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Active Shooter Incident Preparedness and Response Strategies

In recent years, active shooter incidents have become a growing concern across the United States. Also called a mass shooting in some situations, such an incident refers to an individual or group of individuals entering a populated area in order to kill or attempt to kill their victims, generally through the use of firearms. According to the FBI, the annual number of active shooter incidents doubled between 2017 (31 incidents) and 2021 (61 incidents), with three out of the five deadliest mass shootings taking place in the last decade. These incidents often result in serious damage and harm, even though FBI research found that the majority (70%) of mass shooting events span less than five minutes. With this information in mind, being adequately prepared for such events and utilizing effective response tactics can make all the difference in minimizing losses.

Considering properties that are easily accessible to the general public (e.g., businesses, government buildings, educational institutions and health care facilities) are common targets for these incidents, it's especially vital for organizations to have mass shooting preparedness and response measures in place. After all, organizations have a responsibility to protect their employees, customers and other parties from possible dangers on-site—including active shooters. Failing to uphold this responsibility could lead to more fatalities and injuries after a mass shooting as well as increased recovery costs and liability concerns for the targeted organization.

This article outlines active shooter incident preparedness and response strategies organizations can implement to better protect their properties and people on-site against this rising threat.

Preparedness Strategies

The best way to offer protection against active shooter incidents is to be proactive. As such, organizations should consider the following preparedness strategies in order to properly safeguard employees, customers and other applicable parties from these events:

- **Conduct a threat assessment.** Different organizations will possess varying exposures as they pertain to mass shootings. Make sure to perform a threat assessment to determine the probability of an active shooter incident on-site, identify related vulnerabilities and outline possible consequences. Conducting this assessment will provide further clarity on the specific preparedness measures necessary to minimize mass shooting exposures.
- **Implement security protocols.** Based on the results from the threat assessment, implement security protocols to help remedy active shooter incident vulnerabilities on-site and deter potential assailants. These protocols may include:
 - Setting up video surveillance
 - Installing alarm systems
 - Leveraging screening technology at property entrances (e.g., metal detectors)
 - Hiring security personnel
- **Establish a workplace violence prevention policy.** Taking a zero-tolerance approach to violence of any kind within the workplace can help prevent dangerous or threatening behaviors from escalating on-site and subsequently limit the risk of active shooter incidents occurring. A workplace violence prevention policy should:
 - Provide a statement of commitment from management to protect individuals from potential violence on-site.
 - Explain what constitutes violence and emphasize that such activity is prohibited.
 - Outline methods for identifying and reporting unacceptable behaviors on-site and confirm that employees will not face retaliation for doing so.

- Establish clear consequences employees may face if they perpetrate violence on-site.
- Offer ways for employees to protect themselves and others from harm amid violent incidents.
- Identify qualified internal and external parties who will be prepared to safely respond amid violent incidents (e.g., HR leaders, medical professionals and security personnel).
- Offer resources (e.g., crisis hotlines) to help employees safely manage mental health concerns or emotional stressors before they lead to violent incidents.
- **Educate employees.** In conjunction with the workplace violence prevention policy, employees should be trained on identifying and reporting potentially dangerous or threatening behaviors among their co-workers, customers and other applicable parties on-site. Although active shooter incidents can be unpredictable, these behaviors could serve as warning signs of potential upcoming incidents—making it critical to address them adequately. Such behaviors may include:
 - Abusing drugs or alcohol
 - Disregarding personal hygiene
 - Acting increasingly hostile, erratic, reckless or aggressive, particularly in response to perceived injustices or wrongdoings
 - Voicing personal struggles repeatedly (e.g., mental health concerns, relationship problems or financial difficulties)
 - Showing little interest in social interactions and distancing from others
 - Making threats or discussing violent intentions
 - Underperforming at work, violating organizational policies, skipping shifts or engaging in conflicts with co-workers (if applicable)
- **Monitor appropriate parties.** In addition to having employees do so, be sure to closely assess any individuals on-site for potentially dangerous or violent behaviors. Take any complaints or reports related to these behaviors seriously. Address such behaviors as quickly and safely as possible to prevent escalation. As it pertains to the workforce, ensure appropriate hiring processes (e.g., detailed applications, in-depth interviews and background checks) are in place to mitigate the likelihood of employing unsafe staff members.
- **Create an emergency action plan (EAP).** OSHA requires most employers to have documented EAPs outlining specific actions amid different workplace emergencies. The goal of any EAP is to mitigate losses when dangerous situations occur. An EAP should include a range of important information (e.g., employee roles and responsibilities, evacuation routes, post-evacuation assessments, reporting protocols, communication systems and emergency contact details) and be reviewed regularly to ensure effectiveness. Active shooter incidents should be explicitly addressed within an EAP. This portion of the EAP should be practiced regularly through active shooter drills and updated as needed.

Response Strategies

In addition to adopting sufficient active shooter incident preparedness measures, organizations should also utilize effective response strategies. These response strategies should be outlined within organizations' EAPs. There is a range of response strategies organizations can leverage. Different strategies may be more suitable for certain locations and industries than others. Organizations should conduct their own research to determine which response strategies make the most sense for their associated properties and operations. One of the most common active shooter incident response strategies is the "run, hide, fight" method. Through this method, organizations should train their employees to follow these steps during mass shootings:

- **Run**—Always be aware of the two nearest exits and have possible escape routes in mind. If an active shooter incident arises on-site, leave your belongings behind and try to evacuate as quickly as possible, regardless of whether others agree to follow you. If there is time, help others evacuate with you and prevent anyone from entering the premises. Once you a safe distance from the area, call 911.
- **Hide**—If you are unable to evacuate the premises, remain calm and try to hide in a secure location, as far away from the assailant(s) as possible (e.g., an enclosed office). Lock all doors and windows and close the blinds. Blockade entry points with heavy furniture, turn off any lights or equipment and silence your cellphone. Make as little noise as possible, stay low to the ground and conceal yourself behind large objects. Dial 911 only if it is safe to do so. Stay in this location unless a safe evacuation opportunity arises or an all-clear is issued by law enforcement on-site.
- **Fight**—If you cannot evacuate or hide from the assailant(s), attempt to disrupt or incapacitate them as a last resort. You can do so by acting as aggressively as possible, yelling, throwing items and improvising weapons.

Immediately after a mass shooting, organizations should conduct necessary post-event assessments and activities, such as:

- Accounting for all individuals on-site and identifying those who are potentially missing, injured or deceased

- Arranging for individuals in need to receive necessary medical attention and psychological counseling
- Working with HR leaders and law enforcement to determine how to notify the families of those affected by the incident (including those killed)
- Analyzing whether the incident resulted in any personnel or operational gaps on-site and taking steps to fill those gaps

In the weeks and months following active shooter incidents, organizations should carefully review incident details in post-event reports. These reports should outline which preparedness and response measures were effective and which require improvement, particularly as they relate to organizations' EAPs. From there, organizations should update their preparedness and response strategies (including their EAPs) as needed.

Conclusion

Overall, it's evident that organizations need to take steps to prepare for and respond to active shooter incidents. Doing so can help keep employees, customers and other applicable parties as safe as possible and minimize associated losses amid these incidents. Organizations should reach out to law enforcement for additional guidance on addressing active shooter incidents and work with legal counsel to discuss any applicable regulatory requirements regarding mass shooting preparedness and response tactics. For more risk management guidance, contact us today.

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