



# Active Shooter Recovery Guide

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Homeland  
Security

# RECOVERING FROM AN ACTIVE SHOOTER INCIDENT

In this dynamic threat environment, it is important that organizations not only prepare their staff to respond to a potential incident, but also collectively determine the processes through which the organization and its staff recover from an incident. Incidents such as mass shootings at Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, FL on June 12, 2016, and at an office holiday party in San Bernardino, CA on December 2, 2015, have demonstrated acts of violence such as active shooter incidents, can happen anywhere. Threats may be either external or internal. Although appropriate measures should be taken to protect an organization from a potential attack, it is nearly impossible to completely prevent every incident. As such, if an active shooter event or other attack occurs, it is vital that organizations prepare themselves to effectively recover, taking into consideration the business and human elements.

Recovery is a continuous process that occurs over short- and long-term incremental phases. Organizations and their staff will progress through the recovery phase at a different rate, and each will require varying degrees of assistance.

In addition to assisting in the recovery of personnel, organizations must ensure the continuity of operations by returning the incident site to its full functionality as quickly and efficiently as possible. Depending on the severity of the incident, this could range from coordinating with law enforcement access, cleaning and sanitizing the scene, and replacing broken glass to seeking a temporary alternative site in which to continue operations, providing personnel with the necessary grief counseling, to recovering lost data if the physical IT center sustained structural damage or loss of electronic equipment.

This guide is intended to assist in the proactive implementation of policies and procedures that position organizations to effectively recover from an active shooter incident, while providing the best support structure for their employees, contractors, visitors, patrons, family members, and the community at large.

## Short-Term Recovery – Address Immediate Needs

The short-term recovery process begins immediately after an active shooter incident concludes. Its goal is to re-establish safety and mitigate the physical, psychological, and emotional impacts from the incident. For those responsible for managing the aftermath, it involves tasks that need to be implemented quickly to ensure that those affected are safe, accounted for, reunited with their families/friends, are able to retrieve their personal possessions, get proper medical and mental health care if required, and are able to receive timely information from an authoritative source about the incident and its resolution.

Preparing to address such short-term recovery issues through response policies and procedures that are regularly exercised will result in a capability to respond to such incidents in a timely, appropriate and productive manner.



The magnitude of the incident will in large part determine how the short-term recovery process is achieved. It may be an orderly and linear sequence of steps as outlined below, or the process may be compressed or otherwise rearranged to better suit the circumstances of the incident.

### Ensuring Life Safety after the Immediate Rescue

Each active shooter incident has its own unique characteristics that will affect every stage of response and recovery, beginning with the short-term recovery process. The safety of victims and others immediately affected by the incident are of paramount and immediate importance.

Depending on any number of factors, one of the first response tasks—the evacuation process from the scene of the incident to an assembly area—may be orderly and well-planned, chaotic, or both. To manage this process, initial steps for incident managers once their staff and others are out of the immediate incident area are listed below.

#### Assembly Areas

Most facilities have evacuation and assembly areas already designated for fire drills and other emergencies. An assembly area aids the reunification process by gathering evacuees in one location. To mitigate any confusion that may arise during the evacuation, ensure that your staff knows how to evacuate as quickly and safely as possible to the assembly areas.

- Depending on the incident, assembly areas may have to be created on an ad hoc basis. Secondary or additional assembly areas may also be used, if necessary.
- When arriving at the assembly area, managers should be prepared to account for employees, letting other responsible officials know of the locations of those who might still be at the scene of the incident, or who may have already left the area entirely.
- If possible or appropriate, an assembly area may serve as a venue for leadership to address next steps, such as relocation and reunification.
- Managers should introduce themselves to law enforcement officers or other emergency officials who may be positioned to protect the assembly area.
- Evacuees should remain with their respective group at the assembly area. Managers should make sure evacuees understand that they are not to leave the assembly area until a responsible official gives the “all-clear” signal, indicating that the threat has been mitigated and the scene of the incident is declared safe and secure.

### Coordinate Medical Assistance

The immediate goal is to help evacuees recover sufficiently to enable them to contact family/friends, cooperate with authorities, and leave the assembly area. This will include information about survivors relocated to hospitals or other assembly areas.



## Ensure Care for the Injured

- Ensure that individuals injured during the incident or evacuation are provided immediate care from responding fire and emergency medical service (EMS) personnel in the assembly area, or where circumstances dictate.
- Support efforts to transport victims unable to be treated at the scene to medical facilities.

## Set Up Crisis Communications Media Response

Communicating reliable and updated information about the incident, casualties, and the location and status of evacuees is of paramount importance. Ensure that such crisis communication plans are in place, including a designated crisis communications spokesperson. The crisis communication plan should include coordination with law enforcement, scripted responses to likely questions, and the designated spokesperson should be thoroughly trained to present the responses. Use the company or facility website and/or social media accounts to provide updates. Also work with local media to disseminate that same updated information.

Use social media and activate a dedicated toll-free number to update information

- Set up an officially designated toll-free telephone number as well as a social media site for continued updates on the incident and recovery; and ensure coordination with law enforcement for updated and accurate information.
- The information provided should include updated news about the situation, points of contact for emergency assistance, and other relevant measures to facilitate recovery.
- Also provide information to employees not present at the site to inform of whether or not to report for work.
- Regardless of existing crisis communication channels, ensure that evacuees' families are informed as soon as possible about their whereabouts and health status.

## Provide Immediate Crisis Support

Depending on the length and severity of the incident, it may be possible to provide additional services for evacuees in the assembly areas. Some of what is described below transitions into the final stage of short-term recovery.

Set up a Family Assistance Center

- Establish a formal or informal Family Assistance Center (FAC) to provide information and assistance to families and friends about fatalities and survivors.
- This will include information about survivors relocated to hospitals or other assembly areas.
- FACs can also help arrange for reunification of survivors with family or friends.
- FACs might also be able to provide basic services to families and friends, such as:
  - Temporary housing and meals
  - Needs assessment (e.g., compensation)



- Advocacy and coordination (e.g., legal rights and services)
- FACs may also provide a reserved environment for families of deceased victims to grieve in privacy that also serves to shield them from the media.

### Assist the Family Reunification Process

The final stage of short-term recovery is the reunification of incident evacuees and survivors with their families and friends. The immediate reunification process should be well-ordered. However, if during the initial evacuation, the evacuees become scattered, this reunification process may take on a larger management responsibility.

#### Update Family Members and Arrange Reunification

- Be prepared to accommodate the various needs of family members and friends who might rush to the scene of the incident.
- Ensure that family members are informed of any changes to the location of the assembly areas as well a time estimate for when they can reunite with the affected employees.
- Reunification with those injured during the incident may take more time since those injured may have already been transported to medical facilities.
- Consider providing transportation for family members to area hospitals where the survivors may have been taken.

#### Facilitate the Retrieval of Personal Belongings

- With personal safety an immediate priority during an incident evacuation, some personal belongings may have been left behind.
- Personal possessions may not able to be recovered until the crime scene investigations are complete.
- Coordinate with law enforcement in setting up a central point for collecting personal belongings.
- Some personal possessions may be collected and treated as evidence for a criminal proceeding, and may be held for a longer period of time.

#### Help Coordinate Vigils and Memorial Services

- Vigils and memorial services are an important part of navigating the healing process following the trauma of an active shooter incident. In the aftermath of an incident, they provide an opportunity for individuals to take comfort and receive support from others affected by the incident. They also provide the community with an opportunity to participate in the healing process and offer support to those in need.
- While vigils may be held on an ad hoc basis the evening of the incident, memorials generally are more formally organized and take place several days later.
- If needed, designate a space in or near the facility where people may leave tokens of remembrance, such as sympathy cards, balloons, or stuffed animals.
- Establish a plan for what to do with the tokens of remembrance, such as donating to a local charity (e.g., flowers, etc.) or transferring them to the families of the victims.



## Long-Term Recovery – Restoration

The long-term recovery process begins once the assembly areas are cleared by law enforcement for cleaning and the affected individuals have returned to their families and friends. The goals of long-term recovery are to help employees return to normality in their daily interactions and professional life, and to take whatever steps are necessary to return the facility and/or business to normal operations.

### First Steps

The progress of long-term recovery depends on the facility or institution, as well as the unique circumstances of each incident. An active shooter incident with several victims and few others affected may require a relatively short period of recovery. An attack with dozens of victims, hundreds of others affected, and extensive property damage may require a longer period of time from which to recover. Be aware that for an individual, the process may be physical (if injured), psychological, or financial. Steps to get the process under way are listed below.

#### Assist Employees with an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

- An EAP is a benefit program that assists employees in resolving personal and work-related problems. After an incident, this may include assisting with emotional difficulties, financial and legal concerns, and other post-attack issues.
- If there is not a formal EAP, ensure that employees can access the assistance necessary to recover from their ordeal, to include grief counselors.
- Ensure that employees are provided appropriate leave time for recuperation from injuries or disabilities caused by the incident.

#### Facilitate Application for Workers' Compensation (or other types of financial assistance)

- If an active shooter event in a workplace results in injuries (physical and psychological) and fatalities, the affected individuals may be eligible to apply for compensation for their medical expenses.
- If necessary, provide life insurance processing assistance to employees or their families.

#### Federal, State and Local Victim Assistance Programs

- Encourage employees to seek information about victim assistance programs from the local community, which can aid in their recovery. Further information may be available from police departments and local government offices.

### Grief Counseling

The psychological impact of active shooter or other violent incidents is different for each affected individual. Grief counseling is used for a spectrum of emotional crises to include for those who were victims of the incident, those who knew some of the victims, and others less directly affected who may still experience post-traumatic stress disorder or other anxieties. Some



individuals may need little or no treatment. The role of the organization is at minimum to facilitate whatever appropriate counseling might be required.

### Offer Mental Health Counseling

- An important component of recovery is to treat the emotional side effects of an incident's violence and stress.
- If possible, ensure that counselors are available immediately after an incident to evaluate and treat affected individuals.
- The goal is to get people affected by an incident to a baseline emotional well-being as quickly as possible.
- The length of treatment will depend on the needs of the individual and be determined by a professional mental health counselor.

## Reopening the Facility and Resuming Operations

Unless there is severe physical damage from an attack or other special circumstances, most facilities will reopen soon after the post-incident investigation is complete. In some cases, an alternative temporary facility may be used. Organizations should establish a reconstitution plan to restore full functionality after an incident.

### Returning to the Facility When it Reopens

- Individuals recover from traumatic incidents at their own rates. Some may be able to reestablish their normal routines and return within days, while others may need more time. Some individuals may be unable to return at all. Organizations should be prepared to accommodate an employee's progress as much as possible.
- Depending on the severity of the particular event, ensure that employees (and others affected by the incident) are aware of the need to pace themselves. Encourage them to take breaks and rest periods when possible.
- Prepare and enact continuity plans to keep operations going, if necessary. The plan may include provisions for hiring temporary staff, teleworking, and working from alternate locations.

## Anniversaries and Memorials

As the effect of the incident recedes over time, its anniversary and any permanent memorial (if installed) may become focal points for memories, reunions, and renewed media attention. Including media considerations in corporate policy for such occasions should be considered.

### Anticipate the Impact of Anniversaries and Memorials

- Anniversaries and memorial services of remembrance are held to help victims, their families and friends continue to transition through their traumatic experience to recovery.
- Anniversaries also are an opportunity for individuals to reconnect with former coworkers. Organizations should consider facilitating reunions.



- For some, anniversaries and memorial services of remembrance may bring about an adverse reaction as they relive the events. Organizations should be aware of this, and offer assistance if needed.

## Post-Incident Scams and Fraud

The aftermath of some active shooter incidents has seen the formation of fraudulent charities and other scams that may re-victimize those affected and the general public who wish to contribute to a legitimate charity. In addition to seeking money, some of these solicitations may be “phishing” for personal information. Organizations should ensure that employees are made aware that such scams could occur.

### Make Employees Aware of Potential Scams and Fraud

- Fraudulent requests for donations may come from in-person solicitations, telephone, email, or social media.
- The U.S. Internal Revenue Service maintains a list of charities that are exempt from taxation. Any charitable organization that does not appear on this list may be fraudulent. Ensure that employees are provided a link (list) to recognized charities to which they can safely donate.
- Some fraudulent charity names may resemble those of recognized charities, or they may claim an affiliation with an existing charity. Reiterate to employees the need to check website and email addresses for anomalies.

## Civil and Criminal Judicial Processes

Some active shooter incidents may result in criminal or civil trials. Ensure that your legal staff is aware of potential liability issues. Organizations may also have to consider a leave policy to account for employee absence during a required judicial process.

### Prepare for Possible Judicial Processes

- Anticipate providing assistance in criminal or civil litigation.
- Make employees aware that they may be called as witnesses in a judicial proceeding.
- Participation in a legal proceeding may bring back traumatic memories of the incident, so consider providing grief counselors.





## Resources

In addition to the resources listed below, organizations should consult the National Incident Management System (NIMS), which is administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). NIMS provides a framework for preparation and response to any major incident, including an attack. <https://www.fema.gov/national-incident-management-system>.

Active Shooter Preparedness resources, <https://www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness>

Hometown Security resources, <https://www.dhs.gov/hometown-security>

Exempt Organization Select Check, IRS, June 2017, <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/exempt-organizations-select-check>

Helping Victims of Mass Violence & Terrorism: Planning, Response, Recovery, and Resources, DOJ-OVC, August 2015, <https://www.ovc.gov/pubs/mvt-toolkit>

Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans: A Closer Look at Active Shooters, Department of Education, [https://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS\\_K-12\\_Guide\\_508.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf)

