

## **Preparing Employees for an Active Shooter Event**

by Julie Quinn, Weights & Measures Director, MN Commerce Department

If you think active shooter incidents happen mainly in schools and colleges, think again. According to the raw data in an FBI report on active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2016<sup>i</sup>, forty-three percent of active shooter incidents (94 out of 219) occurred in commercial locations, including grocery stores, malls, parking lots, shipping locations, and manufacturing and distribution locations. Another thirteen percent (29) happened in open spaces like highways and city streets. And eleven percent (23) more happened on government property. If your organization is one of those types of locations, or if your employees work off-site at any of those types of locations, then part of your safety program should include preparing employees to react to a possible active shooter event.

Why? Because in the event of a real attack, each employee is going to have to make their own decision how to respond. If you haven't trained them, they may not have the knowledge or tools to know what to do. This article is intended to familiarize you with one of the most common approaches to preparing employees for an active shooter event and is for informational purposes only. Your organization will need to determine its own approach and protocols for responding to an active shooter event.

### **Run-Hide-Fight**

Run-hide-fight is the method recommended by both the FBI and the US Department of Homeland Security for active shooter situations. You can find free run-hide-fight training materials from both agencies on their websites:

<https://www.fbi.gov/about/partnerships/office-of-partner-engagement/active-shooter-resources/responding-to-an-active-shooter-crisis-situation>

[https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/active\\_shooter\\_pocket\\_card\\_508.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/active_shooter_pocket_card_508.pdf)

There are also many privately-produced run-hide-fight videos, articles and training materials available on the internet and from private training companies. Unfortunately, most of these materials do not address the "freeze response" people experience in the face of unexpected violence. Nor do most of them address the specific needs of employees working off-site such as inspectors, service agents and technicians.

Whichever training approach you choose, make sure to customize the basic concepts of run-hide-fight to the particulars of your organization. Customized training can help employees overcome the freeze response that would otherwise leave them rooted in place. It can also prepare them to know where to run or hide, or even how to fight if they must. Failing to train employees can leave them struggling to find escape routes, hiding places, and improvised weapons amid chaos, pandemonium, and fear. Or worse yet, it can leave them standing like deer-in-the-headlights while looking down the barrel of an armed intruder's gun.

## **Our Brains are Hardwired to Freeze First**

According to NYU professor and director of The Emotional Brain institute, Dr. Joseph LeDoux, our brains are not wired to run-hide-fight. Instead they have evolved to freeze first, then to flee or fight. In fact, most animals are hardwired to automatically freeze in the presence of an external threat. This involuntary behavior arises out of the oldest part of our brains known as the amygdala, and is found in humans, other mammals, vertebrates, and even some non-vertebrates like flies. Freezing is a survival mechanism. We are less likely to be seen by a predator who is far away, and less likely to trigger an attack response by one who is close by. It also gives the amygdala time to release hormones to help mobilize our bodies and focus our attention to hide, flee or fight as the situation demands. But in some people, the freeze response is so strong that they literally cannot move long after the people around them have fled or taken cover.

Studies have shown that shutting down a key sub region on a rat's amygdala allows it to overcome the impulse to freeze. Studies on humans have shown that cognitively reappraising a situation can have the same effect. Dr. LeDoux believes people can overcome the freeze response if they can "cognitively reappraise a situation." He advocates training people to "reappraise the freezing that occurs in dangerous situations" and to recognize freezing as the first step in responding to a threat. Learning to expect the freeze response can reduce the added fear of finding ourselves frozen so that we can "accelerate our ability to shift into the action mode required for 'run, hide, fight.'"

Once in action mode, we can use the rest of our training to take the steps appropriate to our circumstances.

## **Plan Escape Routes**

For run-hide-fight to be an effective strategy, you must ensure that employees have safe escape routes, and hiding places.

Often the escape routes employees would use for an active shooter situation are the same routes they would use for a fire or other emergency evacuations. The difference is that employees should meet at a designated spot for a fire evacuation, but they should be trained not to congregate outside in an active shooter situation. A group of people huddled together is an easy target. Train employees to keep running in as many different directions as possible once outside the building, using cars, trees, fences, and whatever else is available for cover as they go. If they must cross a wide-open area, teach them to zigzag erratically as they run to make it harder for the shooter to draw a bead on them. Make sure to teach them to leave everything behind except their cellphones, and to put their cell phones in their pockets as they run. They should have their hands out in the open as they flee with absolutely nothing in them. When police arrive on the scene, they will not know who the shooter is, and they will first suspect anyone running in the area with objects in their hands. In the heat of the moment, a cell phone might be mistaken for a gun.

Besides training employees on what escape routes are available to them, employers have a responsibility to ensure that escape routes are kept clear and free of tripping hazards and other dangers.

Locked exterior doors should be able to be opened easily from the inside without a key in case of either fires or armed intruders. In an ideal world, all rooms would have at least two avenues of escape in case one of them is blocked. If it is not possible to provide two avenues of escape for everyone, the rooms should be designed as safe rooms; and employees will need to be trained to hide in place and prepare to defend themselves.

### **Provide Safe Rooms**

What if some of the rooms in your building are 'cubicle farms?' Or an open factory floor, warehouse, or loading dock? Search the internet for cubicle defense and you find a series of articles and ads on how to keep people from stealing your office supplies, lunch, and other personal belongings, but little if anything on active shooters or armed intruders. That's because cubicles and similar locations don't make good places to hide in armed intruder situations. They provide cover, but they can't be secured against an active shooter. The spaces they provide for hiding (typically under the desk, and behind machines or shelves) put employees in a physical position where it would be hard to defend themselves if the shooter finds them. For that reason, employees working in those spaces should be trained to use the cover available to move to designated safe rooms if they can.

A designated safe room is not necessarily a bullet proof room. It is a nearby room that can be easily secured against an intruder, thereby buying employees time to contact 911 and to plan their defense in case the room is breached. The door should be able to be locked. Windows should be frosted or have blinds which can be closed so that an intruder cannot see into the room when the lights are turned off. Windows should not be positioned in such a way that breaking them would allow the intruder to unlock the door.

The National Association of State Fire Marshals and the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission have developed recommendations for lock hardware for classrooms and other safe rooms:

1. Hardware must be lockable from inside the classroom without opening the door to minimize exposure by inserting a key in the cylinder of the inside lever
2. Give emergency responders access from the outside of the classroom, either by using a key or some other credential
3. Egress without a key, tool, special knowledge or effort and only one operation to unlatch the door
4. Operable hardware should be mounted between 34 inches and 48 inches above the floor
5. No tight grasping or twisting of the wrist to operate
6. If a classroom door is fire rated, the door must be self-closing and self-latching and may not be modified in a way that invalidates the fire rating

Train employees in areas like cubicles, factory floors, and warehouses to move quickly and quietly, using whatever cover is available to get to the designated safe room without detection. They should also leave everything but their cell phones behind, and they should keep their hands free. It is very important for employees to know who is going where based on their normal work stations. Once a group reaches

their designated safe room, they will lock the door and not open it again until emergency responders have given the all clear. Anyone left behind will be locked out and left at risk.

Once inside the safe room, employees should stay low, disperse through the room, and keep quiet, but they should not necessarily huddle under furniture and hide. The purpose of the safe room is to give them additional cover so that they can take additional steps to protect themselves. Some employees should be turning off the lights and closing blinds. Others should be building a barrier in front of the door to slow down the intruder if he manages to get it unlocked. Someone else should be contacting 911; and everyone should be planning how they would defend themselves if the shooter gets through both the door and the barrier.

### **Contact 911: Text or Call?**

The preferred way to contact 911 is always by voice call. But in some situations, speaking on a cell phone may draw a shooter towards an employee's hiding place. Especially if the employee has not made it to a safe room and is hunkering in a cubicle or behind furniture or equipment. In that case, texting 911 would be the better option if it is available in your local area. When planning your armed intruder response and training, you should check with the FCC to see if your local first responders have text-to-911 capabilities. The FCC list can be found at [www.fcc.gov/file/12285/download](http://www.fcc.gov/file/12285/download). Check back regularly if your area is not currently listed as new jurisdictions are continuously coming on line, and the list is updated monthly.

Whether they are calling or texting, employees should be trained to expect that 911 and emergency responders will ask for the following information:

- Location of the active shooter
- Number of shooters
- Physical description of shooters
- Number and type of weapons held by shooters
- Number of potential victims at the location

### **Decide When to Fight**

Unless your employees are trained police or security staff, no one should expect them to hunt down and disarm an active shooter. You also don't want to give them the message that defending anyone else is part of their job description or your expectations. But you should be giving them the message that they are legally entitled to defend their own lives when they are directly threatened by an active shooter.

Experts have broken into two camps debating whether run-hide-fight should be taught as a sequential series of actions or a set of equally valid options to be chosen based on specific circumstances:

Run if you can. Hide if you can't run. Fight only if you have no other choice.

vs.

Run when it is safe to run. **Or** hide where it is safe to hide. **Or** fight if you have no other option.

Those who argue against training run-hide-fight as a sequence argue that some employees may be in a situation where their only option is to fight. Teaching them that they must try to run or hide first costs them precious time and puts them in a victim's mindset which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to successfully defend themselves.

It is up to your agency to decide under what conditions you want to encourage your employees to fight back. But if the conditions are met and the decision to fight has been made, they should know that evidence shows it is possible for them to succeed even if they are not armed.

In the 2017 FBI report, only two percent of the incidents (5 of 219) ended with the active shooter being shot or subdued by an armed bystander. In comparison, ten percent of the incidents (23) ended with the active shooter being restrained by unarmed bystanders. Active shooters may be armed, but they are not necessarily brave. Thirty-seven percent (82) committed suicide when met with active resistance from police or bystanders.

### **Run a Drill**

Once you have identified your escape routes and designated safe rooms, completed and planned your policy, and trained your on-site workers, it is a good idea to periodically run an active shooter drill in the same way you might periodically run a fire drill. As with a fire drill, local police and emergency responders are often willing to help plan and execute a drill. There are also numerous private security consultants available. The American Red Cross provides a comprehensive checklist for how to prepare and execute an active shooter drill on their website: <https://www.readyrating.org/Resource-Center/Active-Shooter/How-to-Conduct-a-Drill>.

### **Prepare Your Off-site Workers**

Don't forget your off-site workers. According to the FBI data in almost forty-four percent of the reported cases (96 out of 219), the shooters had an unknown relationship with the business; and in almost thirty-five percent of the cases (76), the shooters were employees or ex-employees, partners or ex-partners of employees, or friends or relatives of employees. In a perfect world, all businesses would have effective security to keep unauthorized personnel from accessing their buildings, and effective workplace violence prevention programs. Unfortunately, you can't count on that being the case. And many agencies do not have the luxury of being able to decide that they will not send employees to locations which don't have those safeguards in place.

Inspectors, service agents, and sales staff work in so many different locations that it would not be reasonable for your organization to formulate an active shooter response plan for each site. Instead, it makes sense to train your staff to formulate that plan for themselves as part of their pre-work hazard assessment. They can start by simply asking if the location has an active shooter plan which they should be aware of. If not, some of the questions they are already asking when they first arrive on site may help them create their own plan:

- If they already ask about fire escape routes, then they will know the routes they can use to escape an active shooter.
- If they already ask about storm shelters, they can follow-up with a question asking whether the storm shelter is also a designated safe room, and if there are other safe rooms available on-site.
- If they already ask about the locations of restrooms and locker/shower rooms, they should physically examine the spaces to see if they can be locked from the inside to serve as a safe room in a pinch.

You can also train them to make a note of any cover available in their workspace, especially if they are working in open areas like gas stations, public areas of retail establishments, loading docks, etc. Are there other buildings nearby? Or natural features like windbreaks, woods, or ditches? Don't forget to ask them to identify hazards to avoid during gunfire such as compressed gas cylinders, propane tanks and gas pumps.

Teach them also to pay attention to the actions and behavior of the people around them. In the age of conceal-and-carry, it is impossible for your employees to know for certain who is carrying a gun, and who is not. Providing verbal de-escalation training may be a good idea. A verbal de-escalation course based on the OODA loop (Observe, Orientation, Decision and Action) will not only teach employees effective ways to control their interactions with angry and aggressive people, but more importantly, it will teach them to recognize when they should make the decision to remove themselves from the situation and call for help. And in a worst-case scenario, when running or hiding isn't a possibility, and the will or the means to fight is not available, evidence shows that talking can be successful. In two of the reported FBI cases, school officials talked a shooter into putting the gun down.

### **No One Has to Die**

There were no fatalities in nearly twenty-two percent (48 of 219) of the reported FBI active shooter cases. So, while it is still extremely likely that there will be at least one fatality in any active shooter situation, there is still almost a one-in-four chance that everyone in your organization will come out alive.

Ultimately each person is responsible for their own safety behavior, especially in an active shooter situation. No employer can make the split-second decision on what any given employee's best course of action will be. There are risks involved in running, hiding or fighting. The employee is going to be the one optimally situated to decide which option is best for them at that moment. But management, the safety committee, and the entire organization has a key role in reducing the chance of an active shooter event and ensuring that everyone has the knowledge to choose a good response by:

- Restricting access to buildings
- Establishing workplace violence prevention programs
- Evaluating worksites
- Planning escape routes and safe rooms
- Keeping escape routes clean and safe

- Communicating all aspects of their active shooter program
- Training all employees about the freeze response and run-hide-fight
- Training off-site workers how to evaluate their work sites and form their own response plans
- Training workers on verbal de-escalation, and when to disengage and call for help
- Participating fully in training and communicating safety concerns

Nobody can guarantee that your organization will never experience an active shooter situation, but if you all work together, you can increase the odds that everyone will survive.

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Active Shooter Incidents in the United States from 2000-2016*, [https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/activeshooter\\_incidents\\_2001-2016.pdf/view](https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/activeshooter_incidents_2001-2016.pdf/view) (October 3, 2017).

<sup>ii</sup> Joseph LeDoux, "'Run, Hide, Fight' Is Not How Our Brains Work," *The New York Times*, Dec. 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/opinion/sunday/run-hide-fight-is-not-how-our-brains-work.html>.

<sup>iii</sup> Amy Rock, *Best Practices for Securing Classroom Doors from the Inside*, Campus Safety, <https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/safety/securing-classroom-doors-nasfm/> (February 10, 2018).

<sup>iv</sup> FCC Consumer Guide, *Text-to-911: What You Need to Know*, <https://transition.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/text-to-911-consumer-guide.pdf> (April 25, 2017).

<sup>v</sup> Department of Homeland Security, *Active Shooter Pocket Card*, [https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/active\\_shooter\\_pocket\\_card\\_508.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/active_shooter_pocket_card_508.pdf).

<sup>vi</sup> Mike Wood, *Why 'Run, Hide, Fight' is Flawed*, Police One, <https://www.policeone.com/active-shooter/articles/190621006-Why-Run-Hide-Fight-is-flawed/> (June 15, 2016).

<sup>vii</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, "*Active Shooter Incidents in the United States from 2000-2016*".

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Scott Taylor CPP, *Verbal De-Escalation Techniques That Actually Work*, Security Solutions, <http://www.securitysolutionsmagazine.biz/2014/08/20/verbal-de-escalation-techniques-that-actually-work/> (August 20, 2014).

<sup>x</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, "*Active Shooter Incidents in the United States from 2000-2016*".

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.