



**The Shootings at Columbine High School:
Responding to a New Kind of Terrorism
Sequel**

On the morning of April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire on their Columbine High School classmates, killing or mortally wounding twelve students and one teacher before committing suicide soon after. The attack shocked the world and devastated the Littleton, Colorado, community, where the victims' grieving classmates, families, and friends strove to understand the impetus behind the heinous act, and to make some sense of the tragedy.

For emergency responders, as well, the impact and consequences of the shootings continued to be felt long after the last SWAT team cleared the school that Tuesday night. Indeed, through no choice of their own, law enforcement and emergency medical personnel at Columbine had become players in a drama that would be replayed and analyzed for years to come. "We had absolutely no idea that the rest of the world was watching while we were on scene," says James Olsen, the Littleton Fire Department's paramedic captain. "It was just overwhelming later to learn the impact that it had across the country."

According to then JeffCo Public Information Officer Steve Davis—whose typical schedule in the days following the attack included arriving at Clement Park at 4:00 a.m. and not returning home until about midnight—300 to 500 reporters attended the hourly news conferences during the peak of the media response about four days after the shootings, and 75 to 90 satellite trucks filled the lot at Clement Park. Although the reporters and trucks gradually dispersed, Davis, who left the JeffCo Sheriff's Office during the summer of 2000 to take a new job, says life never returned to normal. "You can't leave the office in the evening when all the media in the whole world has your pager number and your cell phone number," recalls Davis, who began to be recognized by

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strangers on the street in different parts of the country due to his frequent television appearances. "Your weekend doesn't exist. I couldn't even mow my yard without my pager and my cell phone hooked on my shorts and making four or five phone calls while I was mowing." He adds: "It wasn't until the first year anniversary was over that I really could feel some difference. But even then, until the day I left, I was still only down to 50 or 60 percent of every working day being Columbine related."

In the immediate aftermath of the shootings, virtually all emergency response agencies involved held psychological debriefings for personnel, some beginning the night of April 20. "We were talking about details and how this is going to affect you," says Arapahoe Sheriff Patrick Sullivan. "How many of the bodies did you see? Which ones did you see? Were they girls or were they boys? What was the situation, and how is that going to affect you mentally?" Even many emergency personnel who didn't take part in the response needed counseling of some sort, according to Wayne Zygowicz, Littleton Fire's division chief for emergency medical services, because of a combination of guilt, jealousy, and stress at having been excluded from what for many was a life-altering event.

While the debriefings were helpful, though, responders say, reactions within the community made it significantly harder for emergency personnel to come to terms with their Columbine experiences. Within days of the shootings, criticisms emerged regarding not only the law enforcement response, but also the alleged failure on the part of the school and the JeffCo Sheriff's Office to pick up on warning signs that Harris and Klebold were planning a violent attack. In particular, some critics rebuked the Sheriff's Office for failing to act on a March 1998 complaint that Eric Harris's website included a threat to kill a fellow Columbine student, and that it indicated Harris and Klebold were building pipe bombs.¹ Although Randy and Judy Brown, the parents of the student in question, brought the website threat to the attention of the Sheriff's Office, they say, deputies never followed through with a formal investigation.

John Stone was not yet sheriff when the Browns filed their original complaint about the website, but he was not exempt from criticism. In addition to his impromptu and inaccurate estimate the day of the shootings of "up to 25 dead," Stone made several remarks during the investigation that colleagues termed unprofessional, such as speculating openly about possible accomplices to the attack, and publicly identifying a friend of Harris and Klebold as a suspect.² In the late fall of 1999, Stone compounded these missteps by granting exclusive interviews to *TIME* magazine, and allowing a reporter to review three hours of videotapes made by Harris and Klebold that had not been released in their entirety to anyone outside of the investigation.

¹ Harris and Klebold had been arrested for breaking into a van in January 1998, but charges were dropped after they successfully completed a court-ordered diversion program.

² Ironically, the friend mentioned by Stone as a possible accomplice was Brooks Brown, the same student whom Harris had earlier threatened on his website.

Stone claims *TIME* agreed in advance that the tapes were for background use only. In any event, they became the centerpiece of a 32-page special report published in December 1999 that also included a soon infamous photo of Stone and Undersheriff John Dunaway holding three of the actual murder weapons in their gloved hands. The unexpected appearance of the article just days before the Christmas holiday was a particular blow to relatives of Columbine victims. As one police official said: "To allow *TIME* magazine to view that stuff, and to do the interviews they did with them, and to pose for the pictures, just re-victimized those families."³

Due to the fallout from the article, the JeffCo Sheriff's Office postponed indefinitely an awards ceremony planned for mid-December 1999 to honor its SWAT members and other Columbine responders.⁴ The cancellation troubled some officers, who claimed that a medal or award would have provided a much-needed symbol of the agency's support in the face of outside criticism. Sheriff Stone, however, who says a low-key ceremony was to be rescheduled, insists that the Sheriff's Office was fully behind its people, and that the problem lay instead in how the press and a small but vocal segment of the community had presented and reacted to the event. "At some point, it would be nice to sit and look at a paper and not have your name in it in a negative fashion," says Sheriff Stone. "Because we didn't kill those kids. None of our people did. We did the best we could under impossible conditions to try to rectify the situation as quickly and as safely as we could, but we're not miracle makers."

In the months after the attack, some victims' families pushed for an official examination and investigation of the law enforcement response. In September 1999, five months after the shootings, Colorado Governor Bill Owens appointed the Governor's Columbine Review Commission. Both the governor and commission head Judge William Erickson made it clear, however, that the purpose of the 14-member commission was not to judge what had occurred, but to uncover lessons learned from the tragedy, and to make public policy recommendations regarding school safety and domestic terrorism responses.

Instead, a separate forum for scrutinizing the law enforcement response emerged: the courts. In Colorado, plaintiffs had to file a notice of intent to sue within 180 days of an event. Although the JeffCo Sheriff's Office still hadn't released its official report by October 1999, and many relatives of victims wanted to see the report before deciding whether to bring legal action, twenty families filed notices of intent to sue that month in order to keep their options open. By September 2000, the number of actual suits had settled at 14, based on claims of negligence, wrongful death, and personal injury.⁵

³ In Stone's defense, former PIO Steve Davis says that *TIME*'s reporter consistently misled the Sheriff's Office about the focus of his article, insisting it would describe how responders and the community had rallied after the tragedy.

⁴ Arapahoe, Denver, Arvada, and other jurisdictions had all held ceremonies within a few weeks of the attack.

⁵ Although five of the lawsuits originally were filed in Jefferson County District Court, they were transferred to US District Court, where the other lawsuits had been filed, at the request of several defendants, including the JeffCo Sheriff's Office.

The suits charged, among other things, that the JeffCo Sheriff's Office failed to properly investigate and act on Harris's website threats, and did not respond aggressively enough to the Columbine attack by immediately sending deputies into the school after the shooters; that Dave Sanders died because officials didn't rescue him promptly or allow others to do so; that the parents of Harris and Klebold could have prevented the massacre, but failed to monitor their sons' actions appropriately; that the 911 dispatcher gave bad advice to teacher Patti Nielson when she told her to keep students in the library, rather than to seek escape through an emergency exit; that school officials, including Principal Frank DeAngelis, knew Harris and Klebold had violent tendencies as evidenced by their writings, videos, and other schoolwork, yet did nothing to intervene; and even that one victim, Daniel Rohrbough, was killed by a deputy's bullets, rather than by shots fired by Harris or Klebold.

Meanwhile, in May 2000, more than a year after the incident, the JeffCo Sheriff's Office finally had issued its long-awaited report. The largely uncritical document, which some critics insisted left many questions unanswered, joined other materials that the courts had already ordered be made available, including a ballistics report; cafeteria surveillance tapes; a controversial Littleton Fire Department training video, that included video images of the Columbine response set to music; and 45 hours of 911 and dispatch audio tapes recorded during the shootings.⁶

Critiquing the Emergency Response

The criticisms and lawsuits in the wake of the Columbine attack caught many responders unprepared. Some individuals felt both bitter and mystified to be facing the threat of legal action after having risked so much and tried so hard. Others, however, say they understood why families of victims, in particular, felt compelled to assail the emergency response, the school, and even the parents of the killers. "The victims in these cases need somebody to be mad at," says Golden Police Department Chief Russell Cook. "They can't be mad at the suspects; the suspects are dead." He adds: "If they could put somebody on trial and bring them to justice, it might be different, but they can't."

To be sure, there were aspects of the response that even those involved were quick to condemn. Most of the agencies concerned had conducted their own post mortems, scrutinizing actions and results in order to improve future operations. Certain obvious problems stood out, such as the incompatibility of communications systems among different agencies, and the fact that responders didn't have immediate access to current maps. The most critical press coverage, however, and many of the lawsuits focused not on these logistical issues, but on three specific complaints: that deputies did not attempt to enter the school before SWAT arrived; that it took SWAT more than two-and-a-half hours, once deployed, to reach Dave Sanders, and even longer to

⁶ Families of victims had sought the release of the materials, in part to prepare lawsuits against the Sheriff's Office and other defendants.

find the victims in the library; and that the chaos at the scene may have impeded the emergency response.

Central to much of the criticism was the charge that law enforcement was simply too risk-averse in the first minutes of the attack. If sheriff's deputies had followed Harris and Klebold into the school and engaged them in a firefight when they were first spotted, some critics said, the killing might have been stopped right then. Members of the law enforcement community, however, almost uniformly dismiss that contention. Given that the first JeffCo deputies on the scene, Neil Gardner and Paul Smoker, had no idea how many shooters they faced, they say, and given that they were completely outgunned, a pursuit across the open space and into the school would almost certainly have been suicidal. As Arvada Police Chief Ron Sloan puts it, the only likely result of this kind of "tombstone courage" would have been "two dead deputies lying there." He adds: "You see a situation like that, the bad guys are shooting at you, they know you're there, normally that stabilizes it. Then you can go into a negotiation mode. It makes all the sense in the world to do what they did. What didn't make sense was what Harris and Klebold did after that."

Sloan and some other officials also believe that although the initial brief shootout didn't stop Harris and Klebold, it may have hastened the end of the tragic incident. "I'm not so sure but that the very fact that Neil Gardner exchanged fire with Klebold and Harris right there at the beginning didn't alter that whole event," Sloan says. "The frantic nature of the killing that they did do after that may have been very limited because of the engagement of those guys so soon."

Condemnation of the length of time it took SWAT to reach Dave Sanders was even harder for many responders to hear. It was easy for those on the outside to be judgmental, JeffCo SWAT member A.J. DeAndrea says, given that it was later discovered that Harris and Klebold, in fact, posed no threat at all to SWAT members once they entered, since the gunmen were already dead, and since there were no bombs timed to go off after their entry. At the time, however, responders note, every decision made was influenced by the expectation that the gunmen were alive and preparing to attack at any moment. "Had there been a shooter in one of those other rooms, with hostages, and had SWAT teams rushed past them to get to one area or another, you could have had ten more kids killed," notes Arvada's Sloan. Adds DeAndrea: "I struggled with this over and over again. Do I forego the 60 students [off the choir room] to take my five guys to try and find Dave Sanders? Or the 30 over here, or the 30 over there? Do you live with yourself if they make an assault on this room because they're still mobile inside the school? I don't know."

Finally, some observers criticized the JeffCo Sheriff's Office for not making better use of incident command. On this point, a number of responders present that day agree. Yet while the management of the event could have been improved, they say, none suggest that mistakes made were responsible for the death of teacher Dave Sanders, or any other individual. "[Harris and Klebold] were fairly committed to what they were doing, to the point where they gave their lives up in the end, and when you have somebody who is that determined, it's like any terrorist

activity—it's very difficult to stop," says JeffCo SWAT sniper Daryl Hoffman. "You can hopefully lessen the amount of damage that they do, but you can't stop them."

In addition, most responders insist that many good things that occurred that day have gone unrecognized. "I can suggest two things that people forget," says former Captain Robert Armstrong of Arapahoe, who later left to become an agent with the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. "Of all the children that were injured, not one died that we got out. Number two, not one child, teacher, parent, or anybody else was injured with friendly fire." Adds Chris Mikesell, one of two deans of students at the time: "I never saw anyone that day who was not focused on what they were trying to do, who wasn't trying to help, who was not trying—as quickly as possible and as efficiently as possible with what we had to work with and with what we knew—to do the best possible job that they could."

Instituting Lessons Learned

In the wake of the Columbine shootings, regional emergency response agencies introduced a number of significant changes, in some cases proposing new solutions to problems, and in other cases pushing through ideas that had been stalled for years. The new initiatives weren't just geared toward Columbine-like incidents, law enforcement leaders say, but toward an overall improved emergency response.

Certain of the changes were easier to institute than others. Within weeks of the attack, for example, emergency responders had obtained detailed, up-to-date maps of the schools—and in some cases, the major businesses—in their jurisdictions. Littleton Fire Department Paramedic Captain James Olsen took the mapping idea one step further, designing a pre-incident plan on CD-ROM for laptop use.⁷ The CD included not only written descriptions of such details as the location of school keys, alarm systems, and gas shutoffs for each school, but also visual images allowing responders to "walk through" key areas of a building. A police officer, for example, could view on screen what it was like to go down a hallway, open a control panel, and push the button that would turn off a designated sprinkler system. To further familiarize themselves with the schools, some SWAT teams began regularly training in all secondary schools in their areas.

Inter-jurisdictional communication, an obvious obstacle at Columbine, was another area that received scrutiny in the months after the attack, as agencies considered a mix of approaches. As part of a state and federal demonstration project, the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office began testing a communications system called the TRP 1000, a Multiple Agency Radio Communications Interoperability System that allowed radios of different types and frequencies to talk to each other. The Littleton Fire Department, meanwhile, had begun to gather information from other regional

⁷ Littleton Fire's software was based on software developed by the Department of Emergency Management in Pierce County, Washington. While the CD-ROM technology itself was inexpensive, Olsen says, a laptop sturdy enough to use in the field averaged \$4,000.

fire departments in order to compile a database of available radio systems and channels.⁸ This data, Fire Chief William Pessemier says, would allow response agencies with compatible systems to meet ahead of time and designate specific channels for emergency response functions, such as incident command, emergency medical, and staging. What was most needed, though, many officials agreed, was a regional, or even national, approach to radio communications – one ensuring that agencies involved in a multi-jurisdictional response would have compatible systems and the training necessary to coordinate communications in a time of crisis.

More difficult to address were certain tactical changes. According to Arapahoe Sheriff Patrick Sullivan, the attack on Columbine was a “wakeup call” for law enforcement, spurring it to reduce its reliance on SWAT, and to give its regular uniformed officers more sophisticated weapons and training. Those agencies in the area that had not already done so began providing semi-automatic long rifles to all their officers and deputies – including school resource officers – to avoid future lopsided exchanges such as the gunfight between JeffCo Deputy Neil Gardner and Eric Harris.⁹ “There’s been such a trend to go to this community-oriented policing, the softer police department, the softer approach,” says SWAT member A.J. DeAndrea, “which has hurt law enforcement when you go up against a hardcore criminal.”

To accompany the upgrade in firepower, most departments instituted one of two new kinds of response training – RAID, or Rapid and Immediate Deployment, or TNT, or Tactical Neutralization Teams – both with the goal of getting uniformed officers into a building without having to await the arrival of SWAT. Simply put, the training would teach first responders to a scene who encountered gunfire to operate as a team – somewhat like a modified SWAT team – and to attempt an immediate entry and termination of threat, instead of simply securing the area. According to Chief Russell Cook, RAID training would be one of the Golden Police Department’s top budget priorities in 2001. “It reinforces incident command, it gets us critiquing tactical operations better, it prepares us so we don’t feel our hands are tied waiting for SWAT,” Cook says. “And it reinforces that our basic mission is to protect the public.”

While most agencies had launched the training, though, some officials viewed the new approaches with “healthy skepticism,” as Arvada’s Chief Ron Sloan puts it. “When you’re talking about tactics that take some precision of execution, so that you’re not shooting each other, so that you’re not getting into crossfires, so that you know what the other guy’s going to do when you go into a building, that takes constant training,” Sloan says. “We don’t have the resources to do that. No police agency does.” Adds Arapahoe SWAT commander Bruce Williamson: “There will probably come a day when [these new tactics] will be tested, and somebody’s going to get hurt or killed, and they’re probably going to say it’s because the cops entered too fast. So what do you do? You just do the best you can with the information and circumstances you have at the time.”

⁸ Littleton planned to extend the database to include law enforcement agencies in the near future.

⁹ Most school resource officers, however, did not carry the long rifles in the schools, but stored them in their cars.

Bomb squad and emergency medical responses were also affected. Deputy Inspector Joe Dempsey, bomb squad leader for the Arapahoe Sheriff's Office, says the shootings at Columbine demonstrated the importance of involving bomb experts in early tactical decisions. Had bomb technicians deployed along with Lieutenant Terry Manwaring's SWAT team, for example, Dempsey says, they could have told Manwaring that the bombs obstructing the emergency exit from the library posed no risk as long as they weren't moved. "One of the things we talked about afterwards," Dempsey says, was, 'Hey, guys, if you have a device and you want to get around it, or you want us to just look at it and tell you it's OK, we're there.'"¹⁰

Littleton Fire, meanwhile, won federal funding to train 15 paramedics as special SWAT paramedics, who could deploy along with a tactical team and provide medical attention both to injured team members and to other victims encountered during the course of an operation.¹¹ The SWAT paramedics had begun training with the Littleton Police SWAT team, and had initiated discussions with JeffCo's SWAT team as well. "The relationship between us and the Littleton Police and the Jefferson County Sheriff is tremendous now," says Fire Chief Pessemier, "probably as a result not only of Columbine, but the changes that we've tried to make as a result of that."

Overall, law enforcement and emergency response agencies in the area had engaged in an increased number of inter-jurisdictional emergency exercises in the wake of Columbine, as well as sought out training in incident command. Even so, Sloan admits, there still weren't enough opportunities to interact. "Even after Columbine," he says, "everybody's busy, everybody's got staffing constraints. So you don't see as much of that as you would hope." Nevertheless, developments such as the inter-agency training of SWAT paramedics and the exchange of information for the CD-ROM pre-plan had made a difference. "I wish we had had the relationship then that we have now with the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, and the Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office, and the Littleton Police," says Littleton Fire's Chuck Burdick. "We now know them all on a first-name basis."

At Columbine High School, meanwhile, security was clearly tighter than before. Although the school hadn't resorted to overt security measures, such as installing metal detectors, or limiting access to only one door, visitors to the school had to sign in at the office just inside the main entrance, wear a visitor's tag, and wait for an official escort. The bigger change, though, both school and law enforcement representatives say, was the widespread realization that something as heinous as the attack on Columbine could happen—not only in a place like Littleton, Colorado—but anywhere. "Once the unthinkable happens, then it's not the unthinkable anymore," says Arvada's Chief Sloan. "There's somebody else out there who's just sick enough, or just twisted

¹⁰ Although bomb squad members weren't wearing tactical vests, Dempsey says, they were willing to deploy, even in an active shooter situation.

¹¹ While SWAT paramedics in some parts of the country carried guns, Littleton chose to keep its paramedics unarmed.

enough, or in need of attention in their lives, who is going to say, 'Well, if they did it, I can do it, too.'"

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