

Special training aims to prepare people for active shooters

By Sara Samora | The Herald-Zeitung Sep 5, 2019

He had attendees close their eyes and picture where they entered Calvary Baptist Church.

With their eyes still closed, he told them to point to their nearest exit.

Hays County Sheriff's Office Captain David Burns' point was clear.

If the active shooter entered the building the same way — they needed to find another way out.

This is all part of a program called "Avoid, Deny, Defend," which is included in a course called the Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events.

This activity was to teach them to be aware of their surroundings, and to know the escape routes in the case of disaster like a fire, or an active shooter.

Courses to survive

These courses and programs are part of the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training, formed in a partnership between Texas State University, the San Marcos Police Department, and the Hays County Sheriff's Office in 2002, as a way to train first responders in the event of an active shooter.

Since its establishment, the center has trained more than 130,000 law enforcement officers in the United States, D.C., and U.S. Territories.

In 2004, the ALERRT Center formed CRASE, as many schools, businesses and communities began looking to law enforcement on what they should do in case of a mass shooting situation.

The FBI has teamed up with the center in 2013 after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut.

Definitions

The ALERRT Center defines an active shooter event as "one or more persons engaged in killing or attempting to kill multiple people in an area occupied by multiple unrelated individuals."

While the federal government and organizations have various definitions, Pete Blair, executive director of the ALERRT Center, said there is a difference between an active shooter versus a mass shooter.

"One of the things that separates the active shooter designation from other definitions is there isn't a requirement that a certain number of people be shot or killed," Blair said.

In other words, there's a difference where someone plans and goes to a location with the intent to kill people as opposed to a bank robbery gone wrong

"That's a different kind of situation, so that's kind of how we approach things differently with the definitions," Blair said.

Avoid. Deny.

Defend.

The CRASE training uses the "Avoid, Deny, Defend" program, and recommends civilians use it over the Department of Homeland Security's "Run, Hide, Fight."

On Aug. 28, Burns made his presentation at Calvary Baptist Church because one of his coworkers is a member.

"We're not the first responders," Burns told the attendees. "You're the first responders, because you are the ones who are at the active shooter scene before law enforcement arrives."

When it comes to ADD, he said in this case, words matter.

According to the center's website, ADD is used because it is more in line with human resources and educational standards.

“They believe that ‘Avoid’ is a more palatable word than ‘Run,’ because ‘Run’ disenfranchises those who are unable to physically run,” the site said. “‘Deny,’ as in denying access to your location, is a stronger word than ‘Hide.’ And while ‘Fight’ is an action that is forbidden on most school campuses, ‘Defend’ is a last resort safeguard, a right and an opportunity to guard against life threatening action.”

With “Avoid,” civilians must be aware of their surroundings and the situation and have an exit plan. They must move away from the active shooter as possible.

With “Deny,” the strategy tells people to deny access or opportunities to the active shooter. They suggest keeping distance between them and the shooter or create barriers. If a person is in the part of the building where there is no exit and the shooter is nearby, the strategy tells people to turn off the lights, lock a door if possible, and/or move heavy furniture or objects to keep the shooter from entering.

“Defend” is a last resort. If people cannot avoid or deny, then they must be prepared to defend themselves.

Blair said this is a fight that needn’t be fair.

“If you find yourself in close proximity to that person, when you can't avoid or deny access to, you’re trying to turn it into a wrestling match instead of a shooting one,” Blair said.

Burns went over the defend strategy, assigning people who sat on the aisles as the ones who must think fast and somehow stop the active

shooter, while the rest of the people make their way out of the building.

When it comes to defend, people must think about what they can do or grab to stop the active shooter, especially if law enforcement has not yet arrived after 911 has been called.

Stress levels and response

Burns also went over stress levels and the responses outlined by Amanda Ripley's book on disaster survival.

The first, "Denial," is where a person is calmed, and sees an event as an everyday part of life, or normalcy bias.

The example used in this case is the World Trade Center on 9/11 as an example. People who worked on floors closer to the ground took their time to evacuate. During that time, they gathered their things or spoke about what was going on when the planes hit the towers.

Had the planes been closer to their floors, or had the fire spread rapidly, they would not have been so lucky.

When they finally evacuated, they didn't panic or ran to the exits.

The second one, "Deliberation," is when a person has to decide on what to do.

Without pre-existing plans, then this would cause stress throughout the person's body, affecting their abilities to receive information, as well as form a plan.

With stress, heartbeats vary per minute. The higher the stress, the number of beats increases, which may make it hard for people to make decisions.

Finally, the "Decisive" moment. Once a decision has been made, it must be executed quickly, or the person could be injured or killed.

When one carries, know how to use it

When it comes to the question of those carrying a firearm and a license to carry, Burns said having a license is not enough.

While Burns said he is one of the biggest Second Amendment advocates, having a gun license is not enough if people are not keeping up with the training. Shooting at a piece of paper in place is not the same as a moving target.

Then there is the type of training.

"There has been a lot of studies that have gone out right now and obviously, it's really hard, especially for civilians, to find a realistic type of training," Burns said. "Law enforcement has gone from not having any type of reality based training to where almost everything we do now is reality based, and I think that's made us better for it."

Burns said people should put themselves into those situational scenarios and trying to incorporate all of the five senses. What it smells like, what they seen, what they're hearing and feeling and try to incorporate that into their visualizations.

"You can you can do a lot on firearms training," Burns said. "But I'm a big proponent of 80% dry fire, 20% live fire."

Dry fire is pulling the trigger sans ammunition, and basically getting to know the technicality of the weapon, as well as form muscle memory.

"You need to practice those drills and not just carry it around like it's some kind of a talisman and everything's going to be fine," Burns said. "You better know how to put it in the operation. If you find yourself in a situation where you need to do so, you owe yourself and to the other innocent people around you, because the last thing you want to do is create more harm."

Once the shooter has been stopped, either by law enforcement or civilians, CRASE training is adamant that people follow law enforcement's commands. When law enforcement enters the building or room where people are hiding and give a command such as to stay down, they must stay down.

A shooter has no name

Another thing Burns went over is not naming the shooter, because some suspects are motivated by a desire for fame or notoriety.

After the West Texas shooting on Aug. 31, the Odessa Police Chief Michael Gerke refused to reveal the identity of the shooter.

Gerke said he did not want to give him notoriety for what he did.

"If you read these read these guys' manifestos and things that they're seeing, they're all looking to be glorified during these horrific cases," he said.

The ALERRT Center also has website explaining why the media and others should not name the shooter.

"This focus allows the attacker to accomplish one of their goals and validates their life and actions," the center's accompanying site, Don't Name Them, said.

Sherry Towers, a physicist at Arizona State University, said their research on how the media covered mass shootings could inspire copycat killings.

"We found evidence that killings that receive national or international media attention do indeed inspire similar events a significant fraction of the time," Towers said. "During the trial of the Aurora theater shooter, the father of one of the victims asked the media not to cover the trial, because he feared that the coverage would inspire copycat killings. Unfortunately, his prediction came true. A gunman opened fire in a Louisiana movie theater, and in a Tennessee movie theater, a man attacked people with a hatchet. All within two weeks."

Does ADD apply on the road?

The Aug. 31 shooting happened on the road. That meant the shooter had two weapons, an AR-15 and a 2,000-pound vehicle.

The shooter hijacked a U.S. Postal Service vehicle and drove on the highway and streets. At the press conference, Gerke said the attack began after a traffic stop.

"It's hard to have a general rule of 'stay in your car,' or a general rule of 'don't get out of your car,'" Blair said. "If you can have your engine block between you and the person, that provides you cover because the engine block will stop rounds generally."

Any other part of the car could not be relied upon to stop rounds.

"Most conventional bullets will go through most parts of your vehicle," he said.

Blair said the ADD strategy would still apply in this scenario.

"This isn't a unique situation, this type of thing has happened a few other times where there's a shooter who goes mobile, driving through town shooting at people," he said. "This is where the awareness thing is part of paying attention to what's going on around you to try to create a situation for yourself to avoid."

He added the basics are still going to be there and that the specifics are there and designed to give people some things to think about and to do.

One of these things is that a person must judge what is happening around them to keep their space open. It also has to do with situational awareness, and what is happening at the time.

“Generally, it’s to lead yourself out so that if something happens you have the ability to avoid an accident or if someone’s going to try to shoot at you, you have the ability to get away from that as well,” Blair said.

BREAKOUT BOX

If anybody wants a CRASE class for their establishment, contact New Braunfels Police Officer Lucas Crawford at (830) 221-4166 or email at lcrawford@nbtexas.org.

People can also contact the Comal County Sheriff’s Office Patrol Division or Training Section at (830) 620-3400.

For more information on CRASE training, visit alerrt.org.

For more information on ADD, visit havoiddenydefend.org.

For more information about the “Don’t Name Them” campaign, visit dontnamethem.org.