If the city is involved in organizing a vigil, consider whether any elected officials (including yourself) should be authorized to speak at the event. At one event, one mayor decided to prevent elected officials from speaking to avoid politicizing the tragedy. Other mayors have addressed this concern by advising elected officials and dignitaries to deliver a coordinated message of healing and unity.



When planning a vigil, seek input from the victims and families (through the victim advocates) and from mental health experts. If the shooting targeted an ethnic or religious community, consult with leaders from that community for help crafting culturally appropriate messages of loss and to understand appropriate dress and customary practices. Determine whether interpreting services are needed at the vigil.

Timing may be an important consideration. Although the community will want to have a vigil as soon as possible, law enforcement officials may still be working overtime on the investigation. The vigil may need to be delayed until sufficient police staffing is available to provide for adequate security.

Mayors in Action: The First Vigils

Faith communities organized a vigil the afternoon after the mass shooting in Dayton. A candlelight vigil was held that evening, organized by the “Downtown Dayton” business community group and several City Commissioners. The Mayor said she asked the Commissioners for help planning the vigil so that they could demonstrate their concern for the victims and their families in a concrete way. Their support in this way also allowed the Mayor to concentrate on other aspects of the response. These vigils allowed the community to come together to safely “reclaim” the Oregon District, where the shooting took place. The Dayton Police provided security for the candlelight vigil in the business district.



In Orlando, city staff coordinated with faith leaders and organizations that serve the LGBTQ+ community to host an interfaith vigil. Because the event was declared a terrorist attack after the shooter swore allegiance to the Islamic State, Mayor Dyer felt it necessary to invite a respected Imam to speak out against the attack in order to prevent retaliation against the local Muslim community. At the vigil, Imam Muhammad Musri declared the support of the Muslim community for the victims of the tragedy, and condemned the ideology of hate and death expressed by the shooter.¹

Funerals

All the mayors we interviewed told us they attended as many funerals as they could. In some cases, they were invited to speak. Familiarize yourself with any faith and cultural traditions that may be part of the funerals you attend. In some cases, state and community-based partners may offer to pay for funerals. Your office can ensure that victims’ families are connected with these resources.

Security may also be needed at funerals, especially if the shooting was a hate crime and the affected community is gathering at a large funeral or memorial service. One mayor mentioned that police also provided security for family members’ homes while they were at funerals to protect against potential theft while they were away from their homes. These security needs must be balanced with ongoing demands for law enforcement personnel at the scene, at the family reunification center, and at vigils or other events.

Victims’ home addresses may need to be sealed by the county’s property assessor as soon as names are released in order to protect victims’ privacy and prevent people from going to the homes of victims and family members during the funerals.



Recovery

First Annual Remembrance Event & Commemorations

Mayors and their staff told us that the one-year mark is one of the most difficult times in the recovery from the shooting. Right after the shooting, you will be working around the clock to attend to the urgent demands of the response, and you may sense that the community is united in its shared feelings of grief and loss. A year later, those feelings may have changed. The community may become divided over issues such as pending litigation, a criminal trial for the shooter, payouts from funds and foundations, and political views. The first annual remembrance event is therefore both a terrible reminder of an event that is still raw for many, as well as a time to heal for others.

Many mayors told us their city took the lead in planning that first remembrance event (or series of events). They called it a “remembrance” rather than an “anniversary” because the latter is a word with happy connotations. Some families wanted to participate in planning and tell their stories, while others did not. The mayors recommend consulting with victims’ advocates and mental health professionals.

It is important to prevent the event from becoming politicized to avoid re-traumatizing family members and the community. That may involve requiring elected officials to use messaging focused on healing or not inviting elected officials to speak.



Image 11: Location of the Pulse Nightclub Shooting in Orlando (WalterPro).

The City of Orlando worked with Orange County and the onePULSE Foundation to host Orlando United Day on June 12, 2017, one year after the shooting. Buildings throughout Orlando and central Florida were lit in rainbow colors. Events were also hosted by the University of Central Florida and other colleges. Community members were invited to Lake Eola Park Amphitheater for an evening of prayer, live music, inspirational dance, and a moment of reflection for the victims. There were tens of thousands of attendees. The City was involved in planning and provided the security for the Lake Eola event.

The Covid-19 pandemic made it difficult to organize vigils and remembrance events. In 2020, remembrance events in Dayton and El Paso had to be virtual. Dayton Mayor Whaley told us that a “virtual event is not the same, people need to come together.” Nevertheless, the city found ways to engage mourners. #DaytonShines events included physical activities, such as a memorial tree placed in the Oregon District on which notes of remembrance could be placed along with seed packets, and an online event that featured a photo mosaic and nine minutes of silence.

See Chapter 6 on schools for a description of Parkland’s first annual remembrance events, which included activities for students and the broader community.

Key Resources: Resources for Helping Victims and Planning Vigils

Office for Victims of Crime, Helping Victims of Mass Violence & Terrorism, Recovery

Phase: Office for Victims of Crime Training & Technical Assistance Center (OVC TTAC), Planning How to Cope with Commemorations, Special Events, and Timeframes that Activate Trauma Memories

<https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/pubs/mvt-toolkit/recovery.html>

Permanent Memorials

Permanent memorials honor the victims and testify to the community’s united response. When planning a memorial:

- Engage victims and families, community partners, and local businesses. Consider forming an independent board or commission with stakeholders that are committed to advancing a shared vision.
- Consult with mental health partners.
- Recognize that the process will take time.

¹Karni A. Biden signs bill creating National Pulse Memorial and commemorates Pride Month. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/25/us/politics/biden-national-pulse-memorial.html>. Published June 25, 2021. Accessed July 7, 2021.



Memorials may take years of planning due to the need to find an appropriate site, address the wishes of the families (some express a desire not to be reminded daily of their loss), and coordinate partners that can realize the community's vision (such as architects and donors). In San Bernardino, for instance, the groundbreaking ceremony for a memorial honoring the victims took place five years after the tragedy, with construction scheduled to be completed in summer of 2021. Likewise, President Biden signed legislation creating a permanent memorial and reflecting pool at the site of the Pulse shooting in 2021, five years after the shooting.¹

In Newtown, Connecticut, planning has taken even longer, with voters approving a referendum to construct a memorial pond nearly a decade after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012.² According to press reports, the memorial will be completed in December 2021.³



Image 12: Rendering of the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial reflecting pool (Courtesy of SWA San Francisco).

Archival Considerations

Documenting and archiving items left at the scene—the spontaneous memorials created by the community—or donated after the shooting is a monumental task. These items may include flowers, candles, notes, teddy bears, art, and items of personal significance and sentimental value. In Orlando, this massive effort involved a large number of staff working against the clock to prevent items from being soaked by rain.

Deciding when and how to preserve these items can be a challenge. One approach is to partner with a local museum or historical society to properly archive them. One mayor recommended informing the public about these preservation efforts to prevent confusion when they are removed from the site. Consider reaching out to other cities who have endured a public mass shooting to make connections with staff that have expertise in this area.

For example, Pamela Schwartz of the Orange County History Center in Florida has developed best practices for museums and historical centers to curate and display art and artifacts from impromptu memorials assembled after a public mass shooting.⁴ She has reached out to historians in other cities to offer archival guidance after public mass shootings.

Depending on the volume of items received, you may need to get creative. Newtown, CT received 65,000 teddy bears after the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting and thousands of letters, Origami paper cranes, and other items. Storage capacity and staff were overwhelmed. Stuffed animals had to be diverted to recipients such as children’s hospitals and orphanages across the country.⁵ First Selectman Patricia Llodra suggested “cremating” letters and other items for use as “sacred soil” for a permanent memorial—staff simply could not read all of the letters received from around the world.

It may not be possible, or even desirable, to save every item: Newtown converted many of the tons of teddy bears, letters, and ephemera that were donated into bricks that could be used when a permanent memorial was built.⁶

Key Resources: Permanent Memorials and Archiving

Los Angeles Times, Archiving grief: Museums learn to preserve memorials left at mass shootings: <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-museums-mass-shootings-20180225-story.html>

Lisa M. Moore, (Re)Covering the Past, Remembering Trauma: The Politics of Commemoration at Sites of Atrocity: <https://jpia.princeton.edu/sites/jpia/files/2009-3.pdf>

Judy Barsalou and Victoria Baxter, The Urge to Remember: The Role of Memorials in Social Reconstruction and Transitional Justice: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/srs5.pdf>

Oklahoma City Memorial Museum: <https://memorialmuseum.com/>

9/11 Memorial Museum: <https://www.911memorial.org/>

National Mass Violence and Victimization Resource Center, best practices: <https://www.nmvvrc.org/media/cf2f54yj/tipsheet15.pdf>



Endnotes

¹ BBC NEWS, *Orlando Shooting: Vigils Held Around World to Honour Victims* (June 2016), available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36524095>.

² Elizabeth Williamson, *A Search for Remembrance After the Sandy Hook Massacre*, THE NEW YORK TIMES, May 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/01/us/politics/newtown-sandy-hook-elementary.html> (last visited May 4, 2021).

³ Amanda Blanco, *After Years of Planning, 'The Clearing' is a Memorial That Will Honor the 26 Victims Who Died at Sandy Hook Elementary School*, THE COURANT (December 2012), available at <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-news-connecticut-sh-memorial-20191214-gxfbdkbyza6xbh7iamnpxbfu-story.html>.

⁴ Matthew Peddie, *Intersection: Pulse Memorial Plans; Gun Safety Activism; Curating Pulse Items; Former Pro Surfer CJ Hobgood*, NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO (June 2019), available at <https://www.wmfe.org/intersection-pulse-memorial-plans-gun-safety-activism-curating-pulse-items-former-pro-surfer-cj-hobgood/115908>.

⁵ Paul Kix, *65,000 Teddy Bears for Newtown, and One Man to Sort the World's Grief*, THE TRACE (December, 2015), available at <https://www.thetrace.org/2015/12/sandy-hook-shooting-donations/>.

⁶ WCVB, *Newtown Finds a Way to Dispose of Victim Mementos* (December, 2012), available at <https://www.wcvb.com/article/newtown-finds-a-way-to-dispose-of-victim-mementos/8176565>.



COMMEMORATIONS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Include commemorations in any emergency management planning or victim assistance planning for a public mass shooting.
- Develop protocols for donations management.
- Learn about how communities heal from trauma.

Response

- Activate partners to begin documenting and cataloguing items left at the scene.
- Activate partners for help planning a vigil and other events.
- Cultivate partnerships that are lacking as you move to recovery phase.

Recovery

- Attend funerals when invited, plan security for the families of the victims.
- Consult families when planning for vigils, the one-year remembrance, and any permanent memorial.
- Make staff available to assist with archival and documentation needs or revise protocols for use with community partners and volunteers.

