

this," he contends. "With all those agencies there, we had the people that we could immediately task to do the things that had to be done. People that day stepped up to the plate and tried to make a difference." And although Dunaway confirms that he frequently went outside the command vehicle to talk, he says the conversations served the dual purpose of helping coordinate the broader operation and shielding those inside from unnecessary interference. "As people came to the command post, the last thing I was going to have any of them believing was that I was disinterested in their presence or in their offers of assistance," Dunaway explains.

Still, some claimed the response to the shootings was more disorganized than it needed to be. "Even with full incident command in place, it'll look chaotic," says Arapahoe Sheriff Patrick Sullivan. "But at least you're getting things done better, and people are communicating, and those who need to get information are getting information." At Columbine, though, incident command seemed to have slipped. There was no formal staging area for law enforcement, for example, which added to the confusion in the streets around the school and near the command post. And although Dunaway was in charge of operations for the incident, neither he nor anyone else appeared to have assumed full responsibility for assigning jobs such as traffic control, logistics, communications, and officer relief—all key pieces of incident command.

While Walcher and Dunaway both readily concede that the response did not meet a textbook case of incident command, however, they question whether a more formalized structure would have been appropriate. The fast-evolving demands of the situation, the number of responding officers, and the need to hand off tasks to individuals from many agencies and jurisdictions argued against imposing a rigid structure under one lead agency, they say. "I don't think incident command was ever intended to be used for combat operations," says Dunaway, "and that is basically what we were dealing with there." Moreover, given the enormity of the undertaking, says Walcher, some tasks necessarily fell to the wayside. "The last thing on my mind was, 'Gee, where's our staging area going to be?'" he recalls. "The street was filling up so fast with cop cars that I had no clue where we could have a staging area, whether we could even have access to it, nor did I care, because I was too busy worrying about kids who had been shot and getting a SWAT team in there that could end the situation." He adds: "It wasn't a traditional incident command, but the system in place accomplished what really needed to get done."

As Walcher and the other commanders prioritized and delegated jobs, some agencies simply tackled tasks that needed doing, rather than seeking direction from the command post. Captain Mark Campbell, for example, who was deploying officers from the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office as they arrived, had noticed that the northbound lanes of Pierce Street were clogged with haphazardly parked patrol cars, blocking the passage of emergency vehicles. To free the lanes, Campbell called on several early-arriving members of the Arapahoe SWAT team, who either contacted the vehicles' owners, Campbell says, or simply lifted the cars out of the way.²² Such ad hoc tasking created its own command and control problems, though. One suburban SWAT team, for example, never even checked in with the command post, but simply deployed itself around the school.

Communication Breakdown

While the somewhat haphazard command approach may have complicated the Columbine response, though, a far bigger impediment was the inability of different agencies to talk. Indeed, responders say, the absence of linked communication systems greatly increased the difficulty of establishing and maintaining effective incident command—particularly given the many departments and jurisdictions on scene. Had all responding agencies been using compatible systems with a databank of channels to choose from, for example, the command post could have allotted a channel for each major task or area of responsibility, such as traffic control, SWAT, logistics, emergency medical, and perimeter control. Such a system, a regular feature of incident command, would have simplified both the division of the response into manageable pieces, and the management of each of those pieces. "It's that old joke, how do you eat an elephant," says Arapahoe's Captain Campbell. "In little bitty bits. You kind of break things down."

As it was, as additional agencies continued to arrive, the ability of all those involved to communicate deteriorated significantly. While the JeffCo Sheriff's office still used a VHF radio, for example, many other responding agencies, such as Denver and Arapahoe, had either analog or digital 800 megahertz (MHz) systems, neither of which could communicate directly with a VHF system, nor with each other. "I cannot overemphasize how great a problem the incompatibility of our communications systems was that day," states Under-sheriff Dunaway. "What that presented was almost unmanageable."

Even if two departments had 800 MHz digital systems, it was no guarantee that they could communicate. Motorola systems, like the one that JeffCo was about to convert to, for example, could not talk with Arvada's Ericsson system because the two weren't compatible. Similarly, although the JeffCo Sheriff's Office and Littleton Fire both had VHF systems, they couldn't communicate during the early hours of the incident because they were using different channels. "If the officer doesn't ever flip that switch and practice talking to that agency," notes Littleton Paramedic Captain James Olsen, "he's not going to know how to do it when the incident comes down."²³

Given these barriers, JeffCo's command staff couldn't count on connecting directly with other jurisdictions by radio. Instead, it pieced together informal links, placing a JeffCo Sheriff's Office representative with a radio on every team, or passing messages through its own dispatch center to a different center, and then back to the field. Even this last method, however, often broke down. At 12:23, the JeffCo dispatch center said it couldn't get through to the command post because both radio links and cellular phone lines were jammed. Indeed, the center was so overloaded that calls were going instead to dispatchers in Littleton, Denver, and other municipalities, who then had to relay messages back to JeffCo. "Radios and cell phones and everything were absolutely useless," declares Steve Davis, public information officer for the JeffCo Sheriff's Office, "they were so overwhelmed with the amount of traffic in the air."

Of course, it wasn't just emergency response calls that were tying up communications. At 11:47, a local television station ran the first report of possible shootings at Columbine High School. By noon, area TV stations had switched to full-time live coverage, and parents and relatives were besieging school, law enforcement, and county officials for information about their children and loved ones.

Lieutenant John Kiekbusch of the JeffCo Sheriff's investigation division had established four debriefing areas where officers could question students and staff about what they had seen. By 12:25, the JeffCo Sheriff's Office and school administrators had settled on Leewood Elementary School, less than a mile from Columbine, as the primary debriefing site. Counselors from the Victim Services Unit of the JeffCo Sheriff's Office had already been sent to the elementary school to talk with students and parents, and the dispatch center began specifically directing parents there. "Where the media was very helpful was in continually broadcasting that information very early on so we wouldn't have a mass of parents

running down to Columbine looking for their kids," says Sheriff Stone.

Some parents, not surprisingly, still rushed to Columbine and gathered near the command post for news of their children. For their part, many students and staff who had escaped the school never went to Leewood Elementary for questioning, and did not reunite with parents or relatives until hours later. Although JeffCo assigned officers trained in crowd control to escort students from safe areas near Columbine to buses that would take them to the elementary school, scores of students simply headed home or to the houses of friends. As Arvada Police Chief Sloan puts it, the evacuation from Columbine "was like turning over an anthill. Whoosh . . . they were out of there."

SWAT Approaches the West Side

As the command staff struggled to bring order and efficiency to the overall response, SWAT Commander Lieutenant Terry Manwaring continued his efforts to insert teams into Columbine and apprehend the killers. Almost a half hour after leaving Deputy Allen Simmons and his team on the east side of Columbine, Manwaring and his group of five finally worked their way around to the upper west entrance of the school at 12:34, still using the fire truck as a shield.²⁴ Three shooting victims lay on the west side of the school, two up near the west doors, and one down a flight of stairs outside the cafeteria. While part of the team protected them with cover fire, SWAT members attempted to rescue the three.²⁵ One student near the doors was alive and was rushed to medical attention in the back of a patrol car. The other two, however, were already dead.²⁶

After dealing with the victims, Manwaring had hoped to send a SWAT team directly into the building through the upper entrance. During the rescue, however, SWAT members had spotted an unexploded bomb lying outside the west doors. Manwaring had heard there could be time- or motion-activated bombs in the school, and he didn't want to risk sending SWAT members past a device that might be triggered at any point. Instead, the SWAT commander decided to drive the fire truck over the bomb and straight through the doors into the school—assuming that the vehicle would absorb any blast. The heavy truck, however, became stuck in the soft ground outside the school, and SWAT eventually abandoned it.

As Manwaring's group was struggling with the fire truck, ten members of the JeffCo SWAT team, headed