

# 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 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 top official (mayor and/or city manager) presides over the event. That will influence the people who will play an important role in the event of a mass shooting to participate. At a minimum, you should include:

- City leaders: the mayor, who will lead the exercise, and others as appropriate.
- Law enforcement: the chief of police or county sheriff, and possibly the regional FBI Special Agent in Charge.
- Key advisors and city 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, include 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 moderator or facilitator is needed to keep time, move the conversation along, 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).
- Develop 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 separate from the press).
- Identify minority groups who could be targeted. Plan follow-up actions with law enforcement to enhance their security. City officials should meet community leaders.
- 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.)
- Determine how to handle the victims fund. If you decide to establish a 501(3)(c) to handle the funds, you must do so far in advance of a shooting. Or choose to establish a relationship with the National Compassion Fund.
- The C4 team should identify potential liability for the city. Review applicable laws and mutual aid agreements. Identify protocols that may need to be developed: *e.g.*, an expedited coroner’s protocol for identifying victims, a strategy for establishing a victims’ fund, and public records request management.
- 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.

### 3. How to Organize

The tabletop planning team should develop a scenario of a mass shooting. Participants should review the scenario and the [Mass Shooting Protocol & Playbook](#) in preparation of the tabletop. The **Mass Shooting Protocol** helps you understand the mayor’s role in the first 24 hours after a mass shooting. The **Playbook** provides detailed information, resources, and checklists you can use to plan your response and the long-term recovery. The **Case Briefs** of six cities that responded to a mass shooting are also included in the Playbook and describe how city officials actually responded to the shooting in that city.

How it works:

The tabletop starts with introductions, followed by scenario-based discussion, guided by a facilitator. This should include a review of the timeline of a mass shooting (attached) and the mass shooting scenario developed for the tabletop. Then breakout groups discuss (without stress) problems encountered and actions they would take. Evaluators selected to observe and offer feedback on the proceedings. The mayor (or city manager) should keep participants engaged, ensure they are asking and answering questions, and talking with each other about how their decisions affect the response.

Rules of the road:

- Creativity/Group Problem Solving
- Use the knowledge and information available in the room
- Encourage active thinking and listening
- Active Participation is required

- Show respect – challenge ideas, not people
- Keep political views out of the discussion

Conclude with a debrief (“hot-wash”). The breakout groups brief the mayor on their discussion. The group agrees on a summary of decisions, protocols established, and agreement on next steps (including training, filling resource needs, developing protocols, etc.). Each participant identifies something significant he or she has learned. Draft an after-action report.

#### **4. When/How long**

Schedule a tabletop once a year, starting immediately. Make it a standing practice. A tabletop 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 know what to do in the event of an extreme emergency. This exercise can prevent mistakes and aid in the recovery of your community. In addition, a tabletop can:

- Strengthen your relationship with law enforcement partners.
- Make vital decisions (such as where to stage the reunification center) when you have time to consider the pros and cons of available options.
- Allow you to ask questions, and to make mistakes, without consequences.
- Provide the opportunity to hone your emergency messaging and develop communication protocols. If needed, arrange media training.
- Help you manage difficult personalities, such as other elected officials.
- Help identify key partners, gather their contact details, and identify partners you may need to cultivate (such as public health officials or the American Red Cross)
- Give your city attorney time to understand and minimize legal risks.
- In the case of a school shooting, determine how multiple jurisdictions will cooperate and harmonize communication systems and response protocols. (Note that most education-based tabletop exercises focus only on the school’s response. They do not assign a role for the mayor. For this reason, recommend that you plan a tabletop with school and law enforcement officials present if possible.)
- Help you and your team appreciate the magnitude of the support survivors, families, first responders, and the wider community will need to recover from the trauma of a mass shooting.

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# 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