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Acknowledgment

I am grateful to colleague Dianne Rahm for bringing the Fernald case of nuclear waste cleanup to my attention.

CASE STUDY 9

Introduction

As Dr. Garnett's essay stresses, for public administrators today, internal and external communications are central to influencing their work, both in terms of helping to set the agenda for what they do and then decisively shaping public opinion about how well or poorly they perform their roles. External media such as radio, TV and newspaper coverage, its volume and content, as well as various "internal players," help to create the issues public agencies address, how they perform or fail to perform their tasks, and then largely determine public perceptions of what they accomplish. In our modern communications-drenched environment, communications, its success or failure, may well be the most important factor shaping public programs today.

Possibly the most glaring recent instance of communications breakdown at the local level occurred during the tragic shootings at Columbine High School, Littleton, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. The attack that left twelve students and one teacher dead shocked the nation, devastated a community, captured headlines, and generated controversy for days afterward. For many, the inconceivable happened: Two heavily armed teenagers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, from quiet, upper-middle class suburbia, deliberately prepared and executed the mass killings. Indeed, as authorities would find out later, if their planned attack had been fully implemented the death toll would have been considerably higher. The shooters had scattered seventy-six bombs through the school, two in nearby fields, and thirteen in two cars inside the parking lot, for a total of ninety-nine bombs. If the two twenty-pound propane tank bombs they set to detonate at 11:17 a.m. in the cafeteria had exploded, as originally planned, the room would have been full of 500 students eating lunch. As one sheriff's deputy observed afterward, "Bad bomb makers made for a lot of live kids. . . ."

Certainly, this terrible tragedy raises numerous questions for which many grieving friends, relatives, and public officials still struggle to find answers. However, from an administrative perspective, at the heart of law enforcement's combined response to this new sort of homegrown terrorism lay a crucial problem of poor communication. From the first Jefferson County sheriff dispatcher's call "female down" at Columbine at 11:23 a.m., a series of administrative communications flaws unfold. The following story by Susan Rosegrant, written for the Kennedy School of Government Case Program, focuses upon many of the communication breakdowns that took place throughout all phases of the emergency response to the shootings.

As you read this thoughtful, retrospective study, try to look specifically at how ineffective communications influenced the decisions that the responders made.

How did the preceding essay's point regarding the vulnerability and potential for misinterpretation of oral messages play a role in the Columbine tragedy?

What effect did the unavailability of up-to-date floor plans for Columbine High School have on police choices? Why were current maps not readily on hand?

Why did ultimately a thousand law enforcement officers arrive at Columbine from surrounding metro-Denver jurisdictions? What were the effects upon those already there attempting to cope with the emergency? What accounted for such ineffective coordination among various units?

How did the perceptions of each type of emergency responders—for example, SWAT teams, bomb experts, and medical crews—shape their communications, both what they saw and how they related what they saw to others at the scene? Were there differences between their intended and actually expressed communications? If so, can you cite examples?

What caused the delay in setting up a central command post, and how did that add to the confusion of operational communications and decision making among law enforcement personnel?

How did the management style of Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone complicate and confuse communications at Columbine? What assumptions did Stone make about the situation, and what would you recommend that he should have said or done differently during the crisis?

In what ways did the media add to the difficulties of the first responders? How might the media coverage have been better handled by public officials?

What lessons can law enforcement and emergency responder agencies learn from the ineffective communication at Columbine?

Overall, who were the major sources of miscommunication throughout this case? Can you generalize about the overall impacts of flawed information upon the effectiveness of law enforcement during the emergency? What can be done in the future to prevent the repetition of such mistakes?

The Shootings at Columbine High School: The Law Enforcement Response

SUSAN ROSEGRANT

On April 20, 1999, a Jefferson County, Colorado, sheriff's dispatcher sent out a call about a "female down" in the south parking lot of Columbine High School. The radio message at 11:23 a.m. that Tuesday morning was the first official word alerting area law enforcement to the fact that something had gone very wrong at the large suburban school about eight miles southwest of Denver. By 11:32, a deputy on the scene had called for mutual aid, and within a half hour, hundreds of emergency responders were arriving to help stop a bloody siege at the school by an unknown number of gunmen—gunmen who were said to be armed with automatic weapons, bombs, and grenades.

The chaotic scene that law enforcement and emergency medical personnel faced, however, seemed designed to frustrate their best efforts. Witnesses were providing conflicting reports about the number of armed attackers, their location in the building, and their ages. The commanders who had rushed to the scene didn't have and couldn't find an up-to-date map of the school's sprawling maze of rooms and corridors. By the time the first Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team entered the school shortly after noon, the gunmen had grown quiet—removing the clear objective of an active target. As SWAT members moved cautiously through the school, the piercing sirens of fire alarms triggered by bombs made it almost impossible to communicate. Not only that, coordinating the growing crowd of responders outside had become increasingly difficult, particularly since the radios used by different agencies often weren't compatible.

Over the next few hours, the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies first secured the perimeter of the building so that the shooters could not escape, then struggled to evacuate students, teachers, and staff—particularly those who had been wounded—and to apprehend the killers. Not until almost 4:00 p.m. would SWAT members discover that two student gunmen, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, were already dead,

having committed suicide in the library just minutes after the first SWAT team entered the building. Horrified SWAT members also discovered the ten students that Harris and Klebold had executed in the library about a half hour before killing themselves. In all, the two had killed or fatally wounded 12 students and one teacher and injured 24 others in the span of 16 terrifying minutes.¹

Before the week was out, the deadliest school shooting in US history would spark impassioned debates across the nation about such issues as school safety, gun control, the impact of violent video games, and the pressures of suburban life. Within the emergency response community, the attack also spurred a crucial question: Could law enforcement and emergency medical personnel in the Columbine area have done anything better in responding to the terrorist act or in reducing its grave toll?

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office

Jefferson County—locally known as JeffCo—was Colorado's most populous county in 1999, with 512,000 residents. Twelve police departments operated within the county's towns and cities, but the JeffCo Sheriff's Office provided law enforcement for the 173,000 residents in unincorporated areas of the county, including Columbine High School, where a JeffCo deputy was on duty every day as the school community resource officer.² The office's 400 deputies and 185 non-uniformed personnel were headquartered in an imposing cluster of modern buildings in Golden, Colorado, that some locals referred to as the Taj Mahal. JeffCo had its own bomb squad and a part-time SWAT team, whose 12 members worked as regular members of the force unless called in for a tactical emergency.³

In April 1999, the JeffCo Sheriff's Office was in a period of transition. John P. Stone, who had served as a county commissioner for 12 years, had been elected to a four-year term as sheriff the previous November, and