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Bomb Squads Developing Mutual Aid Agreements

By DAVID K. JERNIGAN
and MARTIN S. LaBRUSCIANO



Since the early days of modern law enforcement in America, agreements between municipalities for mutual public safety services have been used in emergency situations. In addition to providing enhanced protection to the public, such agreements allow jurisdictions to pool resources, defray certain training costs, and establish administrative rules and procedures on a regional basis. Today, many regional mutual aid agreements exist under the identity of joint operations, such as drug, violent crime, arson, or terrorism task forces.

Another area in which multi-agency cooperation can prove

beneficial and, in many instances, essential is the establishment of bomb squads. The relatively high cost of equipment and training combined with the specific mission of public safety bomb squads makes mutual aid agreements in this area a sound idea for many agencies.

GUIDELINES

Today's public safety bomb squads are significantly more advanced in handling improvised explosive devices (IED) than squads of just 15 years ago. Strong emphasis on standard operating procedures, safety, remote render-safe procedures (RSP), robotics, and improved bomb suit design and

construction have reduced effectively the frequency of bomb technician injuries. In addition, an increased awareness in the areas of safety and technology has led to new guidelines in the field of explosive incident management.¹

The National Guidelines for Bomb Technicians were established in 1987, under the direction of the FBI's Bomb Data Center. These guidelines mandate that a ranking agency official (chief of police, sheriff, fire chief, or public safety director) certify that the agency possesses "bomb technician essential safety equipment," either in its current inventory, in a proposed budget, or available through another

agency by mutual aid agreement. This requirement must be met *before* prospective bomb technician candidates can attend the FBI's Hazardous Devices School (HDS) at the U.S. Army's Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama.²

COST AND EQUIPMENT

While this requirement is an important one to ensure public safety, establishing and maintaining bomb squads represent significant expenses for public safety agencies. The cost to equip a two-person squad with only the essential safety equipment can approach \$25,000. This equipment includes at least one full protective bomb suit, a portable X-ray unit with supporting accessories, a dearmer/disrupter, demolition equipment, and a set of quality hand tools.³ Optional equipment, such as a remote-operated robot or a bomb containment vessel/vehicle to transport the hazardous material to a remote disposal site, adds considerably more to the overall cost of a bomb disposal unit.

Although these outlays may represent a small fraction of the public safety budgets of many large cities, the financial resources to purchase such specialized equipment are virtually beyond the reach of most small- and medium-sized law enforcement agencies. How, then, can these agencies meet their bomb disposal needs if they lack the necessary funds to support a disposal unit that conforms to the national guidelines? The answer in many cases may be the implementation of a mutual aid or voluntary cooperation agreement among several small agencies or the merging of a small agency's bomb squad into the

previously established squad of a larger agency.

AGREEMENTS AMONG AGENCIES

The Florida Experience

The Florida Mutual Aid Act went into effect in June 1981. The act was designed to facilitate cooperation and assistance among Florida law enforcement agencies in routine *and* emergency situations through mutual aid agreements. It also defines the responsibilities of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in emergency management and planning on behalf of local law enforcement agencies.⁴

In addition, the Mutual Aid Act includes a provision for implementing voluntary cooperation agreements. These formal, written agreements permit voluntary cooperation and assistance of a routine law enforcement nature across jurisdictional lines. They also outline the

assistance to be rendered by law enforcement, designate which agency will bear liability arising from acts undertaken through the agreement, and define other terms and conditions the respective agencies deem appropriate. Voluntary cooperation agreements can be broad-based or crime-specific in nature.⁵

Because of the considerable financial savings, smaller departments that seek to join previously established bomb squads may consider entering mutual aid and voluntary cooperation agreements similar to Florida's model. Such agreements address the extent to which "new" agencies contribute resources to the squad. This might include contributing an additional protective suit, X-ray equipment, or vehicle, in order to enhance the overall quality of the mutual aid response. In addition, a joining agency's participation on a regular basis, in both inservice practical training and normal callouts to explosive incidents,



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fulfills both agencies' commitment to the mutual aid agreement or voluntary cooperation agreement.

Working Model

Law enforcement and military bomb disposal units of central Florida joined forces in 1989 to provide a mutual aid assistance network of personnel, equipment, and resources. The Central Florida Bomb Disposal Group is a working model of multijurisdictional cooperation in providing the highest level of professional service in response to bombing and hazardous device calls.

The group formed as a result of the dramatic growth of the greater central Florida area which, among other things, had resulted in an increase in the number and complexity of bombing/explosive-related incidents. Before the creation of the Central Florida Bomb Disposal Group, the number of FBI/HDS-trained and qualified bomb technicians available to many jurisdictions of the region had not been commensurate with the needs of their communities.

The bomb disposal group consists of personnel from nine agencies—Altamonte Springs Police Department, Brevard County Sheriff's Office, Daytona Beach Police Department, Orlando Fire Department Arson/Bomb Squad, Seminole County Sheriff's Office, Volusia County Sheriff's Office, Orange County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Army 66th Ordnance Detachment (EOD), and Orlando Office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF). In addition, several retired military and EOD personnel participate in the group

and provide invaluable information and assistance.

One of the group's initial challenges was to draft a mutual aid contract that would specify the terms and conditions under which qualified bomb technicians and investigators could be called upon by law enforcement or fire service agencies. Members also determined

“
...cooperation among agencies with existing...capabilities will be essential to provide the highest level of protection to the public.
”

that this mutual aid contract should address such ancillary issues as restitution, liability, workers compensation, death benefits, and property damage.

Additionally, the members of the group identified the operational guidelines in which all group members agreed to approach IEDs, hazardous materials, and ordnance incidents. They eventually adopted the National Guidelines for Bomb Technicians as the operational standard for the group.

Because any one of a large number of municipal law enforcement agencies within the greater central Florida region could, at any time, request assistance in explosive-related matters, members determined that it would be impractical for every municipal law enforcement

agency in the area to enter into a mutual aid contract with each member agency. Instead, the member agencies (with the exception of the BATF and the Army's 66th EOD) entered into mutual aid contracts with the sheriff's offices of six central Florida counties. Through these agreements, municipal law enforcement agencies requiring bomb disposal expertise contact the sheriff's office in their county to request assistance, which is then provided “under the colors of the sheriff” of the respective counties.

Currently, the Central Florida Bomb Disposal Group meets every other month. Member agencies take turns hosting these informal gatherings. During the morning sessions, group members generally share incident management techniques, discuss recent bombing cases and intelligence, and present new or innovative tools and equipment. In the afternoon, the members work together to resolve simulated IEDs in practical field exercises. Members are encouraged to work with personnel outside of their own agencies and to use tools and equipment provided by the other group members.

The New Jersey Experience

While the central Florida model is an excellent example of multijurisdictional cooperation, various approaches can be used to address the unique needs of different communities. A smaller scale arrangement exists in New Jersey between the Clifton Police Department and the Passaic County Sheriff's Department.

As a suburb of New York City, Passaic County supports a

In 1988, through a letter of agreement, the chief and sheriff established a mutual aid arrangement. The letter outlines and documents the mutual response strategy and the cooperative efforts of the two agencies in the event of a callout. In essence, the agreement ensures that

CONCLUSION

For small- and medium-sized agencies, the Florida and New Jersey models offer two distinct, but viable, alternatives to establishing and maintaining explosive disposal units. As the cost of public safety

bomb squads increases, cooperation among agencies with existing, but limited, capabilities will be essential to provide the highest level of protection to the public. Such arrangements are yet another example of law enforcement's adapting to contemporary economic realities and learning to do more with less. ♦

¹ "Standard Operating Procedures, Four Models," *Special Technicians Bulletin*, FBI Bomb Data Center, 1992.

² "National Guidelines for Bomb Technicians," *Special Technicians Bulletin*, FBI Bomb Data Center, 1987, 2.

³ Ibid, 6-7.

⁴ Florida State Statute 23, section 1231.

⁵ Ibid.

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