

other parts of the school, fearing that too many SWAT teams inside would add to the confusion and unacceptably increase the risk of friendly fire.

Managing Information

Although communications at Columbine were patchy and unreliable on April 20, due to overloaded cell phone systems and incompatible radios, information continued to pour into the JeffCo Sheriff's command post. Despite periodic breakdowns, the three dispatchers in the mobile command bus were receiving messages from the JeffCo dispatch center, other regional dispatchers, county officials, school officials, the tactical command post, and officers responsible for the different aspects of the response. In addition, messages were being relayed in regarding cell phone calls made to families, police, and even television and radio stations by students trapped in the school. Finally, there was a constant stream of reports, queries, and requests from people—official and otherwise—who had gathered around the command post. "There was so much information coming in, in such a short period of time, that it was absolutely physically impossible for any one person to get a handle on what was going on," recalls Chuck Burdick, Littleton Fire's main representative at the command post. "At one point in time, I remember very vividly my brain just saying, 'Absolute overload.' I got to the point where I didn't hear anything. Not even gray noise—it was no noise at all. It was the strangest experience I've ever had."

The volume of information wasn't the only problem, Burdick says. Because it sometimes took a long time for messages to get through, he says, many accounts were outdated, leading to a skewed understanding of what was happening inside the school. Early on, for example, reports of gunfire in one area of the building were sometimes received along with later accounts of shots and explosions in other parts of the building, leading responders to assume that there were more than two gunmen at work. "That's what led law enforcement to think there were six or more shooters in the school," Burdick explains.

SWAT member DeAndrea, who recalls being peppered with information as he was first working his way through the high school, says he had great sympathy for those on the outside trying to unravel conflicting accounts. "Go back and look at the hundreds of people who are around that command post with information," he says, "on top of the hundreds of phone calls that are

coming in to a very small number of people. If I call in and tell you one thing, and somebody else calls in and tells you another thing, who knows whose information is more correct? We're not computers to process all this information and get it all out accurately." He adds: "I'll tell you, I was happier to be inside the school than to be at the command post."

Much of the crush of information was unavoidable. But, according to some responders on scene, commanders could have eliminated a portion of the extraneous input. Although it was standard practice among law enforcement to cordon off a command post during a major incident, JeffCo had not stationed officers around the mobile command trucks, and didn't isolate the vehicles with crime scene tape until later in the afternoon. As a result, people came and went relatively freely. "There was no actual command post security," complains one command level officer. "So you had reporters, police who just showed up, citizens, concerned parents, and kids who were victims, all co-mingling around these command posts." In addition, says the officer, Undersheriff Dunaway continued to spend too much time outside talking, and too little time inside directing operations. "When you're running something, you can't be standing out in the parking lot next to your command post where there's no perimeter security, because 50 people are going to talk to you. He needed to be in somewhere, sitting down, getting fed information, and he didn't do that."

Dunaway and some others, though, dismiss the charge that students or parents came close to the command posts. Moreover, the Undersheriff says, his conversations outside the post, which included periodic meetings with Sheriff Stone and chief investigator Lieutenant Kiebusch, were a necessary part of the effort to learn more about Harris and Klebold, to search for additional suspects, and to ascertain whether the attack was going to spread beyond the high school. "I needed to retain a certain distance from the operational aspects of it in order to contemplate the policy-level issues that we might face that day," Dunaway says.

Managing the Media

Just as Columbine was the biggest and most complex incident that most local emergency responders had ever confronted, so it was the biggest event most local media had ever covered, and quickly became a leading national and international story as well. When Steve

Davis, public information officer (PIO) for the JeffCo Sheriff's Office, first left for Columbine at about 11:30 that morning, though, he had no idea how important the event would become.²⁹ Following his usual practice, Davis pulled out a standard call list as he drove and began phoning local TV stations, newspapers, and radio stations. "I told them I've got a report of shots fired, explosions at the school, I'm on my way down there, and I'll try to pick a place to meet," Davis recalls.

By the time he got to Columbine at about 11:45, Davis says, there were at least two television crews and a radio station on scene, as well as a few PIOs from other jurisdictions who had reported in case Davis needed help. Already it was clear that the incident was going to be too large to handle by simply traveling from one media representative to another. Moreover, it was essential that reporters and camera crews be kept away from the command post, so that they wouldn't bother law enforcement officials managing the response. Accordingly, Davis, with the help of the other PIOs, told reporters that all interviews would take place at a designated media center in the parking lot at the northeast corner of Clement Park—a recreational area which abutted the high school's north side. Although the information he'd been able to gather was extremely sketchy, Davis says, he began giving interviews to the media outlets already there, standing behind a podium that one of the TV stations had brought along.

As the seriousness of the attack at Columbine began to emerge, however, and as news operations flocked to the scene, Davis soon realized he could not satisfy the barrage of requests for individual interviews. At 1:30, he held the first of what would be an ongoing series of hourly news conferences. Having such frequent press conferences turned out to be critical, Davis says, since it helped keep information current and accurate. "There were so many rumors and myths getting started, it gave me a chance to confirm stories or chop them off right at the root immediately, instead of letting them fester all day," he explains.

On the other hand, the hourly updates made it almost impossible for Davis to stay abreast of the latest developments himself. "Most of the news conferences would run 30 to 40 minutes with questions and answers," he recounts. "When I ended that, I would start to walk out and was just mobbed by media wanting an individual interview. By the time I got done doing that, it was time for the next news conference. I would literally have to run over to the command post, stick my head in, and say, 'OK, what's new? What's changed?' Or,

'I'm hearing questions about this and this, do we have anything on that, can we address this?' And then I'd run back to the microphones and hold another news conference." Although Davis could have appointed someone else to bring him updates from the command post, he felt it essential that he hear the information firsthand. "There were so many concerns about what was going out and the accuracy of what was going out," he notes, "that I wanted to hear it straight from those people before I turned around and went to the microphones."³⁰

Despite his efforts to keep the press cloistered in one area, Davis says, some media representatives sought out more dramatic stories and footage. Several journalists got near to the command post, and a TV reporter at the Yukon/Caley triage area interviewed wounded students, even though families had not yet been notified of the students' injuries. Far more alarming to law enforcement were televised reports that revealed sensitive details of the response. Helicopter news footage early on, for example, showed Manwaring's SWAT team making its slow approach to the school behind the cover of the fire truck. "Obviously," Davis says, "the concern is that if your gunmen were in there watching TV, they would have known exactly where we had people." Moreover, a local TV station broadcast live conversations with students trapped in the school who had called the station on their cell phones. "The kids are saying, 'I'm holed up in the science room with 23 other kids and we've got the door barricaded,'" recalls Davis. "And we're thinking, 'Get that off the air!' Now we're telling the gunmen exactly which room to go to in order to find 23 more hostages." Even the helicopters, themselves, posed a problem, kicking up dirt that in some cases temporarily blinded the rooftop snipers, and making it harder for responders outside the building to hear.³¹

Members of the JeffCo Sheriff's Office also had to be vigilant in restricting the press to a media area outside of Leawood Elementary. As the afternoon wore on, more and more panic-stricken students and parents were gathering. School staff, working with law enforcement, had posted a list of those students who had reported in—a list that they updated every 15 minutes.

The SWAT Response Continues

The efforts by the command staff and by Steve Davis to digest and act upon incoming information were mirrored inside Columbine by the intensive efforts of the SWAT teams to understand what they were seeing and