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Rapid Responder Fills in the Blind Spots

At a high school in Spokane, Washington, a student with a gun barricaded himself in one of the science classrooms on September 22, 2003. Using Rapid Responder®, a tool designed to coordinate response to emergency situations, a safety officer at another school brought up a floor plan and photographs of the room, which provided crucial information to officers on the scene. Although the student ultimately received nonfatal wounds in a confrontation with SWAT team members, Rapid Responder helped responders safely defuse the situation with no further injuries to officers, students, or staff.

Following the Spokane incident, the Claremont (California) Police Department became interested in the software as a way to help officers in the field fill in blind spots when confronting dangerous situations in unfamiliar territory. In 2006, the department approached the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC)–West for assistance in funding the installation of Rapid Responder at Claremont High School as a technical pilot project. According to the Center's Matt Begert, a year of meetings and discussion resulted in the installation of the software in August 2007, just before the start of a new school year and just in time for the Claremont Police Department to practice using the system in conjunction with their active shooter training.

"In return for funding the project, we will be able to learn from their use of it over time, and figure out where there might be the possibility for improvement," Begert says. "We'll also be able to show it to other jurisdictions and agencies who might want to implement the software."

Begert expects the observational phase of the project to last 1 to 2 years, with the end product a determination of how useful the software appeared to be over time. Results will be shared with the product manufacturer.

Claremont began collecting information on the product's use immediately with the August 2007 training.

"From that training, we realized what a valuable tool it was, and we currently have a grant application [U.S. Department of Education, Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools program] submitted to install it in all 12 public schools and 9 campuses in the school district," says Claremont Capt. Gary Jenkins

The active shooter training took place in a cordoned-off section of Claremont High, in a group of classrooms clustered around a small courtyard. Officers were divided into groups of four, instructed to move in a diamond formation (one officer leads, two officers assume flanking positions, and one brings up the rear), and sent through a battery of different scenarios. Before each contingent began a training session, its members received a briefing on the layout of the classrooms and the courtyard using the software tool. During the training, officers carefully maneuvered through the courtyard and classrooms seeking two active shooters. In some scenarios, other officers pretending to be wounded students simulated panic and caused chaos as they ran through the courtyard. Shooters also used these pretend students as hostages.

"Before we had this, the officers essentially would tactically respond to situations without any specific knowledge about the area they were entering," Jenkins says. "With the software, officers could review the setup of the area, including floor plans, where doors connect classrooms, and so on. It gave the officers the ability to employ better officer safety tactics, and was a huge advantage in planning how to operate as a team, how to move as a team, and even how to retreat if need be."

Like many similar tools, Rapid Responder was developed in response to the 1999 Columbine High School tragedy. In the aftermath of that shooting, when it was pointed out that better communication might have provided a more effective response to such a crisis, several members of the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs (WASPC) began identifying ways that would help first responders communicate better in similar situations. Prepared Response, developer of the software, used that input as a starting point to create a sophisticated tool that first responders can use to coordinate their actions when responding to a variety of situations. During an actual event, all emergency responders have access to

previously agreed-on plans as well as access to the most up-to-date and reliable information about the environment. This increases the likelihood that all units responding to an emergency can work together.

The software helps agencies and jurisdictions coordinate the actions of emergency responders by collecting hundreds of pieces of information about a building and its environs and organizing these data points in a user-friendly display. Information that can be compiled in the system includes evacuation plans, floor plans, utility shutoffs, and photographs, giving first responders immediate access to critical information and enabling them to respond to crises quickly and efficiently. The software can be loaded on a laptop, made accessible via the Internet, or carried on CD–ROMs and flash drives. This means that on the road, even in a command post without Internet access, emergency responders can access the tool.

"We wanted to be prepared if confronted with a situation like Columbine and the number of events that have occurred since then," Jenkins says. "We wanted to make sure we had something at our disposal, and this one just seems to provide the information that would be critical to us in responding to that type of event or in a natural disaster such as an earthquake or wildfire."

He explains that something as simple as knowing where the utility shutoffs are might make a difference in responding to an incident, and this software puts that kind of information at their fingertips. Claremont PD also knows who on the school staff has certain responsibilities, which would help the department better coordinate efforts with the school district.

"It's something that we hope we never have to use, but the way we look at it, we hope for the best, we prepare for the worst," Jenkins says.

This product appears on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office for Domestic Preparedness Authorized Equipment List, which can be accessed through https://www.safetyact.gov/.

For more information on this project, contact NLECTC–West, 888–548–1618 or Michael O'Shea, National Institute of Justice program manager, at michael.oshea@usdoj.gov or 202–305–7954.

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