Active Shooter, Fast Counts…Getting it Right Counts More

I've spent the majority of my time over the last year focused on the school safety and security issue. One item that concerns me is the proliferation of tools that claim to speed up response but actually add another layer of communication or redundant communications that may just confuse a response.

There should not be any debate that the faster information gets into a public-safety answering point (PSAP) the more effect a response will be. When someone dials 911 they get a PSAP operator that is trained to manage emergency communications in their community and will likely be in direct contact with responders. Anyone who hasn't read or listened to the transcripts of the Sandy Hook 911 calls should do so; they indicate a lot of coordination taking place in a compressed timeline—dispatching units while talking to people on scene, coordinating across agencies, etc. Listening to a 911 call can be an emotional experience with reaction ranging from horror to anger but it's pretty easy to understand that adding a third part is not a good plan.

Our company sells a Smartphone based security system called ***I'm Safe for Schools*** that is designed to speed response through better situational awareness for responders. We've built the system with an understanding of how the 911 system in the US works as well as the Incident Command System (ICS) and we have ensured we do not conflict with a system that is already very good. Just as the PSAP Manager must coordinate information flow between agencies and on-scene (often panicked) callers, an Incident Commander must be an integrator of information and assets.

Having a Smartphone app that claims to speed response by setting up parallel communications or going through a third party call center can only make the task of integrating the flow of information and the coordination of response more challenging. There are a lot of new tools being developed, but unfortunately there are a lot of tools that were not designed as a tool for active shooter response that have just been rebranded. There are security monitoring companies that have jumped on the "we do schools too" bandwagon and there are companies that sell pendants to elderly now selling them for classrooms. There are app based systems that bypass 911 and notify police using the system directly (one even notifies retired police) so they can "respond faster."

What is missing in many of these tools is the understanding that an integrated response is absolutely critical in an active shooter incident. There is likely to be a requirement for multiple police agencies, local EMS may be overwhelmed so mutual aid kicks in, personnel dispatched to deal with families, the press, etc. all need to happen and the more confused a situation is when it starts the more difficult it will be to get assets where they need to be. Getting it right from the start will make the response faster and better.

I strongly believe that Smartphone solutions are the answer to many security issues. "Crowdsourcing" suspicious activity reporting, security awareness and security alerts can leverage the nearly 200 million smartphones in the US. As with anything new there are going to be challenges so it is important to look closely at how a tool fits into established protocols before buying. This will result in better security because more people will be involved and at the same time lower security costs.