

Mass Shooting Protocol & Playbook: Tabletop Exercise

The first time you think about how to respond to a mass shooting shouldn't be when you have received a call alerting you that a mass shooting is in progress. Mayors who have responded to a mass shooting agree that city leaders need to prepare. Hosting a tabletop exercise is the single best way to do that. The following template provides guidance for making basic preparedness decisions and can be adapted to meet your city's needs.

1. Who

Key to the success of the tabletop is to ensure that your city's chief elected official presides over the event. That will ensure participation by the people who will play an important role in the event of a mass shooting. Consider inviting:

- The mayor or chief elected official, who will lead the exercise.
- Law enforcement: the chief of police or county sheriff, and possibly the regional FBI Special Agent in Charge.
- Key advisors and administrators: the city manager and department heads responsible for decision-making during an emergency.
- The "C4" team (the functional equivalents of the city counsel, chief administrative officer, mayor's chief of staff, and chief financial officer).
- If you are planning a tabletop focused on a school mass shooting, invite officials from the local school, the school district, and the county.
- For planning victims' services, include local public health officials, a representative of the American Red Cross, and victim's advocates.
- If you will need to rely on support and services provided by other cities, invite them.
- A facilitator is recommended to ask questions, observe, take notes.

2. What

During your tabletop, the participants should accomplish the following:

- Develop a communication protocol for press briefings and social media messaging.
- Define roles of city agencies and potential community partners (who may be willing to provide services, funds, volunteers, meals, or other support).
- Outline a plan for the city's response not just immediately following an incident, but the days and weeks that follow.
- Consider places a mass shooting could take place in your community. For each location, identify potential locations for the Reunification and Family Assistance Centers (they should be scalable, have a secured perimeter, parking, and be separate from the press).

- Discuss the services victims and families will need and how the city will provide them. (Your local American Red Cross representative will be very helpful in this regard.)
- Consider preparedness actions for local schools, including threat assessment and assessment of mental health resources, active shooter drills, and safety plans.
- Determine how the city will establish the victims fund and plan follow-up actions.
- Identify key POCs, distribute names and contact information to all participants. Create a call list. Tabletop participants should enter key phone numbers in their cellphone.

These actions should be discussed during the exercise and completed soon thereafter:

- Identify minority groups who could be targeted during an attack. Plan follow-up actions to enhance their security. City officials should meet community leaders.
- The C4 team should meet to identify potential liability for the city. Review applicable laws and mutual aid agreements and identify areas of potential liability.
- Identify protocols that may need to be developed: *e.g.*, an expedited coroner’s protocol for identifying victims, a strategy for establishing and distributing a victims fund, and public records request management.
- If you decide to establish a 501(3)(c) to handle the victims funds, you must do so far in advance of a shooting.
- Establish relationships with local and national partners identified and discuss with them the support that may be needed during the response.
- Identify needed training and resource gaps.

3. How to Organize

The tabletop can involve an actual scenario, with each participant making decisions as the event unfolds. Or it can be a roundtable discussion at which questions are posed and discussed. Either way, participants should review the [Mass Shooting Protocol & Playbook](#) in preparation of the tabletop. The **Mass Shooting Protocol** summarizes the mayor’s role in the first 24 hours after a mass shooting. The **Playbook** provides detailed information, resources, and checklists that can be used to plan the response and the long-term recovery. The **Case Briefs** of six cities that responded to a mass shooting are useful tools for planning exercises.

Suggested approach:

- **Start with a plenary session led by the mayor:** make introductions, review the mass shooting timeline, and discuss possible scenarios. A facilitator guides the discussion.
- **Create breakout groups:** they can discuss possible approaches to managing specific issues: *e.g.*, communications, emergency management, victims services, donations management, vigils, legal issues, and planning for the long-term response.
- **Reconvene plenary for a debrief (aka “hot-wash”):** breakout groups brief the mayor on their discussion and decisions. Participants agree on decisions, discuss lessons learned, and identify potential next steps.
- **The facilitator drafts an after-action report.**

4. When/How long

Schedule a tabletop once a year, starting immediately. Make it a standing practice. A tabletop discussion that lasts only an hour or two can be effective. A half-day exercise to work through a detailed scenario can be even better. Whatever the length, the mayor or city manager should lead the exercise and be present for the duration.

5. Why

A tabletop ensures that you, your chief of police, and city officials understand their role in the event of an extreme emergency. This exercise can prevent mistakes and aid in the recovery of your community. Other positive outcomes include:

- Help participants perform with confidence during an extreme emergency.
- Strengthen relationship with law enforcement partners.
- Allow participants to make vital decisions (such as where to stage the reunification center) when they have time to consider the pros and cons of available options.
- Allow participants to ask questions, and make mistakes, without consequences.
- Allow time to hone emergency messaging and develop communication protocols.
- Help manage difficult personalities and highlight the need to avoid political rhetoric.
- Identify key partners and gather their contact details.
- Give the city attorney time to understand and minimize legal risks.
- Determine how multiple jurisdictions will cooperate and harmonize communication systems and response protocols.
- Strengthen relationships with the business community by including them in security planning.
- Help city officials appreciate the magnitude of the support survivors, families, first responders, and the community will need to recover from the mass shooting.
- Allows city officials to reassure key constituents, including parents, the business community, and at-risk communities, that the city is doing everything possible to ensure it is prepared in the event of an extreme emergency.

For more information, please contact Sarah C. Peck, s.peck@phaionline.org or visit www.UnitedOnGuns.org

Timeline of Mayoral Response to a Public Mass Shooting

This timeline illustrates an aspirational mayoral response to a hypothetical public mass shooting. The time frames are based on interviews with mayors, first responders, and subject matter experts. In response to actual mass shootings, many mayors did not take these actions within the suggested time frames. However, with advance planning (as recommended in this playbook), the timeline shown is achievable and would improve public safety and public health outcomes.

Day 1

- Shooting occurs
- Law enforcement response begins
- Family and Friends Reception Center (FRC) opens
- Death notifications made within hours (ideally)
- Emergency Operation Center (EOC) and Joint Information Center (JIC) established
- State of Emergency declared (optional)
- First press conference held
- First vigil takes place

Day 2

- Victim's Fund is launched to accept donations
- Key partners are contacted, including American Red Cross and FBI Victim Services Division
- Meeting is held to determine Family Assistance Center needs
- Family Assistance Center (FAC) opens
- Presidential/VIP visits may take place
- Regular press conferences begin
- Regular updates from law enforcement continue
- Social media policy is implemented

Week 1

- Funerals and vigils are scheduled
- Visit victims and families in FAC and hospital
- Meet with mental health experts
- Messaging transitions from factual updates to messages of healing
- Begin responding to public record requests
- C4 team meets daily
- Establish city website for regular updates

Week 2

- FAC closes and Resiliency Center opens to provide services to families and community
- Community board is formed to oversee victims' fund management
- Meeting is held to determine Family Assistance Center needs

Later

- Potential criminal trial
- Ongoing victim and family services
- Apply for funds to defray costs of response
- Plan first annual remembrance
- Begin planning permanent memorial
- Conduct after-action review of response
- Update training and protocols for future emergencies