

# Newtown Police Response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting...



A report by the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association

December 2013

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December of 2012, the nation suffered a collective tragedy when a lone gunman entered the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and proceeded to gun down 26 defenseless children and adults. The country experienced a profound sense of loss, an emotion that President Obama expressed during a national address.

Many elements of the incident have been analyzed by professionals and amateurs alike, without the benefit of official reports or evidence. CNN reported that, "Police and other first responders arrived on scene about 20 minutes after the first calls."<sup>1</sup> The News Times of Danbury, Connecticut, reported that, "There is no doubt there was some delay," referring to the time it took Newtown officers to intervene at the school. These comments were attributed to "a source familiar with the State Police investigation into the shootings."<sup>2</sup>

With so much unsubstantiated information being published by the media and on the Internet, the Chief of Police of the Newtown Police Department requested an analysis of the response to the shooting by the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association.

The goal of this analysis was to determine whether the police response to the school shooting was timely and in keeping with current law enforcement best practices. The sub-committee assigned to conduct the analysis was provided access to audio and video recordings, records of eyewitness accounts, and first responder statements. Their research was narrowly confined to Newtown officer response time and entry to the elementary school facility.

Records reveal that the first 911 call for an active shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School was received at 09:35:39 hours at the Newtown 911 Center. The State Police received a similar call from a cellular phone at about the same time and transferred the call to the Newtown 911 center four seconds later. Dispatchers immediately (with the caller still on the line) notified Newtown police officers via radio of the reported shooting. The transmission of this information took 16 seconds and generated a response from multiple Newtown officers, including the shift sergeant, officers in the police station, and administrators, including the Chief of Police. All units responded "Code 3" with lights and sirens. The first officer to arrive on the scene did so 2 minutes and 41 seconds after the first radio broadcast of a shooting. Entry to the building from at least two points is confirmed at 09:44:50 hours.

In analyzing the response, it is important to know the accepted practice for officers responding to such a call. Officers arriving at the school must do so in a manner that allows them quick access to the facility, but must also be cognizant of their tactical positioning. Therefore, it is expected that first arriving officers would park a reasonable distance from the building in order to afford themselves the best view of the building and surrounding space. This allows officers to begin assessing the status and location of the threat. Officers are trained to prepare for more than one threat or aggressor.

The elapsed time from first officer arrival at the school, to building entry, was 5 minutes and 57 seconds. In reviewing what occurred during those 5 minutes and 57 seconds, it is revealed that activity on the exterior of the building drew the immediate attention of arriving officers. As police officers arrived at the school, they received reports of gunshots heard toward the front of the building and at the same time received information that there was a person running along the exterior of the building. Police did not know who this person was and moved quickly to confront and identify the individual. The person was handcuffed and secured in order that police could then focus on making entry to the building. It should be noted that the person detained was later identified as a parent. The elapsed time from unit dispatch to building entry was 8 minutes and 38 seconds.

History teaches that the typical active shooter only stops when confronted; as a result, the quicker the confrontation by police, the better. In this case, Newtown officers began arriving at the scene in less than three minutes, and made entry to the school in less than six minutes later. It should be noted that Newtown, Connecticut, is a town of 59 square miles and any analysis of response times must take into account the size of the community, the nature of the roads travelled by responding officers, and the location of officers when the emergency call was received.

Based on our analysis of the police response to the Sandy Hook Elementary School, we concluded that the Newtown officers responded to the scene rapidly, positioned themselves appropriately, and followed their department policy. Since the shooter is believed to have committed suicide at 09:40:03 hours, Newtown Officers were on scene a total of 1 minute and 10 seconds before the shooter committed suicide. Unfortunately this was not enough time to assess the situation, confront the exterior threats, and tactically enter the locked building, and engage the shooter.

## METHODOLOGY

Chief Marc Montminy of the Manchester Connecticut Police Department was asked by the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association (CPCA) to chair a sub-committee to review Newtown Police Department's response to the shooting. Additional sub-committee members were chosen from police chiefs outside of Fairfield County, and with no prior relationship to the Newtown Police. Chief Michael Crowley of the Groton Town Police, Chief Michael Maniago of the Torrington Police, and Chief Matthew Reed of the South Windsor Police agreed to serve on the sub-committee. The combined law enforcement experience of this team is more than 119 years of law enforcement service.

The following data was requested and received from the Newtown Police Department:

- 911 audio recordings for December 14, 2012
- Radio transmission recordings
- In-car video recordings for responding vehicles
- Officer statements
- Newtown duty roster for December 14, 2012
- Newtown Police policies related to active shootings
- Timeline documentation created after the event

The sub-committee made a site visit to Newtown and viewed the officers' response routes, staging location, and layout of the school building, including entry points.

The audio and video recordings were analyzed to determine if time stamps were accurate across recording devices. It is not uncommon for different recording devices to have different time stamps. These differences must be evaluated to ensure the total elapsed time is accurate. It was determined that time stamps were properly synchronized.

## INITIAL CONTACT

At 09:35:39 hours, the Newtown 911 Center received the first report of a shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School from an adult inside the building. The caller indicated that she saw a gun and heard shots. Within seconds additional calls came in, including one from the janitor at the school.

The State Police also received 911 reports from cellular callers, the first of which was transferred to Newtown within seconds of the initial call.

At 09:35:56 hours, Dispatch broadcast the report of a shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School and sent patrol unit 67. Other units heard the transmission and immediately responded to the scene. This is corroborated by in-car video and radio response from the officers.

## RESPONSE

Several patrol officers responded to the call upon hearing the initial report of a shooting. Some officers were at the police station, while others were on patrol, or at an assignment.

Among the first responders was the shift sergeant who was at the police station. The sergeant immediately headed to the school. While en-route, the sergeant gave pre-arrival instructions to in-bound officers and sent some units to the rear of the building and some to the front. This is corroborated by radio recordings.

Another officer was on a motor vehicle stop in a different part of town. He heard the initial dispatch of a shooting and immediately ended the stop, returned to his car, and headed to Sandy Hook Elementary School using lights and siren. This is corroborated by the officer's in-car video system.

Also responding to the report of a shooting was the administrative staff of the department. The chief, captain, and lieutenant, whose duties typically relegate them to police headquarters, responded to the call as soon as it was announced. The chief and others were on scene soon after the first units arrived; however, these vehicles have no in-car video system, but could be seen responding in video from other patrol units, and is mentioned in witness statements.

The first police units arrived less than 3 minutes after Dispatch announced the shooting over the two-way radio system. This time was calculated based on the department's radio recording at 09:35:56 hours, plus 16 seconds, which is the elapsed time of the transmission itself. At 09:38:53 hours, the first officer transmitted that he was on scene (at the Crestwood Drive side of the building). The total response time was 2 minutes and 41 seconds. Other Newtown Police units arrived moments later. At 09:39:13 hours, 20 seconds after the first police unit was on scene, at least 2 additional Newtown officers arrived at the scene, and 57 seconds later, 2 more arrived at the front of the school.

By 09:44:50 hours, at least 9 Newtown Police Officers were confirmed to be on the scene through video recordings, radio recordings, and eyewitness accounts.

## AT SCENE

The first police unit arrived at the rear of the school (Crestwood Drive) at 09:38:53 hours. While not an actual entrance to the school, local officers had knowledge that Crestwood Drive passes

within yards of the rear of the school. 19 seconds later, Dispatch announced to the units on Crestwood that a teacher was reporting 2 figures outside the school running toward the rear of the building and they still heard shooting. At 09:39:34 hours, 22 seconds after the report of a possible suspect heading to the rear of the school, officers reported contact with the suspect.

At 09:41:07 hours, the patrol sergeant reported that the last shots heard came from the front of the building. At 09:41:24 hours, units near Crestwood Drive reported the suspect that they had engaged was in custody. At 09:42:27 hours, the sergeant repeated that shots were heard at the front of the building, possibly the roof.

At 09:43:39, Dispatch advised units on the scene that there was a victim in room 1 who was shot in the foot. EMS was staging off-site until the scene was secure. Meanwhile, at 09:44:31 hours officers near Crestwood Drive reported that the suspect in custody might not be involved.

At 09:44:50 hours, 5 minutes and 57 seconds after the first unit arrived at the rear of the school, an entry team consisting of a Newtown sergeant and two officers make an entry at the south-east side of the school. Soon after the entry, this team was joined by the Newtown Chief. A simultaneous entry was made by a Newtown lieutenant, sergeant, and an officer, who found an unlocked door leading into a boiler room at the north-west corner of the school. These times are substantiated by recorded radio transmissions, as well as 911 calls from the building in which officers can be heard in the background.

At 09:46:23 hours, the first state troopers arrived on the scene, followed by a stream of other officers and troopers responding to Newtown's call for assistance.

What entry teams discovered inside the school defies description. 26 victims were found along with a man with several firearms and what appeared to be a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. At 09:51:31 hours, a Newtown officer reported that the suspect was down.

State and local police continued to search the building and quickly triaged any victims they discovered. A Newtown Officer found a critically injured child, since EMS had not been cleared to approach the building; the officer scooped up the child and sprinted toward the EMS staging area. This is recorded by in-car video at 09:56:16 hours. Soon after, officers and troopers found other children and adults in the immediate vicinity of the suspect and led them out of the building. In-car video shows the wounded and trapped being shuttled out of the building from 09:58:39 hours on. This continued until the building was emptied.

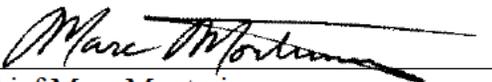
## CONCLUSION

The 1999 Columbine School shooting in Colorado exposed the law enforcement practice of "contain and wait" as insufficient. Since that time, police have been instructed that standing by and waiting for a tactical team simply affords the shooter more time to engage innocent people. History tells us that shooters continue to shoot until they are confronted. Law enforcement's goal, therefore, is to create that confrontation as quickly as possible.

The Newtown Police Department policy on "active shooter incidents" embraces this new philosophy of quick engagement of the shooter. Adopted in April of 2003, the policy is in keeping with current trend in police training. It outlines the responsibilities of both officers and supervisors at such an incident, and properly prioritizes stopping the shooter as the primary objective.

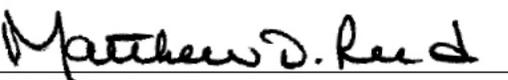
Our evaluation showed that the officers of the Newtown Police Department navigated the inevitable chaos created in the first few minutes of such a call, managed to piece together what was occurring, but were unable to intervene before the shooter took his own life. While we cannot prove the shooter killed himself due to the police arrival, the history of like incidents suggests this may be the case.

Our hearts go out to the families, friends, and coworkers of the victims of this tragic incident. Additionally, we salute the efforts of all of the first responders who will relive this nightmare for the rest of their lives.

  
 Chief Marc Montminy

  
 Chief Michael Crowley

  
 Chief Michael Maniago

  
 Chief Matthew Reed

## **References**

1. <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2012/12/us/sandy-hook-timeline/index.html>
2. <http://www.newstimes.com/local/article/Newtown-police-response-to-shooting-under-review-4650757.php>

## **Attachments**

1. School Shooting Timeline

## **Disclaimer**

The information contained in this report is based on the documentation, audio, video, and statements, provided to us by Newtown Police Department in September of 2013.

# Sandy Hook School Shooting Timeline

