

Best Practices

VIRGINIA TECH SHOOTING

The tragic shooting at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, left 33 people dead and sent shockwaves throughout the nation. In the days that followed, every one of Virginia's seven million residents became a Hokie. In a show of solidarity, the schools' colors were seen everywhere, from banners on car antennas to storefront windows. To help restore calm and order to the people of the Commonwealth, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) immediately joined its state and local partners to implement the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommended risk communications tactics: "Be first. Be right. Be credible."

VDH staff worked together to respond to the crisis, both on site in Blacksburg and in Richmond. In collaboration with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, VDH's Emergency Preparedness and Response (EP&R) Program deployed three Public Information Officers (PIOs), a planner and a team of forensic scientists to the campus to work under the direction of the state's Chief Medical Examiner. As a result of VDH's staffing pattern, a local EP&R response team from the southwest region already was in place. This is one of five regional teams that make up Virginia's statewide public health emergency preparedness system. Each team is composed of a planner, an epidemiologist, a PIO and a trainer, among other public health specialists.

Be First.

Once in place, VDH Office of the Chief Medical Examiner conducted autopsies, contributed to the delivery of information to the public through the press, communicated with family members of the deceased, and supported the state Joint Information Center (JIC). Selected for their former training in law enforcement, emergency medical services and local government, VDH's PIOs were among the first public health workers to arrive on the scene. As agency spokespeople they explained the role of the health department during a mass casualty incident to the public through the press. Together, the VDH PIOs provided context for decision makers in Richmond. They were working to inform federal agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the State Department, as well as foreign embassies on Virginia's mass casualty policies and updates from the scene.

Be Right.

It was the job of PIOs to communicate on behalf of the Office of the Medical Examiner (OCME). The work of the OCME constituted a medical- legal death investigation. Each fatality required a careful autopsy, including retrieval of evidence such as bullets. PIOs, working with a very demanding press corps, explained the process in place to find answers. They strove to acknowledge public concerns without over reassuring people about the speedy delivery of the medical examiner's findings. Among the press there was the impression the medical examination of the victims was taking more time than anticipated. To demystify the process, while maintaining privacy rights, a statement outlining the law regarding the performance of such examinations during a criminal investigation was prepared.

Obviously, families needed information. The Commissioner wrote a letter to parents and others who lost loved ones to express his condolences and explain the medical examiner's investigation process. Representatives of the OCME worked closely with family members to further explain the procedure required for working with the deceased.

CRISIS EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION

Be Credible.

President George W. Bush and Virginia Governor Timothy M. Kaine instilled public trust and confidence in steps being taken by the government. The Governor flew home from a business trip to Asia to communicate directly with parents, students and constituents throughout the state. He was joined by the President in a public healing ceremony televised around the globe to empathize with families. Later the Governor would explain steps the state would take to prevent similar events from happening again in the future. He followed through by establishing a commission to review the events and make recommendations for the future.

These actions made it clear that leadership was in place and that the public's concerns and welfare were being addressed.

All communication was managed on the scene through the Joint Information Center to ensure consistency of messages. VDH's Web site provided content for PIOs from other agencies on the scene to improve their knowledge about the work of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

The Virginia Tech shooting, which was the most deadly campus shooting in American history, demonstrated the value of risk communications. To date, preparations have included exercises for the unimaginable and coaching by nationally respected leaders in crisis management and risk communications. VDH has demonstrated experience in responding to anthrax scares, natural disasters and the events of Sept. 11. However, the Virginia Tech shooting event was unlike anything we have faced in the past. In a year that brought multi-state E. coli and salmonella infection outbreaks, as well as early predictions of a fierce hurricane season, the Virginia Tech shooting reminds us how important it is to incorporate risk communications into all hazards planning and response strategies. That tragic day in April will never be forgotten.