

Courthouse Security: Keeping Yourself and Others Safe

Sheriff (Retired) Terry Pickering, Law Enforcement Consultant

Sheriff (Retired) David Whitis, Law Enforcement Consultant



TEXAS ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES
RISK MANAGEMENT POOL

Are We Prepared?

- As elected or county employees, how can we ensure our safety during an active threat?
- How do we ensure our safety while still being accessible to the public?
- How can we prepare for an incident in an easy to learn, retain, and implement manner?



Current Trends

- Each working day courthouses are visited by citizens who may be disgruntled and angry to the point of breaking the law.
- Individuals and groups have committed acts of violence in courthouses including:
 - Assault,
 - Murder,
 - Escape from custody,
 - Disruption of proceedings,
 - Shootings
 - Arson
 - Bombings



Threats Come In Multiple Forms

Physical Attacks:

- Assault/Active Shooter
- Domestic Relations Matters
- Inmate Attacks or Escape Attempts
- Chemical/Biological Hazards

Facilities Attacks:

- Fire/Explosive/Combustibles
- Vehicle Crashes
- Burglary/Theft/Criminal Mischief
- Records/Data Intrusions



PHYSICAL SECURITY

- Perimeter Lighting (Exterior)
- Perimeter Doors – Control access to courthouse
- Windows
- Interior Doors – Mag locks
- Interior Lighting (Halls) – Good lighting is essential
- Interior Lighting (Rooms) – Good lighting is essential
- Alarms (Duress and Intrusion)



PHYSICAL SECURITY – cont'd

- Communications
- Evacuation Plan
- Fire Detection (Smoke Detectors)
- Fire Protection (Hydrants, Hoses and Extinguishers)
- Parking Lots
- Auxiliary Power





TEXAS ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES
RISK MANAGEMENT POOL

Run and Get Away

- During an active threat if you can safely exit the building...then do so rapidly
- Ensure that you are familiar with multiple exits to move away from the threat if possible
- Leave your belongings behind...your survival is more important
- Ultimately you are responsible for yourself



Know Your Hiding Spots

- If you cannot escape then take immediate steps to hide from the threat.
- Lock your doors.
- Barricade your door with available furniture, pull blinds, and silence cell phones.
- To date....no active shooter has forcibly entered a locked door.
- Be prepared mentally to stay until the threat has been removed.



Be Prepared to Fight

- If you cannot escape and are caught in an area where concealment is not possible....then you must be prepared to fight.
- When you engage an active threat do so with every available advantage....there is no fair fight when you are doing so for your life.
- Get creative....consider what is available....weapons, fire extinguishers, office equipment



Have A Plan

- Plan how your office will respond to an active threat.
- Assign responsibilities.
- Make sure everyone knows the plan thoroughly....there will be no time for explanations when an incident occurs.
- Have redundancies built into your plan.
- Share your plan with other offices and consider a unified response plan.



WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL

It won't happen here!!

- This only happens in the big cities!!
- This is small town America, everybody knows everybody.
- We don't need to scare everybody with all of this security.
- It just cost too much money





TEXAS ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES
RISK MANAGEMENT POOL

Simple Ideas to Improve Security

- An efficient and reliable system to notify everyone of a threat
 - Panic alarms/buttons
 - Intercom system
 - Text/Email messaging
 - Combination of all



Simple Ideas to Improve Security

In your offices;

- Locks on exterior doors
- Blinds or ability to quickly cover any glass
- Ability to move furniture behind entry door-clear clutter and unnecessary items away



Simple Ideas



What is a 1st Amendment Audit?

- “First Amendment Auditors”—individuals who specifically film on public property to test the rights to film in a public space—has forced law enforcement and governmental agencies to review how to respond to First Amendment audits. The audits, often posted to YouTube or other social media platforms, have become a form of activism.



First Amendment Right to Record

The First Amendment protects the public's right of access to information about their officials' public activities. It “goes beyond protection of the press and the self-expression of individuals to prohibit government from limiting the stock of information from which members of the public may draw.” *Fields v. City of Philadelphia*, 862 F.3d 353, 359 (3d Cir. 2017) citing *First Nat'l. Bank of Bos. v. Bellotti*, 435 U.S. 765, 783 (1978).



What Is a Public Space?

- A public space is
 - Accessible and open to the public;
 - An area where an individual has a legal right to be present.
- Examples:
 - Parks and beaches
 - Streets and sidewalks
 - Public portions of government buildings



Deflection and Disengagement

- Individuals may engage you in debate or arguments about recordings.
- You should
 - Deflect inflammatory comments
 - Develop disengagement techniques
 - Have a programmed response prepared



Parting Advice

- Identify & Provide Notice of Restricted Areas (Signage, etc.)
- Develop & adopt reasonable content-neutral rules on recordings (Think time, place, and/or manner)
- Use common sense
- Consider whether there is any actual harm from the recording/audit
- Discuss how these audits are to be handled before one takes place



Law Enforcement Consultants



Northwest Region
Carmen Napp
(512) 964-6572
carmenn@county.org



Northeast Region
Kenny Lemons, Jr.
(940) 636-8378
kennyl@county.org



Southwest Region
David Whitis
(512) 517-2547
davidw@county.org



Southeast Region
Terry Pickering
(512) 517-7197
terryp@county.org

