



# 2018 Borderline Bar and Grill Mass Shooting Public Safety Response After Action Review

March 2021

**Ventura County Sheriff's Office**

Bill Ayub, Sheriff





*Healing Garden dedicated to the victims of the Borderline Bar and Grill Mass Shooting*

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# Letter from the Sheriff



**O**n Wednesday, November 7, 2018, tragedy struck the peaceful city of Thousand Oaks, California. It was “College Night” at the Borderline Bar and Grill, a popular western themed destination for line dancing, country music, and socializing. At 11:18 p.m., a lone gunman entered the establishment and opened fire into the crowd, killing 11 of the 259 people who were inside. Ventura County Sheriff’s Sergeant Ron Helus and two California Highway Patrol (CHP) officers responded within minutes and approached the Borderline to stop the shooter and to save lives. Sergeant Helus lost his life in an ensuing gun battle and became the twelfth casualty of the Borderline mass violence incident.

The following after action report outlines significant and specific details of the chain of events that took place when the 28-year-old gunman launched a campaign of violence against an unsuspecting and vulnerable crowd of mostly college students. This report delves into the background and profile of the suspect and details his calculated and premeditated actions. In response to the villainy, there were many acts of remarkable heroism and admirable performance by Borderline patrons and first responders. While the successes are certainly noteworthy, this report provides a critical study of the emergency response to the incident, the subsequent investigation, and the lessons learned from that critical analysis.

We undertook the creation of this report in the spirit of striving for continuous improvement. During reviews of critical incidents, we find value in identifying issues that could be improved upon, and this report is an effort to do precisely that. It is our hope that the lessons learned from this study of the deadliest act of violence in Ventura County’s history will help others to more effectively prevent, respond to, investigate, and recover from incidents of mass violence.

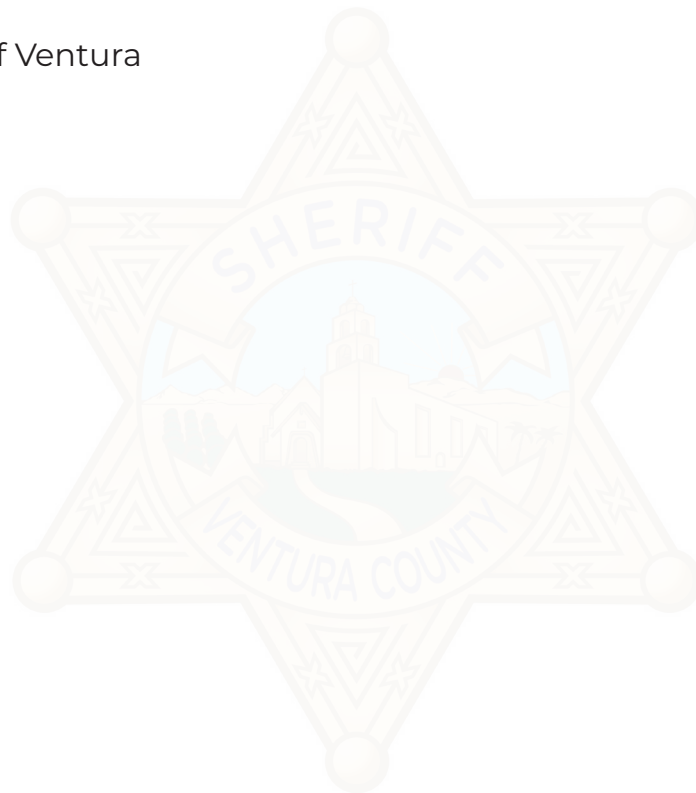
Lastly, I would like to offer my deepest condolences to the families and friends of all who lost their lives at the Borderline on that dreadful night. My admiration and gratitude goes out to those who were injured and survived, and the many people who demonstrated courage that night, as they disregarded their own personal safety to save others. The pride I have in Sergeant Ron Helus and the CHP officer who rushed into peril cannot be overstated. Their quick actions unequivocally saved lives. I would also like to thank the

brave officers from our neighboring public safety agencies, who did not hesitate to respond and assist our deputies that night, the FBI for its support in processing the massive volume of evidence and an exceptionally complex crime scene, and the dozens of agencies, organizations, and individuals that played a role in supporting the investigation and recovery from this terrible act of violence.

It is inspiring to know that we are a resilient community that rises to the task in the face of adversity. So too will this agency rise to the challenge of self-reflection and constant improvement. Our community deserves it. We demand it, and ultimately, we would have it no other way.

**BILL AYUB**

Sheriff, County of Ventura



# Foreword

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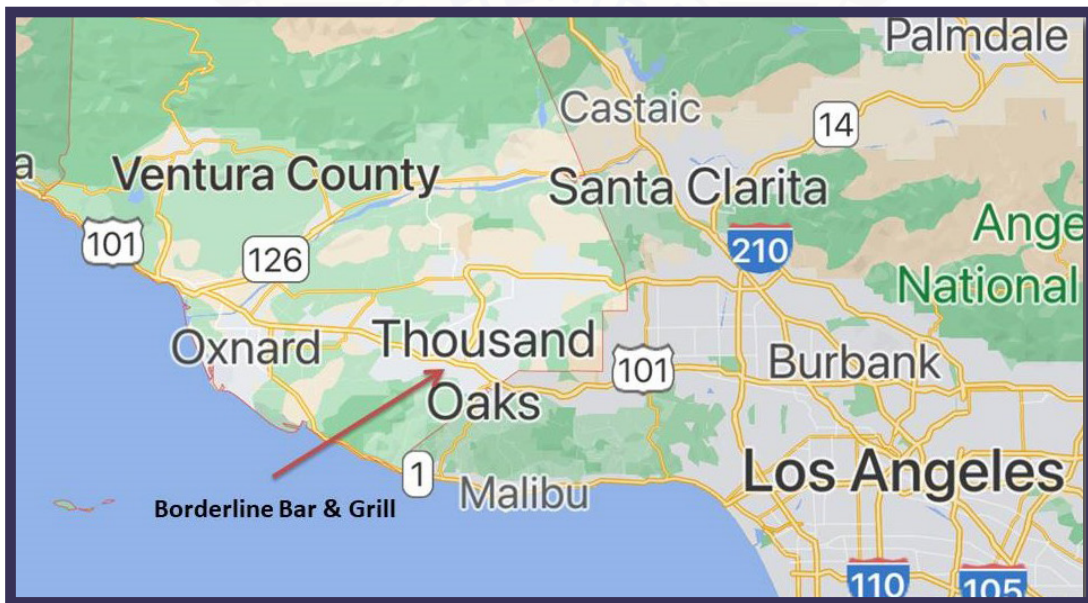
This After Action Report is a tool for examining the law enforcement response to the events of November 7, 2018. By its nature, this document discusses a sensitive event. The families who lost loved ones have voiced their feelings that releasing details of the event furthers the pain and trauma they experience. We acknowledge this and have attempted to create this document with their concerns in mind. We are grateful to the families for their involvement in the process that took place after the Borderline shooting. We have learned from their experiences and sharing.

# Executive Summary

## BACKGROUND

Ventura County is located in Southern California and has a population of approximately 850,000. The city of Thousand Oaks is the second largest city in Ventura County. The population of Thousand Oaks is approximately 128,995, and the city spans more than 55 square miles. The city consistently ranks as one of the safest communities of its size in the nation, according to FBI crime statistics.

Thousand Oaks is one of five cities in Ventura County that contracts for police services with the Ventura County Sheriff's Office. At the time of the Borderline shooting, there were 11 uniformed deputies and two sergeants assigned to patrol Thousand Oaks.



The Borderline Bar and Grill is a western themed restaurant and dance hall located just off the 101 Freeway in Thousand Oaks. The restaurant is approximately 11,000 sq. ft. and has a 2,500 sq. ft. dance floor and pool tables for gaming. The building sits atop a rise, with stairs and a rising walkway leading to the main entrance. The entrance to the building is not clearly visible from the parking lot.



The entrance is accessed by ascending 10 steps which lead to a landing just outside the doors to the establishment. Just inside the main entrance, to the right is a cashier/counter area and an adjacent office (see photo 3). On the interior wall of the office is a large screen television, which displays the live feed from cameras located around the perimeter and interior of the Borderline.

Wednesday nights at the Borderline are dubbed 'College Night,' where young adults 18 and older are the primary focus. This weekly event draws students from several colleges and universities.

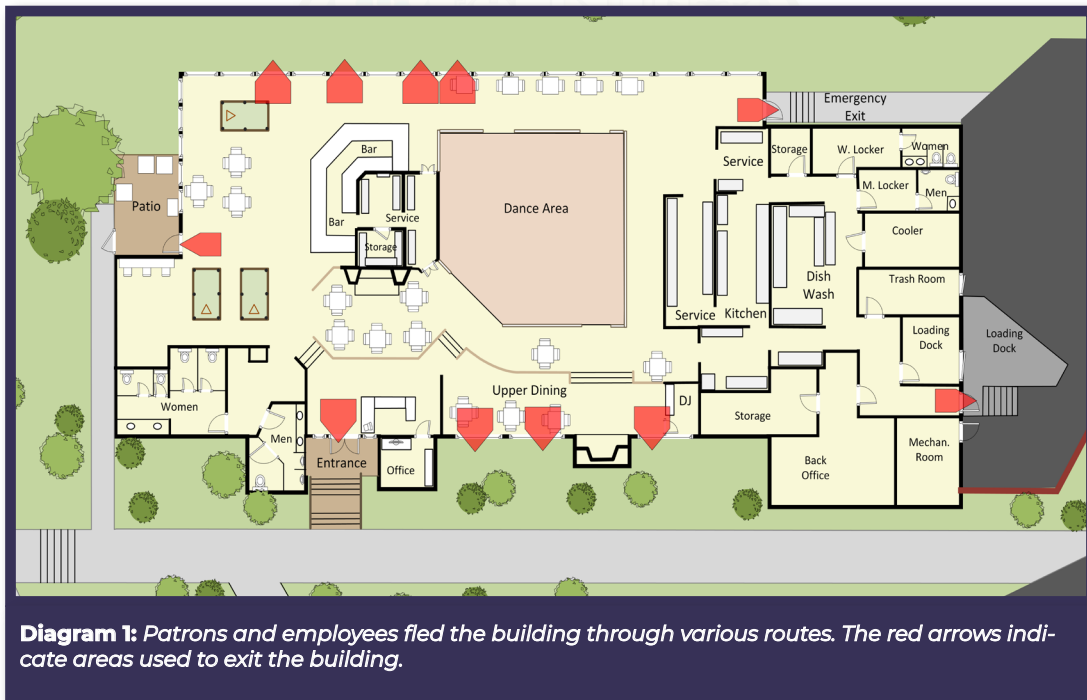




## INCIDENT

On the night of November 7, 2018, at 11:18:24 p.m., an estimated 259 people were inside the Borderline Bar and Grill. A 28-year-old lone gunman walked into the Borderline and immediately began firing a handgun at employees and the crowd of mostly college students. In the initial attack, five victims near the entrance were struck by gunfire. The shooter went into the establishment's business office, which is located nearby the main entrance and behind the host counter. The suspect then activated a laser aiming sight and flashlight mounted on his firearm. From this office, the suspect began to throw smoke grenades into the bar and dance floor areas. Ultimately, the suspect deployed a total of seven smoke grenades, one unsuccessfully, in the Borderline.

In the moments after the shooting began, scores of patrons and employees fled the building. While some fled through doors, others used chairs and tables to break large windows and jump from the building. The diagram below (Diagram 1) illustrates the areas used to exit the building.





**Photo 4:** Photo of the glass windows along the north side of the Borderline Bar and Grill.

When the shooting began, two California Highway Patrol officers were conducting an unrelated traffic enforcement stop near the Borderline. They were alerted to the shooting by a patron fleeing the scene. The two CHP officers immediately ended the traffic stop and drove to the main parking lot of the



**Photo 5:** Photo depicts the north side of the bar. This is the location where numerous patrons/employees jumped out the windows. Opposite (or north of) the chain link fence is the on-ramp to the U.S. 101 Freeway (southbound).

Borderline. At about the same time, 9-1-1 calls regarding the shooting were received in the Sheriff's Communication Center (Dispatch). Sheriff's dispatch

broadcast information about the incident, and sheriff's deputies and sergeants responded to the scene.

At 11:20:27 p.m., two minutes after the first shot, the shooter walked the interior perimeter of the main room shooting victims who had been injured in the initial attack or were found hiding. At one point, one victim was shot while attempting to exit out a broken window. The shooter continued through the building and appeared to enter the bar and bathroom areas, where additional victims were discovered after the incident.

At 11:22:08 p.m., less than four minutes after the first shot, Sergeant Ron Helus notified sheriff's dispatch he had arrived on scene. Twenty-eight seconds later, at 11:22:36 p.m., Sergeant Helus broadcast that there could be two suspects, and at least one victim was down outside. As Sergeant Helus arrived and joined the two CHP officers, the shooter returned to the office near the front entrance. Fifty-eight seconds later, at 11:23:34, p.m. a second sheriff's sergeant arrived at the borderline and took up a position in the parking lot to the west. Sergeant Helus and the second sergeant did not make contact with one another.



**Photo 6:** Borderline CAM 9 depicts Sergeant Helus at the open door to the bar and one CHP Officer coming up the steps. The second CHP Officer is to the rear, at the bottom of the steps. This snapshot of the surveillance footage is just prior to Sergeant Helus and the CHP Officer making entry.

At 11:24:06 p.m., Sergeant Helus advised dispatch that he wanted a patrol unit to go to the north side of the building near the freeway, as the suspect could have gone over the wall or fence to the north.

Sergeant Helus and the CHP officers approached the front of the building. Sergeant Helus and one CHP officer, both armed with rifles, climbed the stairs and arrived at the threshold of the Borderline's entrance. The second CHP

officer, armed with a shotgun, took up a covering position at the base of the stairs. Sergeant Helus told his CHP partner he could see multiple people down.

Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer slowly entered through the main entrance. Sergeant Helus used his rifle-mounted light to illuminate the area in a sweeping movement. The CHP officer with the shotgun remained outside the building in a covering position. During this time, the suspect was in the office and can be seen (on the surveillance system) looking at the surveillance system, which provides a view of the stairs used by Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer. As Sergeant Helus crossed the threshold, he verbally announced, "Sheriff's Department." On the surveillance video, the shooter can be seen moving toward the door of the office with his weapon up. This office doorway opens to the same area occupied by Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer near the entrance. As Sergeant Helus' light swept the office doorway at 11:26:20 p.m., the shooter retreated from the door.

The CHP officer entered the main doorway and took up a covering position as Sergeant Helus moved further into the building. The CHP officer knelt down and appeared to check one of the victims, as Sergeant Helus broadcast over the radio "...at least five down inside." (11:26:26 p.m.). During this time, the suspect can be seen exiting the office toward the entrance on surveillance video.

Within 3 seconds of this broadcast, the suspect fired on Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer from a distance estimated to be 7-14 feet. The CHP officer retreated out the doorway in a low crouch with Sergeant Helus close behind. As Sergeant Helus moved toward the doorway, he tripped over a velvet rope and fell onto the threshold of the doorway. The CHP officer moved to the bottom of the stairs, turned, and appeared to shoulder his rifle and scan the doorway through which he had just retreated. The CHP officer later stated he believed Sergeant Helus had descended the stairs with him as they retreated from the gunfire.

Sergeant Helus crawled on his hands and knees to an area just outside the doorway and attempted to stand up while holding his rifle. At the same time this was occurring, the suspect can be seen leaning over the host counter, shooting through the open doorway towards Sergeant Helus. (11:26:35 p.m.). The CHP officer fired one round from his rifle, followed closely by several more rounds. At this point, Sergeant Helus dropped his rifle and fell forward onto his chest/stomach.

In a rapid succession of events, a deputy on scene broadcast that shots were being fired at the south entrance (although dispatch only repeats "at the south entrance"). The suspect moved back into the office. The CHP officer

broadcast over the CHP radio, “11-99 officer down,” and Sergeant Helus rolled over onto his back, picked up his rifle, and shined the light into the building.

Moments later, at 11:26:48 p.m., the suspect moved out of the office again, walked to the host counter where he had just been, and fired his handgun out the door. The CHP officer returned fire, as did Sergeant Helus from his position on the porch. At the conclusion of this engagement, the CHP officer moved down the concrete walkway away from the building. Meanwhile, the suspect moved back into the office and deployed a smoke grenade.

At 11:27:08 p.m., Sergeant Helus can be viewed on video pointing his weapon mounted light into the doorway of the Borderline. Sergeant Helus’ movements can be seen slowing and then stopping. Sergeant Helus is not seen moving again on video. At 11:27:12 p.m., the CHP officer broadcast again over his radio frequency, “S.O. down.”

For the next two minutes, the suspect can be observed on video, inside the office, looking back and forth between his cellular phone and the surveillance system. At 11:30:30 p.m., 7 minutes and 30 seconds after the shooting began, the suspect dialed 911 from the Borderline business telephone. From a combination of audio and surveillance recordings, we now know that when Sheriff’s dispatch answered the call, the suspect never spoke. The 911 call was terminated after 1 minute and 5 seconds.

At 11:31:47, p.m. a deputy on the perimeter spoke with the CHP officer who was with Sergeant Helus during the shooting. The CHP officer told the deputy that Sergeant Helus was down. The deputy broadcast that a “Sam Unit” (sergeant) was down. However, this transmission was made at the same time as a dispatcher talking over the radio, so it was not heard by others at the scene. This deputy broadcast the information again a few seconds later, but his second broadcast was not acknowledged. The deputy did not broadcast this information again.

At the same time, the suspect can be viewed on surveillance video, in the office removing items from his pockets. These items were later discovered to be additional high capacity magazines and other miscellaneous items. The suspect then deliberately placed a flashlight on top of a display case with the light shining toward the pool table area and the smoker’s patio door on the west side of the building.

At 11:34:43 p.m., 8 minutes and 53 seconds after the final exchange of gunfire between Sergeant Helus, the CHP officer, and the shooter, the second sheriff’s sergeant in the west parking lot directed two deputies with rifles to go to the front of the Borderline to make contact with Sergeant Helus. On various surveillance cameras, the two deputies can be observed moving around the

building toward the front entrance.

At 11:35:46 p.m., a radio roll call was conducted to identify where patrol deputies were positioned. Two minutes after the two deputies were sent to the front of the Borderline, they began to slowly close on the front of the building. Sergeant Helus was lying outside of the Borderline, just to the east of the building's main doors, in an area that also contained a handicap lift. The handicap lift's solid ramp and gate were in an upright position, potentially blocking the two deputies' view of Sergeant Helus.

At this point in time, there were approximately 14 uniformed law enforcement officers on scene: two sheriff's office sergeants (one being Sergeant Helus), 11 deputies, and two CHP officers. All of them were holding perimeter positions around the Borderline, with one covering the north side, seven covering the south side, three covering the west side, and three covering the east side. The main entrance is on the south side of the building.

As deputies approached the main entrance at 11:37:06 p.m. The shooter can be seen on video in the office looking at the surveillance system. The shooter is then seen on video lighting a firework and throwing it out of the office. The shooter threw another firework out of the office approximately 40 seconds later.

At 11:38:51 p.m., 15 minutes and 52 seconds after the incident began, the shooter can be seen on video crouching down against a wall in the office, placing his gun under his chin, and shooting himself, after which his body slumps to the side. Outside the building, a patrol deputy reported over the radio, "Just had one shot."

At 11:41:27 p.m., one of the patrol deputies sent to contact Sergeant Helus spoke to one of the CHP officers and realized that Sergeant Helus was down near the doorway of the Borderline. Over the next 4 minutes and 32 seconds, the deputies moved closer to the front of the building, gathered more help, formed a plan, and approached the main doors.

As the deputy who spoke with the CHP officer ascended halfway up the stairs to the front entrance, he saw Sergeant Helus down and unresponsive (11:43:23 p.m.). While this deputy was on the stairs, another deputy nearby announced, "Hold on, hold on, we might have the suspect." This caused the deputy on the stairs to stop and backtrack. The deputy who made this statement had located a victim who was lying outside the building, below the window that the shooter leaned out and fired his gun during the initial assault. The deputies determined this victim was not the suspect, and they returned their attention to the front entrance and Sergeant Helus.

At 11:46:49 p.m., a team of deputies and a Simi Valley Police officer, who had arrived to assist, reached Sergeant Helus. The team arrived at Sergeant Helus's side 20 minutes after the time Sergeant Helus had last engaged the suspect, and 12 minutes and 6 seconds after the second sheriff's sergeant sent deputies to make contact with Sergeant Helus.

At 11:46:58 p.m., the rescue team removed Sergeant Helus from the front door area. Sheriff's deputies attempted life saving measures on Sergeant Helus as he was placed in a patrol vehicle and driven to a nearby ambulance. Sergeant Helus was transported to Los Robles Regional Medical Center and ultimately died of his wounds.

Sergeant Helus suffered multiple gunshot wounds in the battle with the suspect. In all, he was struck six times by gunfire. As the investigation unfolded, it was determined that one of the rounds that struck Sergeant Helus was fired by the CHP officer who had made entry with him. This round was fatal.

In total, the shooter fired 61 rounds.

Additional law enforcement officers and firefighters from agencies across Ventura County continued to arrive. Many of these officers were Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) officers or other officers with advanced tactical training. This response included a sheriff's captain, who was also the SWAT team captain. A multi-agency entry team was assembled and led by this captain. They approached and entered the building to search for the shooter and victims. A second entry team comprised of sheriff's deputies also made entry into the building from a door on the west side of the structure. Two Ventura County firefighters, who were trained in Tactical Emergency Medical Support (TEMS), were included in these entry teams as rescue personnel.

The team searched the inside of the building and located 11 deceased victims. As officers searched the building, they located the shooter deceased in the office. The officers also found and evacuated 19 patrons who had been hiding in various locations throughout the building.

In all, 259 people were inside the Borderline when the shooter entered and began shooting. Twelve people lost their lives during this incident, with the suspect not included in this count. One hundred twenty-eight people sustained injuries. These injuries included a gunshot wound, bumps, bruises, fractures, dislocations, and significant lacerations resulting from patrons jumping through plate glass windows to exit the building. In total, 29 people would seek treatment at six local hospitals for injuries sustained during the event.

The following day (just 14 hours later), two major wildfires ignited, the Hill and Woolsey fires. Over the next week, 250,000 people from Thousand Oaks, Agoura Hills, Calabasas, and Malibu were evacuated. The Borderline crime scene itself was threatened by fire, but was not evacuated. The Ventura County Sheriff's Office Major Crimes Bureau took the lead in the investigation with assistance from various local, state, and federal agencies. In the weeks that followed, hundreds of witnesses were located and interviewed. Hours of surveillance video, officers' body-worn camera (BWC) video, and audio recordings of the 911 calls were scrutinized.





# Suspect Profile

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**M**any friends and relatives of the suspect were interviewed after the Borderline shooting incident. This profile is a synopsis of those interviews and the physical evidence collected as part of this investigation. The purpose of this section of the after-action review is to provide insight into the life and personal characteristics of the suspect.

## CHILDHOOD & HIGH SCHOOL

The suspect was raised by his mother and stepfather, whom he believed to be his biological father, until he was two or three years old. At that time, his mother and stepfather separated, and he remained in his mother's custody. He attended pre-school and most of elementary school in Orange County, California. During the third and fourth grades, the suspect moved to Europe with his mother, due to a work transfer. They returned to the United States when he entered the fifth grade in Orange County, California.

Shortly after returning to the United States, the suspect's stepfather died. According to the suspect's mother, the suspect was fond of his stepfather. However, he did not appear to be emotionally impacted by his stepfather's death. The suspect did not attend his father's funeral.

The suspect attended a private school in Orange County during the sixth and seventh grades. School records indicate he was suspended four times during this period, twice for inappropriate language and twice for some form of disobedience. The suspect completed grades 8 through 10 in Orange County and then transferred to Newbury Park High School in Thousand Oaks, California for grades 11 and 12.

According to his mother, the suspect developed a serious demeanor, a temper, and a desire to be in charge as a child. She felt his peers would have described him as intense and funny. The suspect's mother also thought he pushed his teachers "right to the edge." She stated the suspect was not violent toward others but did display destructive behavior, such as breaking video game controllers in frustration, and knocking holes in the drywall of the family residence when a high school coach changed his position on a baseball team.

The suspect's high school track and field coach said the suspect had serious anger issues and hated to lose. In one instance, the suspect used profanity, which was against the rules, so the coach made him run laps as discipline. As

the suspect ran these laps, he yelled, “Fuck you!” several times, so the coach added a lap for each use of profanity. The suspect ended up running 13 miles that day. On a separate occasion, the same coach said the suspect “attacked” her when she refused to give him a phone she had found and claimed was his.

Peers of the suspect who were interviewed stated the suspect was “intense,” “a competitor,” and a “protector,” but none noted violent outbursts in high school. He graduated from Newbury Park High School in 2007.

## MILITARY SERVICE

The suspect entered the United States Marine Corps on August 21, 2007. He ended his active duty service on March 3, 2013, when he was honorably discharged. The suspect obtained the rank of corporal (E-4) during his active duty service. From March 4, 2013 until August 20, 2015, the suspect completed his inactive reserve obligation, at the conclusion of which he was separated from United States military service.

The suspect completed his recruit training at Marine Corps Recruit Depot (MCRD), San Diego. Basic training for the United States Marine Corps consists of a physical fitness regime along with classroom instruction where the suspect would have learned tactics and discipline. Additionally, the suspect would have received training in both urban and rural warfare, consisting of covert movement, close quarters combat, and the use of smoke grenades to provide concealment.

Military records reveal the suspect served in Afghanistan during the Afghanistan War from November 16, 2010 until June 13, 2011. During his wartime service, he participated in Operation Enduring Freedom.

The suspect was disciplined for shoplifting and traffic offenses while serving in the military.

## VETERANS AFFAIRS

Records from Veterans Affairs indicate the suspect never sought either medical or mental health treatment services from their office. This is contrary to what he told friends.

## MARRIAGE

The suspect was married to a woman he met prior to joining the military. Although married, the two never lived alone together. The suspect was deployed in various areas while his wife was attending school in California. On

one occasion, the suspect returned to his mother's home in Newbury Park, but did not tell his wife he had returned. She learned of his return through other sources. Eventually, the two decided to get a divorce. At first, the suspect sent his wife fraudulent divorce paperwork. She suspects this was because he did not want to lose a military housing subsidy. When she realized the paperwork was fraudulent, she contacted the suspect's commanding officer. This prompted the suspect to send the appropriate paperwork and the divorce was completed amicably.

## RETURN FROM MILITARY SERVICE

Many of the suspect's female friends noted that upon returning home from active duty, he was suffering from depression and PTSD. A couple of the suspect's closer female friends witnessed destructive behavior that they felt was prompted by his service in Afghanistan. For example, the suspect was said to have torn a towel rack off a wall after seeing lasagna that reminded him of dead bodies. His closer confidants also stated he had disturbing dreams that would wake him in the early morning hours. He was also said to have a short temper and would yell and vent. Despite this destructiveness, his friends who witnessed these behaviors said he was never physically violent toward them.

The suspect's closer friends said he expressed anger and hate towards civilians, especially college students. He felt these students were disrespectful to the military, were ignorant, and not understanding of his experiences and losses in the Marine Corps.

Many of the suspect's friends seemed to have lost contact with him sometime around 2016. One friend said the suspect "excommunicated" everybody by changing his phone number, deleting social media, and becoming reclusive. One close friend cut contact with the suspect in 2015 because the suspect had become so angry, and the relationship was "too much."

Collective statements indicate the suspect was committed to physical fitness and personal hygiene prior to, during, and immediately after his military service. However, a few years prior to the Borderline shooting, he gained weight and no longer maintained high standards of hygiene.

When asked by investigators, one of the suspect's friends said the suspect had talked about mass shootings. Specifically, the suspect said he did not think mass shootings were preventable, and he found it "pathetic" that people would pray following such an event. He referred to the "kids" committing mass shootings as "pussies."

Several of the friends that were interviewed during the investigation stated the suspect had been to the Borderline on many occasions.

Neighbors of the suspect described him as unpleasant and antisocial, and they were all aware he was a military veteran. Some suspected he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following an incident at the suspect's house in April 2018 to which the police were summoned for a "subject disturbing" call.

There were multiple reporting parties for the aforementioned subject disturbing call, one of whom was the suspect's mother. The suspect's mother reported she believed the suspect was suffering from severe PTSD and was refusing to seek help. The sheriff's dispatcher handling the call asked if the suspect would be hostile toward law enforcement, to which she replied, "It's a high probability." Initially, the suspect refused to answer the door for deputies, although he later claimed he was unaware they were outside. The suspect's mother said she was afraid of the suspect, and said he had destroyed the interior of the residence earlier in the day. The suspect had punched holes in the walls and destroyed a chair. The suspect agreed to meet with a mental health crisis team. They responded to the residence and eventually determined the suspect was not an immediate danger to himself or others.

## WEAPONS

The weapon the suspect used during the shooting was a Glock .45 caliber semi-automatic handgun. Investigators determined the suspect lawfully purchased the handgun in August of 2016, more than two years before the Borderline shooting. When investigators delved into the suspect's financial history, records showed he purchased multiple high-capacity handgun magazines in October 2016. He purchased smoke grenades, night sights, and tactical weapon-mounted light/laser(s) in November 2016. In December 2016, the suspect purchased additional high-capacity magazine.



**Photo 7:** Suspect's Glock 21 with mounted "Viridian" tactical laser/light.

The suspect brought 190 rounds to the Borderline, and fired a total of 61 rounds that evening.

## PYROTECHNIC DEVICES

As previously mentioned, the suspect bought smoke grenades in November 2016. On the night of the incident, the suspect used two different models of smoke grenades from the same manufacturer, Enola Gaye (EG). One of the grenades used was “Cover Smoke EG18X,” which is activated by pulling a wire. The smoke emitted from this grenade is white. In addition, the suspect used five “YPO2Y Smoke Grenades,” which are also wire pull activated and emit smoke colors including purple, yellow, green, orange, and white.



**Photo 8:** Smoke grenades collected as evidence.

In addition to smoke grenades, the suspect used two “TNT Ground Bloom Flower” fireworks. These fireworks are considered “Safe and Sane,” and are ignited by lighting a fuse. In total, the suspect had 10 different pyrotechnic devices to distribute smoke within the building, eight of which he deployed (six smoke grenades and two fireworks).

## ELECTRONIC DEVICES

Historical records containing Call Detail Records (CDRs) and GPS location information were provided by the suspect’s cell phone carrier in response to a search warrant. In comparison to the amount of cell phone activity a typical person generates, the suspect had very limited historical information on his iPhone. The suspect’s cell phone account was established on January 29, 2018. It had been active for approximately 10 months prior to the Borderline incident. There were approximately 2,700 phone events during that time.

There were only 65 total outgoing events, 31 of which were calls to a variety of “800” numbers, mostly consisting of credit bureaus and financial institutions. There are large gaps (days and weeks) in the suspect’s cell phone CDRs where there was no activity.

The suspect’s cell phone only appeared to travel to the area of the Borderline Bar and Grill on two occasions before November 7, 2018. The

public phone number for the Borderline did not appear in the CDRs for the suspect's cell phone, but Google records did show searches for the Borderline Bar and Grill.

In examining the suspect's iPhone, investigators found many references to video games, pornography, marijuana, fast food establishments, and baseball. The suspect had accounts with Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

## PHONE NOTES

On November 7, 2018, during the shooting at the Borderline, the suspect posted two messages to his "Timeline" on Facebook. At 11:24 p.m., the suspect posted, "It's too bad I won't get to see all the illogical and pathetic reasons people will put in my mouth as to why I did it. Fact is I had no reason to do it, and just thought...fuck it, life is boring so why not?"

At 11:27 p.m., the suspect posted on both Facebook and Instagram, "I hope people call me insane (laughing emojis). wouldn't that just be a big ball of irony? Yeah... I'm insane, but the only thing you people do after these shootings is "hopes and prayers".. or "keep you in my thoughts" ... every time... and wonder why these keep happening ..."

The suspect visited websites that demonstrate a propensity for mass violence, suicide, and murder. The majority of these searches occurred from approximately December 2017 to November 1, 2018. The suspect visited websites containing information about the military, marijuana, the death penalty in California, suicide rates by profession, a concert bombing in London, a mass shooting at a school in Texas, body armor protection, how and why people become serial killers, and the movie *The Purge*, to name a few.

The suspect also visited the Borderline Bar and Grill website on January 16, 2018, October 16, 2018, October 22, 2018, October 31, 2018, and again on November 1, 2018 — six days before the incident.

Additional electronic devices that were accessed also gave investigators a snapshot of the suspect's travels throughout his life, confirmed his combat service while in Afghanistan, and supported statements that the suspect withdrew from friends and family in the months leading up to the attack at the Borderline.

## MOTIVE

The suspect did not leave behind a manifesto outlining his reasoning for the killings, nor did he leave behind a vast digital footprint that might have provided investigators with pertinent data to evaluate and interpret.

Efforts to pinpoint either a triggering mechanism or a time frame when the suspect put his plan in motion presented a challenge. We will likely never know the true motivation behind the attack.



# BACKGROUND INFORMATION

## PURPOSE

This review will examine critical aspects of the response and investigation, with the goal that this analysis will encourage discussion of the decisions made and actions taken. A committee of subject matter experts was convened to examine the incident. The committee endeavored to identify lessons learned to assist the Ventura County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies in planning and training the response for active shooter events.

The committee was sensitive to the trauma suffered by the survivors and avoided re-interviewing them whenever possible. Information was obtained by reviewing witness statements and interviews provided directly to law enforcement as part of the investigation.

While it is clear that anyone present at the Borderline at the time of the shooting was a victim, for the purposes of this review, only those killed or injured are referred to as such. Those present but not injured are referred to as patrons.

The committee identified the following topics to be reviewed:

- Sheriff's Communication Center (dispatch)
- The response by patrol personnel
- The tactics used by officers on scene
- The reunification center
- The investigation
- Policy and training
- The use of equipment
- Post incident victims assistance
- Post incident employee wellness

## DATA COLLECTION

The committee was given access to all materials available to the investigators, and reviewed hundreds of pages of documents, videos, photos, and audio files.



## VENTURA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

The Ventura County Sheriff's Office has six patrol stations that provide services to the unincorporated areas of Ventura County and the five cities that contract with the sheriff's office for police services. The contract cities include Camarillo, Fillmore, Moorpark, Ojai, and Thousand Oaks. The sheriff's office employs roughly 750 sworn and 450 professional staff members. The Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team is a collateral assignment, meaning deputies are assigned to other full-time assignments, such as investigations, custody division, or patrol, and respond as a SWAT contingent when needed. The SWAT team trains together a minimum of 20 hours per month. The sheriff's office Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) and Bomb Team are also collateral assignments.



The Borderline Bar and Grill is located in the city of Thousand Oaks. A sheriff's commander acts as the chief of police for the city of Thousand Oaks and a sheriff's captain acts as the assistant chief of police. Deputies assigned to the Thousand Oaks Police station were the first sheriff's office members to respond to the Borderline shooting. As the incident unfolded, deputies assigned to other patrol stations responded, as did numerous off-duty personnel who were called to the event.

Additionally, numerous local agencies responded to the scene to provide assistance to the sheriff's office.

## CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY PATROL

The California Highway Patrol (CHP) provides uniformed traffic law enforcement and response to emergency incidents throughout the state. Primary highway jurisdiction includes all freeways, as well as all highways in unincorporated areas. Additionally, the CHP provides general law enforcement, investigative, and safety services on state property and for state employees throughout California.



The CHP is divided geographically into eight field divisions throughout the state, employing approximately 7,600 sworn officers and 3,300 professional staff members. The Moorpark Area Office, which includes the city of Thousand Oaks, is part of the Coastal Division, which is staffed by 43 employees, 37 of which are sworn.

There were four Moorpark Area CHP officers on duty at the time of the incident. All four of the Moorpark Area officers responded to the incident and played an active role.

CHP personnel of various ranks assigned to other Coastal Division field and investigative offices also responded. In addition to scene and investigative assistance, they assumed administrative responsibility for the officer involved shooting related to their officer.

## OXNARD POLICE DEPARTMENT

The City of Oxnard is the largest city in Ventura County and the 20th largest city in California. Oxnard is home to an estimated 210,000 people. The Oxnard Police Department (OPD) employs approximately 249 sworn officers and 126 professional staff members. In 2018, the OPD received approximately 365,000 calls into the dispatch center and generated roughly 136,000 calls for service. The OPD has a K-9 unit and a full-time SWAT team.

The full-time SWAT team is supplemented by a collateral squad of SWAT operators. The SWAT team trains over 40 hours a month and the collateral SWAT operators train 30 hours a month. On the night of the Borderline incident, 10 OPD on-duty officers, including two patrol sergeants and an armored rescue vehicle, responded.



The on-duty OPD officers responded Code 3 (lights and sirens) for approximately 20 miles to the incident site. The first unit on-scene was a patrol sergeant with prior SWAT experience. He was part of the second team that made entry into the building. The additional patrol officers and sergeant arrived on-scene together and checked in with a sheriff's office sergeant, who assigned them duties around the perimeter of the building. Once the building was cleared, they escorted victims to a designated location. Off-duty OPD SWAT and K-9 officers subsequently arrived together and were directed to clear the crawl space on the north side of the building. About two hours after the incident began, two Violent Crimes Unit detectives responded to Saint John's Regional Medical Center in Oxnard to assist with victim and witness interviews.

## SIMI VALLEY POLICE DEPARTMENT

Simi Valley is the third largest city in Ventura County and is located in the eastern area of the County, adjacent to Thousand Oaks. The Simi Valley Police Department (SVPD) consists of 118 sworn personnel and 50 professional staff members. Simi Valley is 42 square miles and home to an estimated 127,000 people. The Simi Valley Police Department has a part-time SWAT team and

four K-9 handlers. On the night of the Borderline incident, 17 SVPD officers responded to the scene. The response included a patrol sergeant, two K-9 officers, patrol officers, SWAT, and traffic personnel. In addition, two SVPD dispatchers and a SVPD dispatch supervisor assisted with transferring calls and sharing information about victims still hiding inside the Borderline.



One of the first SVPD officers on scene helped with the rescue effort for Sergeant Helus. He and numerous other SVPD personnel became part of a multiagency entry team that cleared the bar and dance floor areas.

## VENTURA COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT POLICE DEPARTMENT

The Ventura County Community College District Police Department (VCCCDPD) is responsible for providing a safe learning environment at three main campus locations: Moorpark College, Oxnard College, and Ventura College. The department is comprised of 15 sworn police officers, two community service officers, and 25 police cadets.



A VCCCDPD officer responded from the Moorpark College campus when the Borderline shooting occurred and became a member of the multi-agency team that entered the establishment and searched for the shooter and additional patrons hidden inside.

## VENTURA COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT

The Ventura County Fire Department (VCFD) is an all-hazard fire department providing service to more than 480,000 citizens in the unincorporated areas of Ventura County and the cities of Ojai, Port Hueneme, Moorpark, Camarillo, Santa Paula, Simi Valley, and Thousand Oaks. All fire and medical related calls are managed by the department's regional Fire Communications Center (FCC) with trained emergency medical dispatchers. All firefighters are trained at the Tactical Emergency Medical Support (TEMS) First Responder Operational (FRO) level. Nine firefighters are trained to the TEMS Specialist level.



On the night of the Borderline shooting, seven fire engines and three support companies, for a total of 53 personnel, responded to the Borderline.

In 2013, the Ventura County Fire Department partnered with the Ventura County Sheriff's Office to adopt and develop a Rescue Task Force (RTF) program. The RTF is a widely utilized program designed to get emergency medical care to victims of critical incidents as quickly as possible. In the case of an active shooter, the RTF would consist of law enforcement personnel providing force protection to fire personnel as they move to provide treatment to victims. The assembly of RTF teams is designed to occur at a unified command post, whether it be permanent or temporary, and is done by the law enforcement incident commander or their designee. VCFD personnel were prepared and ready to deploy as an RTF. Six VCFD personnel (four TEMS FRO's and two TEMS Specialists) made entry into the Borderline with law enforcement.

## VENTURA POLICE DEPARTMENT

The Ventura Police Department (VPD) provides law enforcement services for the city of Ventura, which is formally known as the City of San Buenaventura and home to approximately 110,000 residents. The Ventura Police Department has 140 sworn officers and 50 professional staff members. The Ventura Police Department, like the sheriff's office, has a collateral SWAT team, whose members respond as a SWAT contingent when there is a need.



On the evening of November 7, 2018, the Ventura Police Department had 16 patrol officers on duty. When the shooting occurred, eight of those officers and the on-duty watch commander responded to the Borderline. Five of the nine VPD personnel that responded to the Borderline were current members of the SWAT team and two others were former members. Two of VPD's personnel were assigned to perimeter positions, and five others were partnered with two VCFD TEMS Specialists and assigned to look for victims inside the Borderline. One of VPD's K-9's was assigned to the sheriff's office bomb squad to search for explosive devices.

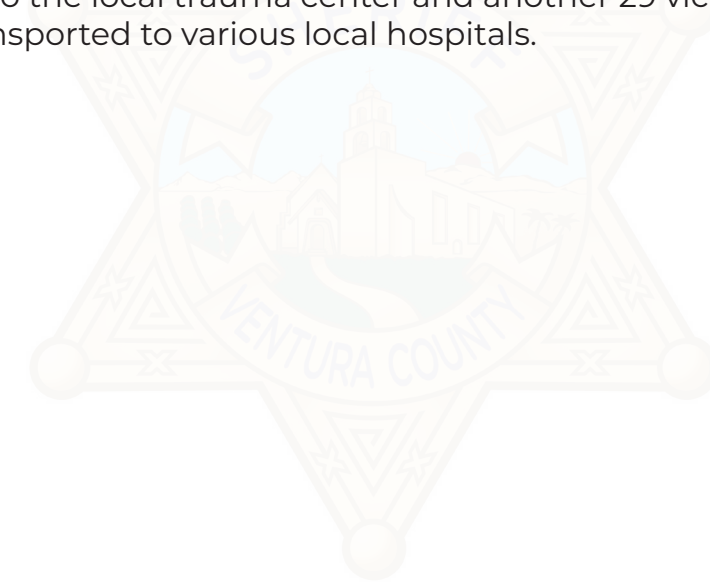
## VENTURA COUNTY EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

The Ventura County Emergency Medical Services (VCEMS) serves as the lead agency for the emergency medical services system in the county. VCEMS is responsible for coordinating the response to local disasters and multi-casualty incidents. During the response to the Borderline incident, VCEMS duty officer personnel were assigned to the incident command post to coordinate medical resources, ambulance response,



patient tracking, and communications with local hospitals. Additional VCEMS personnel responded to staff the medical branch at the county Emergency Operations Center (EOC), served as a medical liaison at the reunification center, and assisted the critical incident stress management and peer support teams that were activated to support with the debriefing of the numerous first responders involved.

In response to the Borderline incident, one American Medical Response paramedic ambulance and a paramedic supervisor were initially dispatched to respond to the Borderline. It became clear that there were numerous casualties and additional resources were requested. Six additional paramedic ambulances from AMR, one ambulance from Gold Coast, and 11 mutual-aid ambulances from neighboring Los Angeles County were requested. Additionally, an AMR disaster medical support unit, which provided a mobile cache of medical equipment, and two additional paramedic supervisors responded. A total of 19 ambulances were assigned to the Borderline incident and most were staged at a nearby shopping mall. In all, two victims were transported by ambulance to the local trauma center and another 29 victims with minor injuries self-transported to various local hospitals.



# Agencies Providing Investigative Assistance

Once the scene was secured and the suspect was confirmed dead, the long, arduous process of investigation began. Numerous resources were provided by partnering agencies to assist sheriff's detectives with the investigation.

## BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, FIREARMS & EXPLOSIVES

The ATF provided the sheriff's office information and records related to the firearm used by the shooter, and assisted with serving a search warrant at Smokin' Barrel Guns in Simi Valley, California, where the suspect lawfully purchased the handgun used in the shooting.

## DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

In response to the Borderline shooting, the Department of Defense sent an agent in charge to the scene to assist with the investigation by quickly and efficiently providing sheriff's office investigators with information, records, and relevant data regarding the suspect's time in the U.S. Marine Corps.

## FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is the primary investigative agency of the federal government and has the authority and responsibility to investigate all violations of federal law that are not exclusively assigned to another federal agency.

The FBI employs roughly 35,000 people, including special agents and support professionals such as intelligence analysts, language specialists, scientists, and information technology specialists. The FBI's Los Angeles Field Office covers a majority of Southern California. FBI field offices are further subdivided into smaller resident agency offices which have responsibility over specific areas. The Ventura resident agency's area of responsibility includes Ventura County and the southern half of Santa Barbara County.

On the night of November 7, 2018, FBI Special Agents from both the Ventura resident agency and the Los Angeles Field Office responded to the Borderline. As the investigation and response unfolded, FBI resources were deployed to supplement FBI Los Angeles resources, including personnel from the FBI laboratory in Quantico, Virginia, and special agents and professional

staff from surrounding field offices, including San Diego, San Francisco, Sacramento, Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City. The FBI's response included victim services, investigative assistance, technical assistance related to the processing of the crime scene, and post-attack behavioral analysis. In all, almost 200 members of the FBI contributed to the investigation of the Borderline shooting.

## **NEVADA GAMING CONTROL BOARD**

The Nevada Gaming Control Board (NGC) is involved in the regulation of gaming and enforcement of Nevada gaming laws throughout the state. Las Vegas casino gambling chips were found in the suspect's vehicle by sheriff's office investigators. The NGC assisted investigators by providing information regarding the shooter's gambling habits and history.

## **SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HIGH TECH TASK FORCE, VENTURA COUNTY**

The SCHTTF Ventura County office was created in 2001 and is jointly managed and staffed by the Ventura County District Attorney's Office and the Ventura County Sheriff's Office.

The High-Tech Task Force is also responsible for the forensic examination of all types of digital evidence, including computers, cellular phones, and other computer-based equipment. The High-Tech Task Force assisted investigators in examining cell phones left at the scene by patrons.

## **VENTURA COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE**

The Ventura County District Attorney's Office (VCDAO) employs approximately 277 individuals. The Bureau of Investigation is the law enforcement arm of the VCDAO and consists of approximately 52 sworn investigators. The Bureau of Investigation works in partnership with approximately 100 deputy district attorneys.

The VCDAO sent 15 investigators to the scene. Investigators were sent to multiple hospitals to attempt to interview witnesses to the incident. In the aftermath of the shooting, the Bureau conducted approximately 70 interviews. On the day of Sergeant Ron Helus' funeral, the Bureau assumed responsibility for the crime scene to allow Ventura County Sheriff's Office personnel to attend the funeral. The Bureau's Special Response Team also provided security for multiple Borderline victims' forums. The Bureau, along with VCDAO and FBI victim advocates, coordinated the return of property to the victims after the crime scene was secured.

VCDAO deployed its Crime Victim Services Unit in the hours following the shooting. These victim advocates were tasked with staffing the reunification center in Thousand Oaks.





# Assistance with Processing The Crime Scene

Numerous agencies also responded to assist with processing the crime scene. The Beverly Hills Police Department, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, Oxnard Police Department, Santa Monica Police Department, Simi Valley Police Department, and Ventura Police Department all provided officers and investigators with specialized training in the use of 3D laser scanning equipment.

## REUNIFICATION CENTER

The Ventura County Sheriff's Office, working with the Conejo Recreation and Parks District (CRPD), established a family reunification center. The location was used not only to provide a place for concerned family members and friends to locate their loved ones, but also to provide support and information. Numerous local agencies responded and provided assistance at this location. The primary agencies involved in the reunification center were:

- Ventura County Sheriff's Office
- Ventura County District Attorney's Office Crime Victim's Assistance Unit
- Ventura County Office of Emergency Services
- Ventura County Medical Examiner's Office
- Ventura County Behavioral Health
- Federal Bureau of Investigations

## THOUSAND OAKS ASSISTANCE CENTER

On November 9, 2018 an assistance center was opened in Thousand Oaks, located in Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks' office. The assistance center provided resources and information to the families of those killed or injured in the shooting. It was also a location where patrons who had fled the shooting could retrieve personal property that had been left behind.

The primary agencies involved in the assistance center were:

- Ventura County District Attorney's Office Crime Victims' Assistance Unit
- Ventura County Behavioral Health
- Ventura County Veteran Services Office
- Ventura County Work Force Development
- Ventura County Community Foundation

- Federal Bureau of Investigation
- California Governor's Office of Emergency Services
- California Victims Compensation Program
- California Division of Workers Compensation
- Interface Children and Family Services/211
- American Red Cross
- United States Social Security Administration
- Christina Grimmie Foundation
- Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office Crime Victim Services Unit
- Kern County District Attorney's Office Crime Victim Services Unit
- Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office Victim-Witness Unit



# Timeline of Events

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The following is a summary of notable events obtained by reviewing 911 phone calls, sheriff's office radio transmissions, Borderline Bar and Grill surveillance cameras, surveillance cameras from an adjacent building, body-worn camera footage, and the CHP dash camera and MVARs audio recording system.

11:18:24 p.m.	The suspect entered the Borderline from the main entrance and immediately started shooting. Patrons began to flee the building through doors and windows.
11:18:36 p.m.	The suspect entered the front office located near the reception desk at the main entrance and threw multiple smoke grenades from the office into the bar. One smoke grenade was thrown on the ground directly outside the office door.
11:18:53 p.m.	The suspect shot at patrons from inside the office.
11:18:57 p.m.	The slide on the suspect's handgun can be seen locking to the rear (indicating the gun was empty). The suspect, in a tactical manner, repositioned himself away from the office doorway, using cover and concealment while he conducted a tactical "speed load."
11:19:04 p.m.	After inserting a fresh magazine into his handgun, the suspect approached the office doorway while holding the gun with both hands in a "low ready" position. He quickly peeked out the doorway and then stepped back into the office.
11:19:10 p.m.	Two CHP officers on a nearby traffic stop are approached by an unknown male who informed them of the shooting inside the Borderline. The CHP officers ended their traffic stop. One CHP officer broadcasts over CHP frequency that there were reports of shots fired at the Borderline.
11:19:14 p.m.	The first call of shots fired at the Borderline was received by the Sheriff's Communication Center (dispatch). A reporting party (RP) reported hearing six to eight shots, but he did not directly observe anything.
11:19:17 p.m.	From the office, the suspect deployed three more smoke grenades into the bar area.
11:19:30 p.m.	Another RP called dispatch and provided the first description of the shooter.

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- 11:19:37 p.m. The suspect turned off the lights in the office, activated the handgun-mounted laser sight, and exited the office.
- 11:19:44 p.m. Dispatch sent two patrol units to the Borderline for an assault with a deadly weapon. Dispatch advised the units that a person is inside shooting.
- 11:19:52 p.m. The suspect walked around the interior of the Borderline shooting at patrons who were attempting to hide or flee.
- 11:20:18 p.m. Dispatch sent Sergeant Helus to the call. He was not one of those originally sent. Sergeant Helus advised dispatch he was already en route.
- 11:20:40 p.m. CHP officers arrived at the south parking lot of the Borderline. They are immediately approached by several patrons, one of whom described the suspect as a white male wearing black clothing.
- 11:22:08 p.m. Sergeant Helus advised dispatch over the radio that he had arrived on scene.
- 11:22:36 p.m. Sergeant Helus broadcast over the radio that CHP was on scene, and patrons were informing him there may have been two shooters. He added there was at least one victim outside.
- 11:23:01 p.m. One additional sheriff's unit arrived at the Borderline, followed by two more about 30 seconds later.
- 11:23:57 p.m. The suspect returned to the office. He left the lights off.
- 11:24:03 p.m. The suspect retrieved his cell phone from his pocket and can be seen manipulating the phone with his left hand.
- 11:24:06 p.m. Sergeant Helus exited his vehicle and began directing additional responding units to the north side of the building in case the shooter had "gone over the wall or the fence toward the north." The CHP officers met Sergeant Helus in the parking lot. All three moved toward the main entrance.
- 11:24:31 p.m. In the office, the suspect manipulated his cell phone. He looked up at a television monitor, which was mounted on the east wall within the office. This monitor was used to display the Borderline's surveillance camera system, which gave the suspect a full view of nine different surveillance cameras within the bar, including the camera that captured the front porch where Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer would soon enter.

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- 11:25:11 p.m. Sergeant Helus and the CHP officers arrived at the stairs leading to the front porch area and main entrance of the Borderline. Sergeant Helus communicated with a patron outside the Borderline in an effort to gather intelligence on the location of the suspect.
- 11:25:25 p.m. After having walked up the steps to the main entrance, Sergeant Helus saw a victim by the door. One CHP officer moved to a position directly behind Sergeant Helus.
- 11:25:29 p.m. While Sergeant Helus was at the threshold of the main entrance doorway, the suspect placed his phone on the office desk. The suspect then gripped his handgun with two hands and directed his attention to the office door. The suspect approached the door with his gun raised at chest level. He peeked out the office doorway, then moved back deeper into the office.
- 11:25:37 p.m. Sergeant Helus crossed the threshold of the front door and took one step inside of the bar. He then made the announcement, "Sheriff's department!"
- 11:25:43 p.m. Sergeant Helus' weapon-mounted light panned inside the Borderline front entrance. The suspect was still inside the office with his back against the west wall, looking toward the office doorway. Sergeant Helus told to the CHP officer, "We got multiple people down." Sergeant Helus began to pan back and forth with his weapon-mounted light for approximately 30 seconds, illuminating the inside of the bar.
- 11:25:50 p.m. Sergeant Helus broadcast over his portable radio that there were numerous victims inside and the need for emergency medical personnel.
- 11:26:05 p.m. The suspect moved toward the office doorway with his handgun pointed toward the opening.
- 11:26:08 p.m. Sergeant Helus panned his rifle to his right, and as he did, his light illuminated the open door to the office where the suspect was located. As Sergeant Helus' light illuminated the office doorway and partially into the office, the suspect quickly retreated further back into the office, placing his back against the west wall outside the area illuminated by Sergeant Helus' light.
- 11:26:15 p.m. Sergeant Helus and one CHP officer moved into the bar. The second CHP officer remained outside at the base of the stairs. As Sergeant Helus entered, the suspect moved toward the office doorway again with his handgun drawn and pointed toward the opening. The suspect arrived at the office door and peeked out the doorway in Sergeant Helus' direction.

11:26:20 p.m.

As Sergeant Helus moved forward, he panned his rifle from side to side, which caused the light on his rifle to illuminate the office entrance/doorway once again. As Sergeant Helus' light illuminated the entrance to the office, the suspect once again retreated deeper into the office.

11:26:23 p.m.

Sergeant Helus continued to slowly move forward in the bar. He was followed by one CHP officer. With two hands on his handgun and slightly bent at the waist, the suspect again moved toward the office doorway with his handgun pointed toward the opening. As the suspect approached the threshold, he used the doorframe for cover and concealment. The suspect arrived at the office door and stepped through the threshold.

11:26:29 p.m.

The suspect opened fire on Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer from an estimated distance of 7 to 14 feet. Both Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer retreated toward the front doors. The CHP officer made it outside.

Sergeant Helus tripped on a velvet rope connected to two security stanchions located just inside the building's front doors. As Sergeant Helus tripped, he simultaneously forced the closed front door open with the right side of his body. Sergeant Helus fell forward onto his chest/stomach at about the threshold of the propped open front door.

*Note: The office doorway opening was at a 90-degree angle from Sergeant Helus at the time the suspect began shooting. However, due to the manner in which the suspect positioned himself, he was behind Sergeant Helus when he began shooting.*

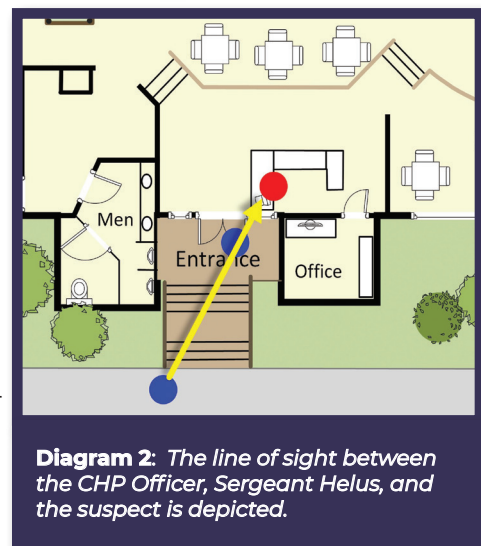
11:26:30 p.m.

The CHP officer reached the sidewalk at the base of the stairs and turned towards the entrance. He shouldered his rifle and scanned the porch area.

11:26:35 p.m.

Sergeant Helus crawled on his hands and knees just outside the entrance of the bar.

Sergeant Helus attempted to stand. At the same time, the suspect leaned over the front counter inside the Borderline and shot through the open door of the main entrance toward Sergeant Helus. Simultaneously, the CHP officer who entered the building with Sergeant Helus, fired one round from his rifle, immediately followed by several additional rounds toward the front entrance area. Sergeant Helus fell onto his chest on the porch just outside the front doors.



**Diagram 2:** The line of sight between the CHP Officer, Sergeant Helus, and the suspect is depicted.

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- 11:26:37 p.m. The suspect retreated and re-entered the office.
- 11:26:41 p.m. The suspect exited the front office.
- 11:26:43 p.m. A deputy on scene broadcast shots were being fired at the front entrance.
- 11:26:44 p.m. The CHP officer broadcast, "Officer down" and "11-99" over the CHP frequency.
- 11:26:45 p.m. The suspect reached over the front counter and began shooting again through the front entrance doors in the direction of Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer, who was still near the base of the stairs. Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer both returned fire.
- 11:26:50 p.m. The CHP officer retreated from his position to a concrete walkway and fired two additional shots.
- 11:26:51 p.m. The suspect re-entered the office and remained there for the duration of the incident.
- 11:26:52 p.m. The CHP officer moved down a concrete stairway to a small alcove of the adjacent medical plaza.
- 11:26:57 p.m. While in the office, the suspect manipulated his cell phone.
- 11:27:06 p.m. The suspect deployed another smoke grenade, then manipulated his cell phone again.
- 11:27:07 p.m. A second sheriff's sergeant on scene advised dispatch that multiple shots were being fired.
- 11:27:12 p.m. The second CHP officer confirmed with CHP dispatch there was a sheriff's deputy down at the scene.
- 11:27:14 p.m. The suspect manipulated his cell phone.
- 11:27:43 p.m. The suspect looked out the opening of the doorway into the bar area. The suspect then backed into the office, but kept his eyes focused on the doorway.

11:28:00 p.m.	The suspect appeared to manipulate his cell phone.
11:28:06 p.m.	Sheriff's dispatch broadcast, "Units at the Borderline, we do, we're land-line with some witnesses and victims that are inside the bathrooms."
11:28:28 p.m.	The suspect set his cell phone down on the desk and held his gun in his right hand. The suspect appears focused on the doorway. He then moved toward the office door, while transitioning to a two-handed grip on his handgun. The suspect pointed the gun out the office doorway.
11:28:42 p.m.	The suspect appeared to manipulate his cell phone again.
11:29:20 p.m.	The suspect again peered out the office doorway while keeping his handgun pointed out in front of his body. He then stepped back deeper into the office. The suspect turned on the tactical light mounted on his handgun and illuminated the desk and television/computer monitor on the wall. He looked up at the surveillance monitor mounted on the wall.
11:29:45 p.m.	Both the CHP officers moved back to their patrol car.
11:30:13 p.m.	The suspect looked out the office doorway with his handgun pointed in the direction of the front entrance doors. The suspect then stepped back into the office and looked up toward the surveillance monitor.
11:30:30 p.m.	The suspect dialed 9-1-1 from the office landline. The suspect held the landline phone to his left ear and continued looking toward the doorway.
11:30:47 p.m.	While the suspect was holding the landline phone to his ear, a sheriff's dispatcher answered. The call lasted for 1 minute and 5 seconds; the suspect never spoke.
11:31:47 p.m.	A deputy on scene broadcast over the radio that a sergeant was down. The deputy obtained this information from the CHP officers. Dispatch did not acknowledge the transmission, nor did any other deputies on scene, because the deputy's transmission was "covered," or transmitted over, by dispatch.
11:31:48 p.m.	The suspect manipulated his cell phone.
11:31:51 p.m.	An RP called dispatch and reported he was hiding in the attic of the Borderline with approximately 10 other people.
11:32:25 p.m.	The suspect moved away from the west wall over to the doorway and looked outside.



11:32:54 p.m.

The suspect appeared to be removing items from his pockets and placing them on the office desk.



**Photo 9:** The following items were located on top of the desk along the north wall and appear to have been left by the suspect: cell phone, live smoke grenade, six 26-round handgun magazines, three smoke grenade pins with wires attached, a lighter, and one "Atomic Beam" hand-held flashlight.

11:33:22 p.m.

The suspect pressed a button on the landline phone. He picked up the phone and placed it to his ear. He moved back to the wall and again looked up at the surveillance monitor.

11:33:35 p.m.

The suspect placed the landline handset on the desk. He continued to stare at the surveillance monitor on the wall of the office.

11:34:35 p.m.

The suspect briefly exited the office and placed an additional light (the same type of light mounted to his handgun) on top of the front entry display case, located a few feet from the office door. The beam of light pointed towards the patio door. (Investigators theorize the suspect did this in an effort to make deputies believe he was pointing a weapon at the patio door, keeping responding officers at bay or forcing them to find another means of entry.)

11:34:43 p.m.

A sheriff's sergeant told two deputies with rifles to go to the front of the Borderline to see if they could make contact with Sergeant Helus.

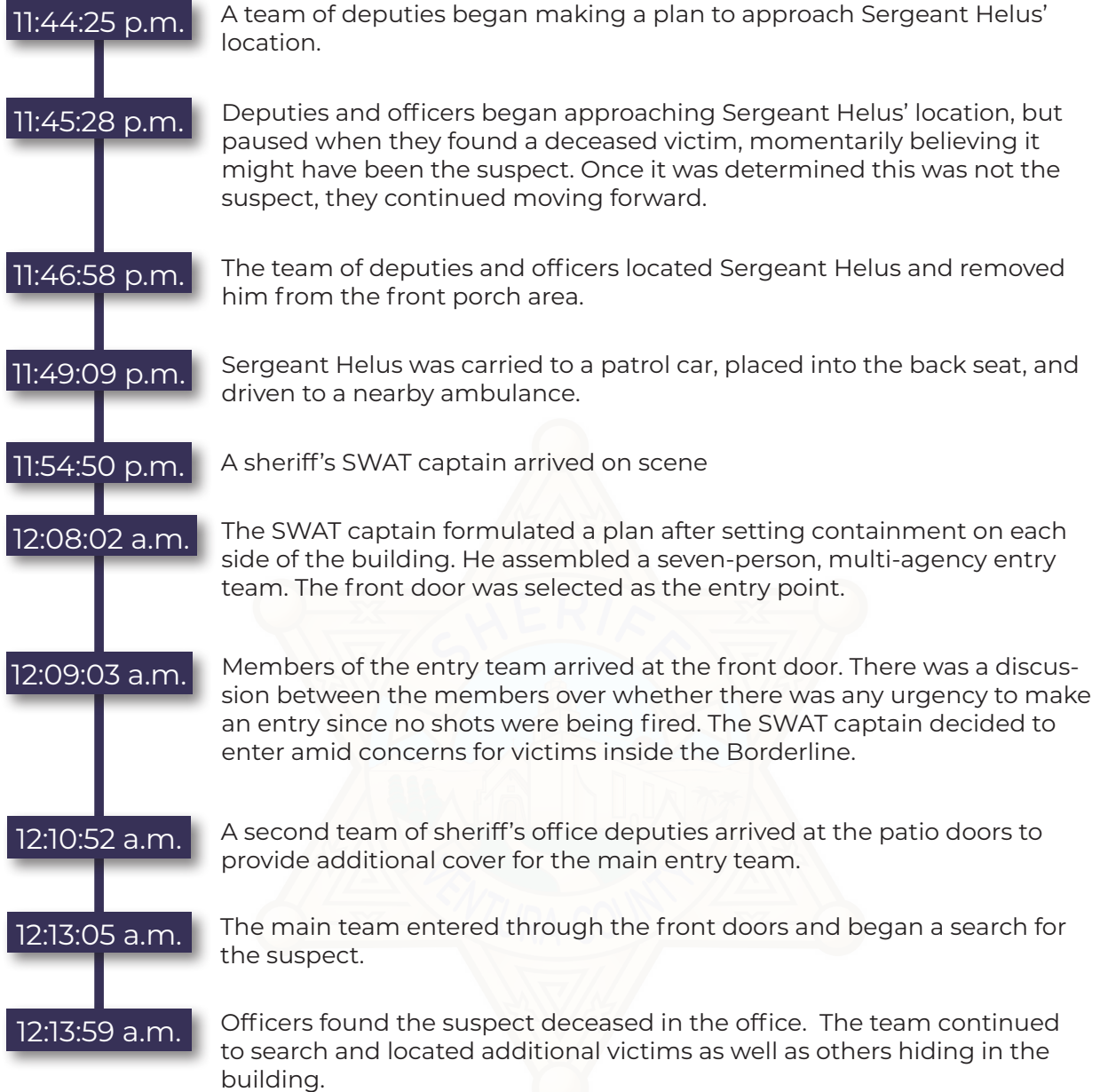
11:35:15 p.m.

Deputies on scene began a roll call of units on scene and their locations. There were approximately 14 uniformed officers on scene: one sergeant (in addition to Sergeant Helus), 11 deputies, and two CHP officers. All were holding perimeter positions.

11:35:38 p.m.

The suspect peeked out the office door, then backed into the office.

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- 11:36:10 p.m. The tactical light from Sergeant Helus' rifle began to dim and eventually turned off.
- 11:36:13 p.m. The suspect manipulated his cell phone, then looked to the doorway while holding his handgun at eye level.
- 11:36:46 p.m. The two deputies who were sent to make contact with Sergeant Helus arrived near the front of the Borderline. From their positions, neither deputy could see Sergeant Helus.
- 11:37:00 p.m. The suspect manipulated his cell phone once again.
- 11:37:06 p.m. The suspect looked at the surveillance camera monitor, then to the doorway of the office. The suspect appeared to remove items from his pockets and placed the items on the desk while watching the surveillance monitor.
- 11:37:09 p.m. Sheriff's dispatch broadcasted, "Units also, one victim, correction, one RP advised the suspect was a Middle Eastern, with a beard, early 20's, wearing a black beanie, black sweatshirt, and a black jacket."
- 11:37:43 p.m. The suspect lit a firework device and threw it out of the office.
- 11:38:12 p.m. The suspect lit a second firework and threw it out of the office.
- 11:38:51 p.m. The suspect killed himself using his own handgun. A deputy at the front of the Borderline reported hearing one shot.
- 11:39:11 p.m. Dispatch advised deputies on scene that a female was in the bathroom. She did not have an update and did not hear any shots.
- 11:39:21 p.m. The second sergeant on scene asked dispatch if SWAT is en route. Dispatch advised that the Watch Commander was notifying them.
- 11:41:27 p.m. A deputy at the front of the Borderline was joined by the CHP officer who was involved in the gunfight with Sergeant Helus. The CHP officer told the deputy about the gun fight and that Sergeant Helus was hit and currently on the porch area of the Borderline.
- 11:42:12 p.m. The information about Sergeant Helus being shot and his location was shared with other deputies and officers on scene. They began planning an approach to rescue him.
- 11:43:23 p.m. A deputy informed dispatch that Sergeant Helus was down and unresponsive. Dispatch acknowledged the transmission.



# Initial Response

## SHERIFF'S DISPATCH, THE WATCH COMMANDER, & RADIO COMMUNICATIONS

The Sheriff's Communication Center (dispatch) is located in the city of Ventura, California. The area commonly referred to as dispatch is a large room with an open floor plan with 11 workstations. Seven workstations are configured with full radio and dispatch capabilities, three are configured for the answering of calls from the public, and one serves as the supervisor's workstation.

There are five additional workstations located in the Advanced Real Time Information Center (ARTIC), a specialized assignment located within dispatch. ARTIC staff members are fully trained dispatchers who serve as an investigative resource to patrol deputies and detectives. They research various databases and provide staff with comprehensive information that can help identify suspects. They provide real time information to officers in the field and network with other law enforcement agencies. The ARTIC stations are not capable of taking 911 calls or broadcasting radio transmissions to patrol deputies. The patrol watch commander's office is also located within dispatch, directly next to the dispatch supervisor's workstation and the ARTIC office.

The radio channels are divided into three areas of responsibility. Channel 1 covers the West County areas, which are patrolled by deputies assigned to the Camarillo, Fillmore, Headquarters, and Ojai stations. Channel 3 covers the East County areas, which include the contract cities of Thousand Oaks and Moorpark, as well as the unincorporated areas of Simi Valley and Oak Park. Channel 2 is primarily reserved for tasks, such as running subjects for warrants. Deputies are typically dispatched to calls on Channels 1 and 3. Dispatchers working Channels 1 and 3 are also responsible for updating deputies with pertinent information regarding their assigned calls for service and acknowledging and relaying the patrol deputies' radio transmissions to other deputies in the field.

## WATCH COMMANDER

The watch commander position is staffed by a sworn sheriff's office captain who is responsible for all patrol operations. The watch commander monitors radio traffic and communicates with patrol sergeants to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to any given incident. From their office, watch commanders have access to the computer aided dispatch (CAD) system and are able to review call information, communicate with deputies via their mobile data computer (MDC), and monitor deputy vehicle locations using a real time

mapping system. The watch commander also answers multiple phone calls, typically from other staff members and the media, makes administrative notifications, and, if necessary, approves the deployment of any additional resources, such as the SWAT team, bomb team, investigative units, and requests for mutual aid from neighboring agencies.

There is also a dispatch supervisor who is a civilian staff member who manages the dispatchers, monitors incoming telephone calls, listens to radio traffic, and keeps the watch commander apprised of any significant events.

At the time of the incident, dispatch was staffed at normal Wednesday night levels which consisted of one sheriff's captain serving as the patrol watch commander, one dispatch supervisor, three dispatchers working on the radio assignments, three call takers answering phones, and one ARTIC staff member. Call takers are responsible for answering the phone lines and entering the calls for service into the computer aided dispatch (CAD) system.

The sheriff's office dispatchers were the first members of the sheriff's office to learn of the event. As dispatchers began fielding related calls, the workload quickly expanded beyond the capacity of the staffing level. The dispatchers and call takers did well answering calls and relaying information to the deputies on scene. However, as with most large-scale incidents, there were breakdowns in communications within the dispatch center.

Dispatch received eighty-seven 911 calls within the first 15 minutes of the incident. For perspective, this is a 12-fold increase over a typical Wednesday night. As the volume of noise in the dispatch center rose, it became difficult for the watch commander to hear what was transpiring. The phone lines in the watch commander's office also began to ring continuously. The phone calls were from deputies in the field, uninvolved staff, and the media – all seeking information on the incident. The increased number of phone calls caused a delay in authorizing units to respond from other stations and the request for resources, such as SWAT, to the scene.

The dispatch supervisor sent an e-mail alert to off-duty dispatch staff requesting they respond to the dispatch. Due to the late hour, many dispatchers had gone to bed for the night and did not see the e-mail. When additional staff did arrive, the initial surge of emergency calls had subsided, but the added dispatchers were appropriately utilized to continue answering calls.

### **RECOMMENDATION #1**

*Agencies should consider using an automated communication system to activate additional resources. This would allow one person to simultaneously send a recorded message to a predetermined group of responders and electronically track the availability of the responders.*

### **RECOMMENDATION #2**

*Update sheriff's policy 330 (Mutual Aid and Outside Agency Assistance) to provide the watch commander with greater direction and specificity in requesting mutual aid from other local law enforcement agencies.*

### **RECOMMENDATION #3**

*Employ the "move-up philosophy" to assist the watch commander. Each uninvolved sheriff's office station had a sergeant working the evening of the Borderline shooting who could have been instructed to respond to the watch commander's office to assist with answering calls and other essential duties. The Ventura County Pre-Trial Detention Facility also shares the campus with dispatch and had two sergeants on duty. The watch commander can easily become overburdened with making notifications to executive staff, requesting additional resources such as the SWAT team, or contacting outside agencies for assistance. Additional staff can assist with these duties.*

## **THE INITIAL 9-1-1 CALLS**

The first 9-1-1 call was received by dispatch at approximately 11:19 p.m. The reporting party (RP) stated that he heard six to eight gunshots coming from inside the Borderline but did not see the shooter. The dispatcher working the call-taker position spoke with the RP and entered the call into the computer aided dispatch (CAD) as a "245 in progress" with shots being fired inside the business. The California Penal Code section for an assault with a deadly weapon (ADW) is 245. The dispatcher that was staffing the Channel 3 (East County) radio position assigned the call to three patrol units. All three units were told to respond Code 3 (lights and siren) to a "245 in progress with shots being fired inside the business." The dispatcher on Channel 3 broadcast the suspect was at the front and shooting at everyone at the bar and one victim had been shot and was bleeding at the entrance.

The ADW call type did not relay the full scope of an active shooter incident, nor did it prompt a greater initial response. At the time of the incident, there

was no active shooter call type coded into the CAD. An active shooter call code has since been created and implemented with dispatch personnel being trained on the new code use.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #4**

*Audit CAD call types to determine relevancy and appropriateness.*

## **THE CALL TAKERS**

As the incident developed, call takers in dispatch found it challenging to keep up with the number of calls coming into the center. It was equally difficult to obtain accurate and complete information from injured and panicked callers, who were yelling and screaming into their phones. In addition, dispatch received numerous calls from the surrounding homes and from family members who were calling to inquire about the well-being of the victims.

Calls that provide pertinent information are entered into the CAD computer system, which is then relayed to the Channel 3 dispatcher's computer for broadcast to deputies on scene. This process is repeated continuously as relevant information is received. The information is coded in such a way that the call slip (record of the incident) can be updated on critical details in an organized and retrievable manner.

Three call takers were receiving information and entering it into the call slip. These updates consisted of multiple lines of text and included information about patrons' injuries, locations, and suspect information. On the radio dispatcher screen, this rapid-fire entry of information continually caused previously entered information to scroll down the computer screen and out of view. Any attempt to scroll back to read prior text was defeated as new text from another call taker populated the call slip. It became very difficult for the radio dispatcher to keep up with reviewing and broadcasting new information received from the call takers, as well as answering radio communications from the deputies in the field and logging these radio communications into the call slip.

A review of call recordings confirmed that call takers were tasked with overwhelming challenges to which they responded appropriately.

The committee did not find any technological solution that could be immediately implemented to remedy this issue in the current system. The sheriff's office is currently in the beginning stages of seeking a replacement

CAD system that includes the ability to freeze or slow the scrolling of newly added information.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #5**

*Agencies may consider assigning a second Dispatcher to sit directly beside the radio Dispatcher on large scale events to read incoming updates and coordinate their broadcast by the radio Dispatcher. This allows the radio Dispatcher to focus solely on radio communications.*

## **RADIO TRAFFIC**

As the initial deputies arrived on scene, radio traffic was generally clear and appropriately repeated by the dispatcher. Sergeant Helus can be heard providing direction to the responding units as he prepared to make entry into the building with the CHP officers. The dispatcher appropriately initiated a "10-33." A 10-33 is police code indicating that officers should limit their radio traffic to emergency broadcasts. It is standard on critical incidents that a 10-33 be initiated to minimize unnecessary or unrelated radio traffic, keeping the channel clear for valuable emergency traffic. As deputies continued to arrive at the scene, they advised dispatch via their radios. The dispatcher acknowledged and repeated that the deputies were on scene. The dispatcher repeated observations radioed in by the deputies, and entered the information received into the call slip, while at the same time reading new information entered by the three call takers and broadcasting that new information back to the deputies on scene.

The majority of important radio traffic was repeated by the dispatcher, including a potential suspect description obtained from patrons on scene. There were some instances in which transmissions made by deputies on scene were either misunderstood or not heard by the dispatcher. There are a number of technological reasons for partial or missed transmissions. If two or more deputies attempt to broadcast a transmission at the same time, they will "cover" each other, making the transmission unintelligible. In addition, when deputies depress the transmit button on their radio systems, they must pause briefly before speaking, or the beginning of their transmission will not be conveyed. In high stress situations, it is not uncommon for deputies to rush their transmissions and fail to pause before speaking. This can lead to difficulty interpreting the true intent or message of the broadcast.

For example, shortly after Sergeant Helus announced that he was making entry with the CHP officer, a deputy broadcast, "(Inaudible) at the south entrance." The dispatcher repeated, "At the south entrance." It would later be learned that the deputy was trying to advise dispatch that shots were being



fired at the south entrance.

Approximately two minutes later, another deputy broadcast, “We have a Sam (sergeant) Unit down.” Neither the dispatcher, nor any patrol deputies on scene acknowledged or repeated this radio transmission. The watch commander also did not hear the broadcast. The transmission is clear and there does not appear to be any other radio traffic that would have covered it.

As time passed, the on-scene supervisor and deputies began to communicate with each other over the radio with more regularity and the dispatcher continued to monitor the transmissions. The dispatcher continued to broadcast additional critical information received from the call takers, including the possible description of the shooter, updates on victims hiding inside the building, and deputies’ perimeter locations. Later, during interviews for this report, all of the involved dispatchers agreed that the noise level in the dispatch center made it very difficult to hear the radio transmissions.

## CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY PATROL DISPATCH CENTER & RADIO TRAFFIC

The CHP dispatch center first received notice of the shooting when a CHP officer advised them over the radio that shots were being fired at the Borderline. At that time, a CHP dispatcher contacted the sheriff’s office dispatch center by telephone and inquired if the sheriff’s office was aware of shots being fired at the Borderline. The sheriff’s office dispatcher confirmed they were aware of the call and informed the CHP dispatch center that deputies were being dispatched.

At the time of the incident, no “ring-down line” between the CHP and sheriff’s office existed. A review of historical information indicates that no “ring-down line” has ever existed between the CHP and the sheriff’s office. A “ring-down line” allows dispatchers to identify incoming telephone calls from other dispatch centers on a computer screen so that the calls can be given priority over other incoming calls during an incident. This did not appear to be a factor during the shooting, as none of the CHP dispatchers shared having difficulty reaching the sheriff’s dispatch during post-incident interviews. Nonetheless, the sheriff’s office is currently exploring the addition of the CHP call center to the list of current ring-down lines that exist with other agencies.

When Sergeant Helus and the CHP officers were ambushed by the suspect, the CHP officer radioed, “Officer down! Officer down! 1199!” over his CHP radio frequency. When a CHP officer broadcasts, “11-99” they are indicating that they need immediate assistance, comparable to the sheriff’s office’s broadcast of “999.” A “999” is a code indicating a deputy needs emergency assistance. The CHP dispatcher acknowledged the “officer down” transmission.

The dispatcher asked the second CHP officer if the officer down was a CHP officer. The CHP officer advised that it was not a CHP officer, but rather the “SO (sheriff’s office) unit.” The CHP and the sheriff’s office are on different radio frequencies. Therefore, the transmission was not heard by any sheriff’s deputies at the scene.

The remainder of the radio traffic between the CHP officers on scene and their dispatch center is clear and concise. The CHP officers on scene and the staff at the dispatch center clearly understood that a sheriff’s deputy had been shot and was “down.” This information was not relayed by CHP dispatch to sheriff’s dispatch. It would take the CHP officer who made entry with Sergeant Helus verbally notifying a deputy at the scene before sheriff’s deputies understood Sergeant Helus had been shot.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #6**

*A proper ring-down line must be established between the CHP and Sheriff’s Office Dispatch Center. Dispatchers should ensure critical information is shared and known by other agency Dispatch centers when multi-agency critical incidents are occurring. Dispatchers should be included in Active Shooter Training to ensure all involved participants have a mutual understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each member of the response team.*



# First Responders on Scene

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Committee members conducted individual debriefings with 11 sheriff's deputies who were the initial responders to the scene. This was found to be extremely beneficial as it provided a big picture understanding of what had occurred and the context in which decisions were made. The debriefs gave committee members the ability to make more informed recommendations and the opportunity to provide feedback to the individual deputies in a private setting. Due to the ongoing officer-involved shooting (OIS) investigation, individual debriefs were not conducted with the CHP officers.

The Ventura County Sheriff's Office defines an active shooter as "one or more subjects engaged in a random or systematic shooting spree with the intent to continuously harm others, with mass murder being the objective, as opposed to criminal conduct, such as robbery or hostage taking." The term "active" is defined as "ongoing action by the suspect upon the arrival of law enforcement." The actions of the shooter as relayed by initial 911 callers suggest there was sufficient information for first responders to conclude that this was an active shooter incident.

The Ventura County Sheriff's Office maintains policy and training that addresses deputy and supervisor actions when responding to a call such as this. Policy 414 (Active Shooter and Threats to Schools) states, in part:

*"If there is a reasonable belief that acts or threats by a suspect are placing lives in imminent danger, the first responding deputies should consider reasonable options to immediately eliminate the threat. Deputies must decide, often under a multitude of difficult and rapidly evolving circumstances, whether to advance on the suspect, take other actions to deal with the threat, or wait for additional resources.*

*When deciding on a course of action deputies should consider ... If a suspect is actively engaged in the infliction of serious bodily harm or other life-threatening activity toward others, the deputy should take immediate action, if reasonably possible, to stop the threat presented by the suspect while calling for additional assistance."*

This section will examine the response from the framework of what should have occurred from a policy and training standpoint versus the reality of the response during the incident.

From this perspective, the following would be looked for in the initial response.

1. Report / communicate with dispatch and additional units information regarding:
  - a. Suspect location
  - b. Suspect weapons
  - c. Number of suspects
  - d. Descriptions of suspects
2. Form a contact team
3. Contact the suspect and control or neutralize the suspect
4. Tend to the wounded
5. Establish a perimeter to contain the scene

Upon his arrival, Sergeant Helus began broadcasting over the radio initial information he had received from his observations and from witness statements. As part of his broadcast, Sergeant Helus directed arriving deputies to respond to the west and north sides of the building and indicated the shooter may have “gone over the fence.” In response to this information, most of the arriving deputies began to take up containment positions around the building.

Sergeant Helus and both CHP officers formed a contact team. At that point, the gunshots from inside the Borderline had stopped. Still recognizing the incident as an active shooter, they decided to make entry into the building. Immediate entry into the Borderline was a tactically appropriate response, based on the fact that the shooter’s location was unknown and there were innocent victims still inside the building. The immediate entry was in alignment with tactics currently being taught at active shooter training courses nationwide.

As previously mentioned, because of Sergeant Helus’ broadcast upon his arrival, in which he directed other deputies on scene to respond to the north side of the building, responding deputies and a second sergeant established containment positions. Shortly after their entry, Sergeant Helus and one CHP officer were ambushed by the shooter. Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer attempted to escape the building and engage the shooter. Their decision to exit the building at the time of the ambush was reasonable, because they were at a tactical disadvantage. As they returned fire, the actions of Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer drove the suspect back into the office, where he remained for the remainder of the incident. Once Sergeant Helus was struck by gunfire and collapsed just outside the south entrance doors, the CHP officers broadcast, “11-99 Officer down” and retreated to a position of safety in the parking lot near Rolling Oaks Drive. This was a significant distance away

from the Borderline building, which caused them to lose sight of the south entrance.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #7**

*Tactical teams should be formed from members of the same agency when possible to ensure tactics and communications are consistent.*

#### **RECOMMENDATION #8**

*When a multi-agency team is deployed in critical incidents, provide for radio interoperability or sufficient team members who can communicate directly with the agency having primary jurisdiction for the incident. In the absence of this, multi-agency participants must ensure communications about critical information is pushed to all involved agencies quickly and concisely.*

## **COMMAND & CONTROL**

The need for immediate entry was addressed by Sergeant Helus and the CHP officers. Once entry took place, the majority of sheriff's resources were outside the building establishing and manning the perimeter. At this point, additional considerations emerge and should be addressed. These emerging considerations support the efforts of the entry team and the overall scene security. While containment of the scene is important, there were enough deputies arriving on scene to both staff containment positions and address other pressing concerns.

A critical incident such as the Borderline shooting requires strong leadership and decision-making skills by those in supervisory positions. Field supervisors must be expected to immediately assume command and provide direction to involved personnel in order to quickly establish a clear picture, purpose, and expectations. This is critically important in a patrol environment where the experience level of patrol personnel is a continuum from new deputy to seasoned veteran.

On scene personnel must be able to identify who is in charge and understand the directions of the incident commander (supervisor). An on-scene supervisor would be expected to establish the following:

- Assume command and control of the incident
- Declare themselves the Incident Commander to all others on scene

- Establish an entry/arrest team
- Establish a rescue team
- Aggressively contain the scene
- Establish a preliminary command post in an appropriate location
- Gather intelligence/gain clarity
- Establish a triage area

As Sergeant Helus was approaching the Borderline, a second sergeant arrived on scene and took up a position on the west side perimeter. Sergeant Helus announced he was making entry into the Borderline. As such, a second supervisor would be expected to assume operational command and control of the exterior resources and should have verbalized it over the radio.

In the minutes after Sergeant Helus' entry, command and control were not established and little beyond containment was provided. By remaining on the perimeter in a position of containment, the second supervisor had a limited view of the incident and therefore a reduced level of situational awareness. Establishing a preliminary command post as soon as possible and taking stock of the resources available at the time would have given greater clarity and coordination of incoming resources.

As it was, additional deputies arrived on scene and self-deployed. They began contacting the numerous patrons who had fled the building, started to assess the injured, and gathered intelligence on the suspect's description and possible location. Deputies also had to control individuals who were not at the Borderline at the time of the shooting, but responded to the scene after hearing about the shooting. On at least one occasion, deputies confronted and detained a man matching the description of the shooter who was trying to run toward the building.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #9**

*Refocus active shooter training to include a supervisory component on command and control, leadership, and the importance of establishing a rally point for command. Training should also include instruction to all personnel of the need to assume a leadership role in the absence of a field supervisor. This refocused training would be developed in consultation with tactical officers and subject matter experts.*

### **RECOMMENDATION #10**

*For longer term incidents, develop Incident Management Teams (IMT) with greater training and expertise in command/control and the organization of resources. In the early stages of any incident, these members can supplement the abilities and capacity of on-scene supervisors.*

*Since the shooting, the Sheriff's Office has created three IMTs comprised of deputies, senior deputies, sergeants, and captains. The teams will receive additional training in incident command. They will also respond to and manage critical incidents to better facilitate identification and organization of resources needed, as well as to assist in command and control.*

### **RECOMMENDATION #11**

*Refine and distribute a list of critical incident prompts for field supervisors and deputies to refer to during incidents.*

Communication of information is a vital component of command and control. By this stage of the incident, critical information was known to individual deputies on scene, but not communicated in an effective manner. By failing to establish a command post and take control, the leadership on scene was unable to absorb and evaluate all of the information in a comprehensive way.

The expectations of field personnel regarding tactical communications includes the timely dissemination of vital information obtained by eyewitnesses, which impacts situational awareness and tactics used at the scene. Deputies obtaining information from witnesses that may have direct relevance and influence on the response should make it a priority to disseminate the information and confirm that it was received by other personnel. Deputies should incorporate plain speech into radio transmissions to ensure the information is conveyed clearly and comprehensively by others on scene.

At least five deputies were on scene and in close proximity to the Borderline building at the time of the gunfight between Sergeant Helus, the CHP officer, and the suspect. Each of these deputies heard the gunfire. The gun battle lasted 22 seconds. Body-worn camera and radio transmissions support that none of the perimeter deputies moved to position themselves in a manner that would support the officers involved in the gun battle.

Further, there was no coordinated communication or response developed or communicated in the minutes after the shots were fired. The footage also shows a patron informing the field supervisor directly that he had witnessed

the shooting and saw at least one officer down. Personnel must synthesize information from multiple sources and resist the urge to rely solely on radio information.

In the early stages of the incident, after the officer involved shooting, the second supervisor on scene sent two deputies with patrol rifles to the front of the Borderline to make contact with Sergeant Helus. At this point, information about an officer being down had not been successfully transmitted over the radio. When they arrived, they did not see Sgt. Helus down at the top of the stairs.

Two other deputies had conversations with the CHP officer who had made entry with Sergeant Helus. They were told by the CHP officer of the officer involved shooting and that Sergeant Helus was down. The CHP officer provided information on the shooter's location and later told the deputies he saw at least three additional victims down inside. As previously mentioned, one of the deputies attempted to transmit, "We have a Sam [sergeant] unit down" over his handheld radio, but he was not successful in broadcasting the information. The same deputy successfully broadcast this information several seconds later, which was recorded on dispatch audio and was heard on other deputies' BWC videos. It is clear that pieces of information concerning the shooting with the suspect and Sergeant Helus being down were making their way to deputies around the Borderline. Effective command and control would have provided critical structure to the incident and monitoring of the information, clarifying its content and generating a clear picture about what was taking place.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #12**

*Training should include a focus on communication that ensures simple, plain broadcasts that accurately and completely relay relevant information. When a deputy on scene learns of critical information, it is the responsibility of that deputy to broadcast the information and ensure they are acknowledged by the Incident Commander. This training will put an emphasis on ensuring that transmitted information is received by others.*

## **SECOND ENTRY**

One of the most thought-provoking issues surrounding the incident was when to attempt a second entry. All who reviewed the incident agreed that a second entry needed to be made after the shootout between the suspect and Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer. The questions to be debated centered on when the entry should have taken place, where the entry would be made, and who would make the entry.



To be clear, personnel on scene should have formed a second entry team, consistent with active shooter training. There is no question a second entry into the building was appropriate. What requires greater clarity are the unique circumstances that faced the deputies after the initial gun battle with the suspect. The fact that Sergeant Helus' entry was repelled, and the absence of continued shooting by the suspect after the confrontation, would have contributed to a change in tempo and tactics.

In the moments after the exchange of gunfire between the suspect and law enforcement, the SWAT team was requested. While a request for the SWAT team was appropriate, the question of a second entry by patrol, prior to SWAT's arrival, remains.

Factors which would contribute to a more rapid entry include:

- Knowledge that there were victims down inside, their condition was unknown at the time, and some may have been in need of immediate medical care

*Note: Although unknown to personnel at the time, it was later learned that all of the injured victims inside the building had suffered mortal injuries and could not have been saved.*

- Knowledge that there were patrons inside hiding
- Outstanding suspect with a proven desire to kill

Factors potentially contributing to the delayed entry include:

- Previous attempt to enter resulted in a shooting that left Sergeant Helus down
- The gunfire stopped after the initial entry by Sergeant Helus' team
- Experience level of the supervisor on scene
- Experience level and tactical knowledge of patrol resources on scene
- SWAT training and experience in tactical entries generally exceeds that of patrol

Even if one concludes that the delayed entry was understandable under the circumstances, there were command, control, and organizational efforts that would be expected to occur in preparation for SWAT's arrival. These would include establishing a well-organized and documented perimeter, designated command location, designated triage and first aid area in a safe location, and an organized contingent of extra personnel ready for deployment at SWAT's direction.

During the period of time after Sergeant Helus was evacuated and prior to the formation of the multi-agency entry team, deputies continued to receive information from various sources, including sheriff's dispatch, eyewitnesses, and other officers, that there were multiple patrons who were still alive and hiding inside the Borderline. Although it was ultimately determined that all deceased victims inside the Borderline sustained non-survivable wounds prior to the attempted entry by Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer, deputies had no way of knowing this at the time. Having this information and not knowing the location or status of the shooter, deputies continued to maintain their containment positions around the Borderline. There were no attempts to re-enter the building until the SWAT captain arrived.

### **RECOMMENDATION #13**

*During active shooter training, patrol personnel must understand that, depending on the immediacy of a threat and the factors known at the time, waiting for SWAT is rarely the preferred option. Scenarios dealing with entry versus maintaining a perimeter should be purposefully developed and practiced to provide insight into this issue.*

Regardless of which decision one agrees with, had effective command and control existed, the intelligence, scene organization, and clarity would have facilitated a faster tempo of operations and allowed for either of these two options to occur more quickly.

The investigation later revealed certain important factors that were unknown to the responding deputies at the time of the incident.

- Suspect's combat experience
- Suspect monitoring of surveillance cameras
- Suspect was able to use surveillance and law enforcement announcements to time his ambush of Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer
- Use of flashlight, fireworks, and last few smoke grenades indicate the suspect was preparing for the second entry. He appeared to be aware of secondary entry points (flashlight on patio) and was preparing to confront a second contingent of law enforcement.

While we do not know what led the shooter to take his own life, his actions would certainly lead a reviewer of the facts to the conclusion that he intended to confront a second entry effort.

## **SECOND ENTRY**

At 11:54 p.m., the Sheriff's Office SWAT captain arrived on scene, 28 minutes

after Sergeant Helus went down and 8 minutes after he had been evacuated from the front entrance. After receiving a short initial briefing, the SWAT captain moved from the parking lot to the Borderline building on foot. The captain moved around the Borderline attempting to locate alternate points of entry and confirming containment was in place. The captain did not identify any other entry point.

Prior to assembling the multi-agency entry team, the SWAT captain received information regarding the location of the engagement with the suspect from the CHP officer who had made entry with Sergeant Helus. Although entering the building through the same entrance where officers were previously engaged by the suspect poses a greater risk to the team, the decision was made to enter through the front door because no viable secondary entry point was identified at that time.

The captain sent a second team to the west side of the building to provide tactical coverage for the entry team. Unbeknownst to the SWAT captain, the second team located an entrance on the smokers' patio. The second team utilized this door to make a secondary entrance into the building in support of the primary entry team. After the incident, entry points were identified that could have represented better tactical options than the main entrance. By entering through the main entrance, the team placed themselves in the middle of the building and had to contend with threats from multiple angles.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #14**

*Reinforce in training the importance of looking for and identifying alternate entry points.*

Just prior to the multi-agency team making the second entry, the team leader shouted to a secondary team that they were about to make entry and confirmed that the secondary team was prepared to provide coverage. These communications would have easily been heard from within the Borderline.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #15**

*Whenever feasible, officers should protect their tactical communications from any suspect.*

## **TEAM SELECTION**

While forming the multi-agency entry team, the SWAT captain maintained

operational control of this team and placed himself in the second position in the line as they approached. Additional arriving deputies and officers were directed by the captain to deploy to the west side of the building in an attempt to provide long coverage for the team making entry through the main entrance.

The SWAT captain has overall control and responsibility for the team and provided much needed leadership in the moment to coordinate an entry team consisting of personnel from multiple agencies. By becoming a member of the entry team, he limited his ability to establish a tactical command position from which he could direct incoming SWAT resources and develop a comprehensive tactical plan.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #16**

*As with any management position, when resources allow, leaders should resist the desire to become a part of the response itself. Managers are charged with ensuring high level command and control of an incident and should focus their efforts on broader incident command.*

## **OFF-DUTY DEPUTY**

An off-duty Ventura County Sheriff's deputy and two other off-duty law enforcement officers he was with, were among the patrons inside the Borderline at the time of the attack. The deputy was serving as a designated driver for a group of friends, was not drinking, and was armed with a micro-compact handgun. At the time of the incident, the deputy had been employed as a deputy sheriff for a few weeks, having graduated the academy less than a month prior.

The Sheriff's Office Policy regarding off-duty law enforcement actions states:

*"Deputies are not expected to place themselves in unreasonable peril. However, any sworn member of this department who becomes aware of an incident or circumstance that he/she reasonably believes poses an imminent threat of serious bodily injury or death, or significant property damage may take reasonable action to minimize the threat.*

*When public safety or the prevention of major property damage requires immediate action, deputies should first consider reporting and monitoring the activity and only take direct action as a last resort."*

The off-duty deputy was interviewed by Sheriff's Major Crimes detectives



**Photo 10:** Photo depicts the west side of Borderline Bar and Grill (smokers' patio) and the pedestrian door several officers entered during the Secondary Entry.

after the incident. He told detectives he was at the Borderline with friends. When the gunfire erupted, he looked in the direction of the shots and saw a muzzle flash at the main entrance. He said he initially went to the ground when the gunfire began. At one point, he looked over the bar and briefly saw the shooter in the distance.

The off-duty deputy heard the sound of glass breaking. He looked and saw a friend had thrown a chair through a window to create an avenue of escape. The off-duty deputy was approximately two feet from the window and also described a crowd of patrons nearby screaming. The off-duty deputy assisted the patrons with getting out of a broken window located on the north side of the building. Once they were evacuated, he also jumped out of the window and escaped to the parking lot. The off-duty deputy met up with an off-duty officer from another agency, who was armed and the two began to move back toward the Borderline to engage the suspect. They heard more gunshots and crouched down. As they readied themselves to move closer, they stopped as uniformed deputies began to arrive. They realized they were not readily identifiable and could be mistaken for the shooter by the uniformed deputies.

In this instance, given that the deputy had just graduated the academy, his understanding and knowledge of practical police tactics and response to critical incidents was limited. Ordinarily, deputies must weigh the risks versus benefits of becoming involved in an incident while in an off-duty capacity. The misidentification of an off-duty deputy as a possible attacker by responding law enforcement is a very real and serious issue which could result in the off-duty deputy being engaged by the responding officers.

The performance of the off-duty deputy is consistent with policy, and the department supports his reasoning and decisions in this incident.



# Casualty Collection Point

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When the incident began, over 200 Borderline patrons, with varying degrees of injuries, escaped the location and fled in multiple directions. This initial unstructured evacuation of the Borderline is to be expected, and patrons appropriately provided for their own personal safety by fleeing in what they perceived to be a safe direction. As deputies arrived and encountered patrons, they began to give more specific instructions to individuals. A review of the body-worn camera (BWC) recordings showed the first deputies on scene directed fleeing patrons to either leave the area or to positions of safety.

Ideally, in the early stages of an event involving mass casualties, as command and control is established, a casualty collection point (CCP) would be identified and broadcast to personnel on scene to bring organization and effective treatment to the injured. In this instance, Command and Control did not proactively establish a CCP. Instead, the CCP was organically established when Ventura County Fire arrived and began treating the injured.

During the interview with Emergency Medical Services (EMS) administrators, it was determined that the initial fire department and EMS response was dispatched at 11:21 p.m., 3 minutes after the suspect began shooting. This response included a paramedic ambulance from American Medical Response (AMR) and an engine company from the Ventura County Fire Department (VCFD). A VCFD Battalion Chief (Battalion 29) established a fire incident command post and requested four additional ambulances and additional fire department resources to assist with the triage and treatment of victims.

The first staging area for responding medical resources was the Moorpark Road intersection with Highway 101. As the breadth of the incident became apparent, VCFD moved their command post twice in the first hours of the incident. This was done out of security concerns as patrons were arriving at the intersection and effective security had not been established. In hindsight, VCFD identified the need for a deputy to be posted at their command post for security.

VCFD later established two CCP locations: one at the Union 76 gas station on Moorpark Road at Rolling Oaks Drive, and the second at the east end of Rolling Oaks Drive in the roadway between an apartment complex and medical offices. The second CCP was established after the patrons being treated at the Union 76 gas station became too numerous.

### **RECOMMENDATION #17**

*As part of the early assessment of a scene, consideration, designation, and resources need to be assigned to treatment of injured subjects. Using the Incident Command System (ICS), an Incident Commander can effectively assign this task to on-scene personnel and give control of this component to a responding supervisor.*

## **REUNIFICATION CENTER**

As relatives and friends of Borderline patrons began arriving at the scene seeking information regarding the whereabouts and condition of loved ones, the sheriff's office quickly determined there was a need for an offsite reunification and information center. The reunification center was set up at the Thousand Oaks Teen Center, about three miles from the Borderline. The Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services (OES) was activated and staffed by 12:30 a.m. Sheriff's OES established a call center, publicized the number to the media and other agencies, then vetted numerous phone calls and were able to direct family members to the reunification center.

The sheriff's office took the lead in identifying a location for the reunification center, coordinating information about victims, and making death notifications. In addition to several sheriff's deputies, resources from the Ventura County District Attorney's Office Victim Assistance Unit, FBI Victim Advocates, a representative from Ventura County Behavioral Health, and Sheriff's Office Chaplain Corps (ordained clergy who volunteer their time on an on-call basis) were all present at the reunification center. Both the District Attorney's Office Victim Assistance Unit and the FBI Victim Advocates have had training and practical experience in assisting victims and the families of victims of mass shootings.

Within a few hours, more than 400 people had arrived at the incident. This included friends and family of Borderline victims, survivors who had escaped the shooting, and members of the community offering assistance. Initially, staff at the reunification center did not have a system to identify those arriving and their relationship to Borderline victims. It was difficult to keep media and non-involved parties outside the facility while allowing family and friends of victims inside. This was further compounded due to many families having a significant contingent of extended family and friends present.

It took more than 12 hours to properly identify the deceased at the Borderline, while simultaneously preserving the integrity of the crime scene. Although this may seem like an extended time frame, investigators were very aware of the need to provide timely and accurate information to those wait-



ing at the reunification center.

In California, Coroners and Medical Examiners have the authority over a deceased victim and the responsibility to verify a victim's identity before notification is made to the next of kin. Ventura County has a medical examiner's office, which is an independent entity from the sheriff's office. The sheriff's office, FBI, and the medical examiner worked together to identify victims one at a time, many of whom were not in possession of identification or were not readily identifiable due to injury.

**RECOMMENDATION #18**

*Controlling access to the interior of the reunification center proved difficult in the beginning. Documenting the names and phone numbers of all those seeking entrance and their connection to a particular victim would have been helpful in providing security and determining each person's purpose for being at the location. It would also assist in providing for victim services later.*

**RECOMMENDATION #19**

*Due to their specialized training and experience, the District Attorney's Victim Advocate Unit should be responsible for the reunification center, with the sheriff's office in a support role. This would allow the victim advocates to fully leverage their expertise and provide a smoother transition to available services.*

**RECOMMENDATION #20**

*The sheriff's office did not have mobile fingerprint readers to assist in the identification of the victims. Obtaining mobile fingerprint readers linked to both DMV and the local criminal justice database could assist in quicker identification of victims.*

**RECOMMENDATION #21**

*Incorporate victim services and reunification centers into large scale mass casualty training exercises.*

# Post Incident Actions

## INVESTIGATION

In the hours after the shooting, it was not clear if the suspect had acted alone or was assisted by others, or if the shooting was a terrorist act. The sheriff's office took the lead in the investigation and was assisted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the California Highway Patrol, local law enforcement agencies, and the Ventura County District Attorney's Office.

The Sheriff's Major Crimes Bureau is the primary investigative body for significant or high-profile cases that occur in any of the sheriff's five contract cities, unincorporated county areas, and jails. A Sheriff's captain manages the Major Crimes Bureau. The bureau has four homicide teams as well as a sexual assault unit and a fraud/financial crimes unit. It is not uncommon for personnel in these units to be reallocated as additional resources to any significant event when needed, as was done during the Borderline incident.

The Borderline criminal investigation was assigned to a homicide team, which consisted of a sergeant and two senior deputy detectives. They coordinated the work of hundreds of investigators, deputies, and officers from the sheriff's office, FBI, CHP, district attorney's office, medical examiner's office (ME), and local law enforcement agencies.

The Borderline crime scene processing by the FBI's Evidence Response Team spanned over six days and included more than 150 FBI agents and other officers working to gather evidence. Numerous search warrants were written for evidence related to the suspect, his actions, and his background. 9-1-1 calls and hundreds of hours of relevant cellphone data were reviewed. Video recordings from body-worn cameras, the CHP in-car dash camera, and Borderline surveillance video were studied. The level of forensic examination and review of digital images, scene diagrams, and physical evidence collected from the Borderline, autopsies, the shooter's car and home, telephones, social media accounts, and various search warrants was extraordinary.

## LOS ROBLES HOSPITAL RESPONSE

The Los Robles Regional Medical Center is the closest hospital to the Borderline and became the primary location where victims were transported for treatment. Injured patrons arrived by private vehicle and ambulance. Sergeant Helus arrived at Los Robles by ambulance.

Four major crimes detectives responded to the Los Robles Hospital to contact

victims and develop investigatory leads. These detectives were quickly joined by additional sheriff's office patrol personnel and command staff, FBI agents, and Sergeant Helus' wife and son. Los Robles became an informal meeting center where friends and family were responding to inquire about loved ones being treated. This unplanned response complicated the investigation, as the emergency room became very crowded.

Sergeant Helus underwent emergency surgery and was pronounced deceased a short time later. A bullet fragment was located lodged in Sergeant Helus' heart and was collected as evidence. The treating physician provided it to one of the detectives. The fragment was suspected to be a rifle fragment, but this information was not communicated to the case agents at the Borderline. Ultimately, a sheriff's office field evidence technician (FET) booked the fragment at the sheriff's crime lab property room as evidence.

At the crime scene, investigators learned that the shooter was armed with a .45 caliber semi-automatic handgun. Had more timely communication existed between the detectives at the Borderline and those at Los Robles Hospital, it would have been determined earlier that Sergeant Helus was shot by someone other than the suspect. As it was, the information about the recovered rifle round was not shared until almost 24 hours later. This specific information would have been beneficial for the case agents and during the questioning of other officers.

Access to ReddiNet was also available at Los Robles Hospital. ReddiNet is a service of the Hospital Association of Southern California that facilitates information exchange among hospitals, EMS, paramedics, law enforcement, and other healthcare system professionals over a reliable and secure network. The system can assign patients to a single incident and report whether injuries were sustained and the patient's disposition. In Ventura County, 17 local and area hospitals participate in ReddiNet. A detective at Los Robles was able to use the information to assist family and friends at Los Robles. However, the existence of this system and its benefits were not communicated to other detectives and organizations in need of this resource. As a result, the pace of the investigation was slowed.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #22**

*While the pace of an investigation is frequently influenced by unique case factors, investigators should employ purposeful, tactical pauses to communicate with one another to ensure each detective has a shared understanding of the facts, resources, and evidence as the investigation unfolds. Technology such as conference calling and video conferencing can be effective tools to facilitate this information sharing when teams are dispersed over large areas.*

## CRIME SCENE RESPONSE (Borderline Bar & Grill)

The crime scene was primarily confined to the Borderline building and surrounding area including the parking lot, which contained the suspect's vehicle. The scene was identified and secured by patrol deputies during the initial response. Every effort was made to prevent any public viewing of the Borderline crime scene, which included one deceased victim outside the building. Investigators obtained consent from property owners to cover windows on a nearby two-story building which provided a view of the inside of the Borderline.

During the processing of the crime scene, all of the victims were removed from the building by medical examiner's office investigators. This was done pursuant to the FBI's crime scene processing protocol. This process was methodical, science-based, and took time to complete. Hundreds of physical items of possible evidence were collected by the FBI. As part of this process, hours of video evidence and hundreds of digital photos were taken. Evidence collected by sheriff's office field evidence technicians was later transferred to the FBI for processing and assigned an FBI property item number.

Throughout the scene processing, there were sheriff's office detectives present to provide assistance and security, but there was no specifically designated sheriff's office detective to document the search or to note and photograph relevant evidence collected by the FBI. Major Crimes detectives were generally familiar with the scene evidence and overall recovery efforts. However, had a detective been embedded with the FBI during evidence collection, it would have allowed for a comprehensive understanding of all the evidence seized. This staff member would have firsthand knowledge and been able to answer specific questions regarding evidence as the investigation unfolded.

In addition to processing the crime scene, the FBI assisted in interviewing 133 witnesses and other individuals connected to the incident. Sheriff's investigators audio record interviews in order to capture the context, tone, and spontaneous statements that often have a powerful impact on the credibility of witness or victim statements. The FBI does not routinely record interviews. However, they will record interviews upon the request of the investigating agency. In this instance, sheriff's investigators were not aware of the FBI policy, and did not request that interviews be recorded.

### **RECOMMENDATION #23**

*Assign liaisons to work with partner agencies during large scale operations. The assigning and embedding of liaisons in multi-agency investigations is critical for ensuring information is shared broadly and in a timely manner. In this case, the liaison could have served as a sheriff's crime scene manager to address these critical elements of an investigation.*

## **INFORMATION MANAGEMENT**

The management of information in the first hours and days of a mass casualty or active shooter event can be crucial to efficiently investigating the case. Identifying leads, ensuring tasks are assigned and completed, and prioritizing witness, survivor, and victim interviews can overburden even the most seasoned detective.

For the Borderline incident, case agents worked out of a command post dedicated to investigations. The initial activities, leads, and case information were written on white boards in the command post and, as time allowed, was converted to reports, case notes, and electronic spreadsheets.

Upon learning of the event, the sheriff's office crime analysis unit (CAU) manager and a senior crime analyst responded to their offices within the Special Services Bureau to assist with processing leads and tips. The CAU consists of five full-time analysts. Ultimately, the entire unit worked to provide timely information to investigators.

During the second full day of investigation, detectives realized they needed a crime analyst at the command post to help manage information and make it easily accessible to all investigators. The CAU ultimately created a web-based database of assignments and information. This effort incorporated information concerning witnesses, injured victims, intelligence witnesses, and associates of the suspect.

Once the CAU created the database, they transitioned to a support role in the command post, working in shifts to assist with updating the database with new information and to assist in social media and other database and analytical searches.

This web-based spreadsheet grew to include over 500 witnesses and victims who were ultimately interviewed. The spreadsheet included the person's relationship to the case, their contact information, and the investigator assigned

to the follow up interview. The proactive response by the CAU and the allocation of crime analysts to help create a web-based searchable database and assist in data collection greatly reduced duplication of effort and improved efficiencies in coordinating the interviews.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #24**

*Explore additional ways web-based and analytic software can enhance investigations and communication between investigators. In the absence of technology, case agents must schedule periodic pauses in the investigation to share information and ensure everyone has a clear understanding of what the investigation has uncovered.*

## **VIDEO REVIEW**

Significant portions of the Borderline shooting were captured on video from a number of perspectives. Security surveillance from the Borderline Bar and Grill provided video of the suspect's actions inside the building, while other surveillance systems on a nearby medical building showed the suspect's approach to the building and later, law enforcements' movement around the building. These surveillance systems are video only and do not record audio. Cell phone video from patrons depicted attempts to escape as well as snippets of the actual shootings. Finally, body-worn cameras (BWC) and CHP Mobile Video Audio Recording Systems (MVARS) recorded the incident from the officers' perspective. These two systems provide both audio and video. While the CHP MVARS system only records video from a 'dash cam,' the audio is captured from a microphone unit worn on the officers' duty belt.

Video of the incident quickly confirmed that both Sergeant Helus and the CHP officer were involved in an officer-involved shooting (OIS). Detectives determined Sergeant Helus did not activate his BWC. Ultimately, investigators were able to marry the audio from the MVARS system to the video obtained from the Borderline security system. This allowed for a more complete picture of what was occurring during both the initial and second entry into the building by officers. A later iteration combined and synced audio and video from surveillance, MVARS, and BWC footage to create a comprehensive depiction of the event.

The quick identification of surveillance systems in the area allowed detectives to obtain search warrants and seize the video evidence. This is a vital step, since many surveillance systems periodically record imagery over older footage to save memory and disk space.

## INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Sheriff's Major Crimes investigators investigate all OIS incidents involving sheriff's deputies that occur within the sheriff's jurisdiction. Internal affairs also responds to the scene of all incidents of an OIS in which a member of the sheriff's office is involved. The purpose of the internal affairs response is primarily to ensure the involved employee's Peace Officer Bill of Rights protections are maintained, requests for legal representation are accommodated, facilitation of a weapons exchange, and possibly obtain a compelled administrative statement if a voluntary statement is not provided. Additionally, internal affairs will review the criminal investigation to determine if the overall use of force was within policy and whether discipline needs to be imposed.

Because Sergeant Helus ultimately died from his wounds, an internal affairs investigation was not conducted regarding his involvement in this incident. A decision was made to proceed with a thorough criminal investigation and an administrative audit of the Borderline incident, resulting in this after-action review. However, internal affairs was available to open an administrative investigation should it have been deemed necessary at any point.

# Employee Wellness and Recovery

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In 2011, the Ventura County Sheriff's Office created a Peer Support Program (PSP) staffed by employees who work on a collateral basis. The goal of the program is to provide all members of the sheriff's office with a wellness resource for professional and personal issues. The program consists of both sworn and professional (non-sworn) staff who have relevant life experience and professional training. At the time of the Borderline incident, the Peer Support Program had approximately 20 members and was managed by a captain.

The PSP also consists of a smaller, officer involved shooting (OIS) team. These team members are specifically selected because each has been involved in an OIS at some point in their career, has personal knowledge of what a peace officer goes through as a result of the traumatic event, and is able to share their personal experiences. The OIS team responds to shootings to provide support and resources, as well as to evaluate the impact of the event on the involved deputy.

OIS members are trained to avoid asking the involved deputies any specific details of the shooting or critical incident. This is done to prevent contaminating witness statements before the involved deputies are interviewed by detectives or internal affairs investigators. By focusing on the wellbeing of the officers, and not what happened, OIS members can help ensure the integrity of the investigation is preserved.

The Sheriff's Communication Center was inadvertently left out of the initial PSP response. PSP members initially focused their efforts on the deputies who had been on scene, and in doing so did not recognize that dispatchers had also been affected by the shooting. It would take a few days before the lapse was realized and for PSP members to reach out to dispatchers to provide assistance. Some dispatchers later expressed feeling forgotten during the initial days following the shooting.

## **RECOMMENDATION #25**

*Incorporate dispatchers into the Peer Support Program to ensure the dispatch perspective is represented and addressed in critical incidents.*

In the month following the Borderline incident, sheriff's management attended patrol briefings to share information about the investigation. This was intended to minimize rumors and address concerns as they occurred. The managers answered questions and provided information concerning services



and resources available to each employee. These services included the department psychologist, peer support, and the employee assistance program (EAP), which is sponsored by the county of Ventura and free to employees of the county and their families. The EAP provides professional and confidential mental health assistance for personal crises, family related issues, troubling challenges at work, and critical incident debriefings. The EAP can also refer members to outside mental health services if the need exceeds the treatment the EAP is able to provide.

On December 18, 2018, Thousand Oaks station management scheduled an informational meeting with the employees directly involved in the initial response. This included dispatchers, deputies, and investigators. The meeting was designed to address concerns that had emerged, such as tactical equipment for patrol.

After this meeting, courses were scheduled to provide coping skills and address the stress being felt by staff. Before the end of each training day, attendees were given an opportunity to ask questions. During these question-and-answer periods, deputies expressed frustration that they had not received any updates since the initial informational meeting.

PSP members continued to provide active support to involved staff for approximately one month after the shooting. Some deputies described internal struggles with guilt in having emotional needs when they looked at the losses suffered by the families of the murder victims. This internal struggle was not seen by PSP members, and as a result, they assumed that involved employees were doing well. Both sides of this situation acknowledge that the hidden effects of a critical incident are difficult to detect. The Ventura County Deputy Sheriff's Association, in coordination with the sheriff's office, made a smartphone application available to its membership which provides access to resources, phone numbers, and other wellness information for those in need of greater service. The application was well received by the employees.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #26**

*Provide more in-depth training to PSP staff regarding mental health resources and critical incident stressors so they can provide more effective employee engagement in the first 72 hours after an incident. Research has shown that debriefing an incident within the first 72 hours after an incident relieves anxiety and puts the events in perspective. This helps an agency manage the traumatic reactions of survivors and involved employees after a critical event. The department should investigate incorporating Critical Incident Stress Defusing (CISD) as a useful tool in this effort.*

# Post Incident Assessment

## EQUIPMENT REVIEW

Deputies and officers who responded to the Borderline shooting were equipped differently based on their individual agency policies and procedures. This review focuses on equipment used by patrol deputies as well as an evaluation of additional equipment needs. Patrol deputies who initially responded to the scene wore a patrol uniform with a duty belt consisting of a handgun, extra ammunition magazines, Taser, pepper spray, baton, handcuffs, and a portable radio. The handgun carried by most of the deputies on scene was the sheriff's office issued Sig Sauer .40 caliber Model P226. All patrol deputies drove marked black and white patrol cars with emergency lighting. Each patrol car is equipped with a shotgun and/or a tactical rifle.

## SHOTGUNS & TACTICAL RIFLES

Each sheriff's deputy assigned to patrol is issued a Remington Model 870 pump action 12-gauge shotgun, loaded with rifled single projectile slug rounds. The sheriff's issued shotguns are configured with affixed flashlights, tactical slings, extended magazine tubes, and "side saddle" shell holders which allow for the carrying of extra ammunition. The shotguns are stored in an upright locking rack in the front passenger area of the patrol vehicle.

A review of body-worn camera video from the incident revealed several deputies did not retrieve their shotguns. For deputies in positions further from the building, a handgun would have been less effective had they been forced to engage the suspect from a significant distance. Weapons such as the shotgun or tactical rifle are typically more accurate at longer range. In post incident interviews, some responding deputies said they are not comfortable with the size and power of a shotgun, nor were they comfortable with tactical or speed loading the weapon.

The sheriff's office allows patrol deputies to carry a department-approved tactical rifle in their patrol car. Prior to doing so, deputies must successfully complete a department sponsored, Peace Officer's Standards and Training (POST) certified, 24-hour tactical rifle training course. Thereafter, deputies are required to successfully qualify with the tactical rifle every two months. Although patrol deputies are not mandated to carry tactical rifles, it is encouraged. About a third of department members carry a tactical rifle. The rifle provides better accuracy from further distances, carries more ammunition, and can be reloaded quicker than a shotgun.

Both the shotgun and tactical rifle have pros and cons and actually complement one another with their differences. While the shotgun performs better at penetrating various media, such as block walls, the tactical rifle is more desirable when over-penetration is a concern.

#### **RECOMMENDATION #27**

*All personnel are required to qualify at the range with both their handgun and shotgun every two months. Most qualification periods include some manipulation of the shotgun to include speed and tactical loading. However, the shotgun is a large, somewhat heavy, and cumbersome weapon. The department should evaluate issuing a rifle to all patrol personnel. The rifle is a lighter weapon and is easier to manipulate. Tactical rifles should be configured with aiming optics and flashlight systems.*

## **BODY ARMOR**

Sheriff's policy dictates that all patrol deputies shall wear body armor. Department-issued body armor is National Institute of Justice (NIJ) rated. Deputies have the option to upgrade to a higher level of protection at their own expense.

Manufacturers recommend replacing body armor every five years. After the Borderline, an audit was conducted, and it was determined some deputies at the Borderline were wearing body armor that was over five years old and was due for replacement. This issue was immediately addressed and rectified.

Prior to the Borderline, there was a process in place to notify deputies via email when their body armor neared its expiration date, but many deputies said they received no such email. Body armor fittings are constantly occurring, but there was no mechanism in place to ensure all deputies with expired body armor were attending those fittings.



**Photo 11:** Rifle plate carrier

### **RECOMMENDATION #28**

*Sheriff's personnel will track expiration dates on body armor. They will send an email to the affected deputy asking them to sign up for a fitting on one of the dates provided in the email. If the deputy does not sign up, his/her supervisor will be contacted. If necessary, the request will be elevated through the chain of command until compliance is gained.*

Although the Borderline suspect did not use a rifle, the sheriff's office recognizes the need to provide patrol personnel with body armor capable of stopping a rifle round. This body armor would not be worn at all times, as it is heavier and bulkier than patrol vests. A vest with this level of protection must be quickly accessible, adjustable for multiple users, and capable of fitting over the patrol uniform and body armor. Various products were tested, and the department chose a product that is stored in a carrying case and assigned to each patrol car. Deputies were trained in quickly donning the body armor and cinching the adjustable straps for a proper fit.

## **HELMETS**

Sheriff's patrol deputies are issued ballistic helmets upon transfer to a patrol assignment. However, none of the deputies initially on scene put them on before approaching the building. During post incident interviews, it was discovered many kept their helmet in the rear cargo area of their patrol vehicle. They also stated the use of helmets is not common practice and many did not think to put it on. The sheriff's office has since begun to encourage the donning of helmets on all firearm-related calls and designed range qualification courses that require shooting while wearing the helmet.

## **BALLISTIC SHIELDS**

Supervisors' patrol vehicles were equipped with level IIIA (handgun rated) 22" x 40" ballistic shields made by United Shield International. None were used during this incident. At the time, the shield was a new piece of equipment assigned to the patrol supervisors and department-wide training on how to properly use them had not yet occurred. The sheriff's office has since begun training patrol deputies and supervisors in the use of the shield. The sheriff office is also considering the purchase of additional shields so that they can be carried by more than just supervisors, increasing the likelihood of a shield being on scene in the initial stages of an incident.



**Photo 12:** Patrol ballistic shields issued to sergeants

**RECOMMENDATION #29**

*Conduct ongoing training in the use of the ballistic shields and helmets. Both sergeants and deputies should be trained in the use of these tools.*

# Training Review

The Ventura County Sheriff's Office and the California Highway Patrol were the first to respond to the shooting at the Borderline. How effective an agency's response to an event such as this is dependent on the type, quality, and frequency of relevant training received by its first responders. An assessment of an agency's response to a critical incident must address whether the training received prior to the incident met the needs of the individual responding officers/deputies.

## TRAINING

The sheriff's office maintains training records for each of its members. That training is based on POST guidelines and certified training courses. POST is the state-sanctioned regulatory body that oversees the selection and training standards for all California peace officers.

POST establishes standards for the training of new peace officers, as well as the continued training of those peace officers after completion of a basic academy. POST requires a minimum of 24-hours of biennial training for each training cycle. The 24 hours must include 8 hours of use of force and driving simulator training (FOS/LEDS), 8 hours of first aid training, and 8 hours of arrest and control tactics training (ARCON). A review of the training records of the sheriff's office first responders showed that all deputies had well beyond POST's minimum hourly training requirements.

Prior to the events at the Borderline, both the sheriff's office and CHP offered training courses referred to as active shooter, rapid deployment, or a combination of these titles. In the case of CHP, both officers have documented attendance in an active shooter or rapid deployment type training as part of their departmental training record.

The sheriff's office conducts a POST-certified Rapid Deployment/Active Shooter training course, and assigns all of its members to attend the training. The agency has been providing this training since October of 2000. The training was developed and is taught by a Rapid Deployment/Active Shooter cadre. This cadre is made up of sheriff's office SWAT team members. The curriculum is a hybrid of material from several tactical organizations and represents a compilation of best practices in the industry. The training is periodically modified based on real life events, as well as the lessons learned during debriefings and after-action reviews that follow.

In the case of the Borderline incident, training records show that all the initial responders from the sheriff's office had attended Rapid Deployment/

Active Shooter training. Both sheriff's office sergeants had attended Rapid Deployment/Active Shooter training in 2001. The remaining deputies who responded that night attended Rapid Deployment/Active Shooter as an 8-hour course of instruction taught during patrol orientation school. Deputies are assigned to the patrol orientation school once they are reassigned from custody to a patrol assignment.

The review of the sheriff's office's Rapid Deployment/Active Shooter training found that the training curriculum was sound. However, there were areas identified that warranted consideration. Those areas include an expansion of command and control, field supervisor specific training for critical incidents and their role in Rapid Deployment/Active Shooter.

## COMMAND & CONTROL

Although Rapid Deployment/Active Shooter training discusses command and control, the focus of the course centers on the initial response and tactical considerations in addressing the threat from a line level perspective. Since the Borderline shooting, the sheriff's office has developed and provides training in command and control as part of Rapid Deployment/Active Shooter training.

## SERGEANT/SUPERVISORY TRAINING

Sheriff's office sergeants attend a mandatory 80-hour POST supervisory course. While agencies can teach this course themselves, the sheriff's office has traditionally sent sergeants to outside agencies for this training. This course and the curriculum are developed to meet the broad needs of California law enforcement rather than the specific needs of any single agency, and the content is highly dictated by POST.

The current curriculum covers 19 topics, of which critical incident management is one. By itself, this does not provide sufficient exposure to command-and-control concepts. Since the shooting, the sheriff's office has also developed a training program to aid newly promoted sergeants and provide additional training specific to command and control of critical incidents.

### RECOMMENDATION #30

*Training in the area of critical incidents, command and control and scene management should be prioritized for newly promoted sergeants and incorporated into standardized training upon promotion. The sheriff's office should incorporate additional hours of training in these areas into a two-year training cycle for supervisors.*

The Training Coordinator has adapted the FOS/LEDS and ARCON training to include 8 additional hours of supervisory training that is specific to the role of a sergeant/supervisor. These expanded courses include command and control, critical incident management, and supervisory responsibilities during uses of force.



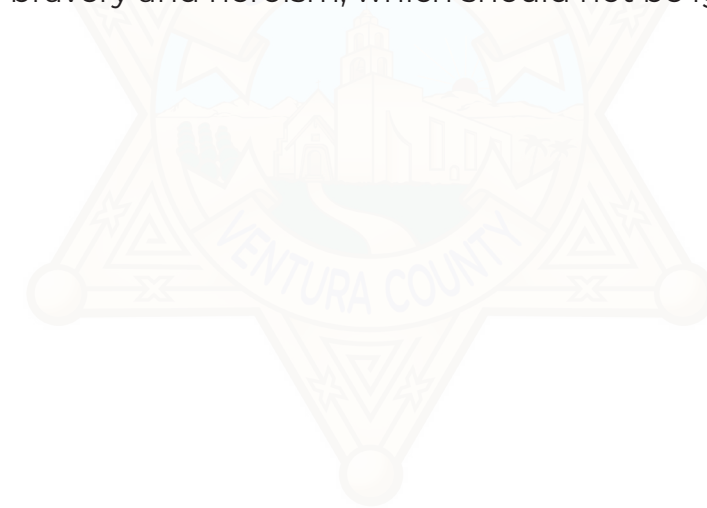


# Conclusion

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The events of November 7, 2018 will forever be engrained in the minds of the men and women of the Ventura County Sheriff's Office, members of the other agencies who responded to assist, and the Thousand Oaks community as a whole. The grotesque act of brutality perpetrated by the shooter was difficult to comprehend, particularly as it occurred in a city frequently ranked as one of the safest in the nation. This mass shooting painfully demonstrated that these threats can occur anywhere, at any time, and that law enforcement agencies everywhere must be prepared to respond.

The committee set out to conduct an unbiased review, striving for the professional development of not only our own department, but also for the law enforcement profession as a whole. It is the committee's hope that other first responder entities and stakeholders can benefit from the findings of this report. While the focus of this critique was on identifying areas for improvement, there were many facets of the response which were done well and included acts of bravery and heroism, which should not be ignored.



# Table of Recommendations

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**Recommendation #1:** Agencies should consider using an automated communication system to activate additional resources. This would allow one person to simultaneously send a recorded message to a predetermined group of responders and electronically track the availability of the responders. (Page 46)

**Recommendation #2:** Update Sheriff's Policy 330 to provide the watch commander with greater direction and specificity in requesting mutual aid from other local law enforcement agencies. (Page 46)

**Recommendation #3:** Employ the "move-up philosophy" to assist the watch commander. Each uninvolved sheriff's office station had a sergeant working the evening of the Borderline shooting who could have been instructed to respond to the watch commander's office to assist with answering calls and other essential duties. The Ventura County Pre-Trial Detention Facility also shares the campus with dispatch and had two sergeants on duty. The watch commander can easily become overburdened with making notifications to executive staff, requesting additional resources such as the SWAT team, or contacting outside agencies for assistance. Additional staff can assist with these duties. (Page 46)

**Recommendation #4:** Audit CAD call types to determine relevancy and appropriateness. (Page 47)

**Recommendation #5:** Agencies may consider assigning a second dispatcher to sit directly beside the radio dispatcher on large scale events to read incoming updates and coordinate their broadcast by the radio dispatcher. This allows the radio dispatcher to focus solely on radio communications. (Page 48)

**Recommendation #6:** A proper ringdown line must be established between the CHP and the sheriff's office. Dispatchers should ensure critical information is shared and known by other agency dispatch centers when multi-agency critical incidents are occurring. Dispatchers should be included in active shooter training to ensure all involved participants have a mutual understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each member of the response team. (Page 50)

**Recommendation #7:** Tactical teams should be formed from members of the same agency when possible to ensure tactics and communications are consistent. (Page 53)

**Recommendation #8:** When multi-agency teams are deploying in critical incidents, provide for radio interoperability or sufficient team members who can communicate directly with the agency having primary jurisdiction for the incident. In the absence of this, multi-agency participants must ensure communications about critical information are pushed to all involved agencies quickly and concisely. (Page 53)

**Recommendation #9:** Refocus active shooter training to include a supervisory component on command and control, leadership, and the importance of establishing a rally point for command. Training should also include instruction to all personnel of the need to assume a leadership role in the absence of a field supervisor. This refocused training will be developed in consultation with SWAT. (Page 54)

**Recommendation #10:** For longer term incidents, develop incident management teams with greater training and expertise in command/control and the organization of resources. In the early stages of any incident, these members can supplement the abilities and capacity of on-scene supervisors.

Since the shooting, the sheriff's office has created three incident command system teams comprised of deputies, senior deputies, sergeants, and captains. The teams will receive additional training in incident command. They will also respond to and manage critical incidents to better facilitate identification and organization of resources needed, as well as to assist in command and control. (Page 55)

**Recommendation #11:** Refine and distribute critical incident checklists for field supervisors and deputies to refer to during incidents. (Page 55)

**Recommendation #12:** Training should include a focus on communication that ensures simple, plain broadcasts that accurately and completely relay relevant information. This training will put an emphasis on ensuring that transmitted information is received by others. (Page 56)

**Recommendation #13:** During active shooter training, patrol personnel must understand that, depending on the immediacy of a threat and the factors known at the time, waiting for SWAT is not always the preferred option. Scenarios dealing with entry versus maintaining a perimeter should be purposefully developed and practiced to provide insight into this issue. (Page 58)

**Recommendation #14:** Reinforce in training the importance of looking for and identifying alternate entry points. (Page 59)

**Recommendation #15:** Whenever reasonably feasible, officers should try to protect their tactical communications from any suspect. (Page 59)

**Recommendation #16:** As with any management position, when resources allow, leaders should resist the desire to become a part of the response itself. Managers are charged with ensuring high level command and control of an incident and should focus their efforts on broader incident command. (Page 60)

**Recommendation #17:** As part of the early assessment of a scene, consideration, designation, and resources need to be assigned to treatment of injured subjects. Using ICS, an incident commander can effectively assign this task to on-scene personnel and give control of this component to a responding supervisor. (Page 64)

**Recommendation #18:** Controlling access to the interior of the reunification center proved difficult in the beginning. Documenting the names and phone numbers of all those seeking entrance and their connection to a particular victim would have been helpful in providing security and determining each person's purpose for being at the location. It would also assist in providing for victim services later. (Page 65)

**Recommendation #19:** Due to their specialized training and experience, the District Attorney's Victim Advocate Unit should be responsible for the reunification center, with the sheriff's office in a support role. This would allow the victim advocates to fully leverage their expertise and provide a smoother transition to available services. (Page 65)

**Recommendation #20:** The sheriff's office did not have mobile fingerprint readers to assist in the identification of the victims. Obtaining mobile fingerprint readers linked to both DMV and the local criminal justice database could assist in quicker identification of victims. (Page 65)

**Recommendation #21:** Incorporate victim services and reunification centers into large scale mass victim training exercises. (Page 65)

**Recommendation #22:** While the pace of an investigation is frequently influenced by unique case factors, investigators should employ purposeful, tactical pauses to communicate with one another to ensure each detective has a shared understanding of the facts, resources, and evidence as the investigation unfolds. Technology, such as conference calling and video conferencing can be effective tools to facilitate this information sharing when teams are dispersed over large areas. (Page 67)

**Recommendation #23:** Assign liaisons to work with partner agencies

during large scale operations. The assigning and embedding of liaisons in multi-agency investigations is critical for ensuring information is shared broadly and in a timely manner. In this case, the liaison could have served as a sheriff's crime scene manager to address these critical elements of an investigation. (Page 69)

**Recommendation #24:** Explore additional ways web-based and analytic software can enhance investigations. In the absence of technology, case agents must schedule periodic pauses in the investigation to share information and ensure everyone has a clear understanding of what the investigation is uncovering. (Page 70)

**Recommendation #25:** Incorporate dispatchers into the peer support program to ensure the dispatcher perspective is represented and addressed in critical incidents. (Page 72)

**Recommendation #26:** Provide more in-depth training to PSP staff regarding mental health resources and critical incident stressors so they can provide more effective employee engagement in the first 72 hours after an incident. Research has shown that debriefing an incident within the first 72 hours relieves anxiety and puts the events in perspective. This helps an agency manage the traumatic reactions of survivors and involved employees after a critical event. The department should investigate incorporating critical incident stress defusing (CISD) as a useful tool in this effort. (Page 73)

**Recommendation #27:** All personnel are required to qualify at the range with both their handgun and shotgun every two months. Most qualification periods include some manipulation of the shotgun to include speed and tactical loading. However, the shotgun is a large, somewhat heavy, and cumbersome weapon. Consideration should be given to providing a department issued rifle to all patrol personnel. The rifle is a lighter weapon and is easier to manipulate. Tactical rifles should be configured with aiming optics and flash-light systems. (Page 75)

**Recommendation #28:** The Sheriff's Personnel Bureau will track expiration dates on body armor. They will send an email to the affected deputy asking them to sign up for a fitting on one of the dates provided in the email. If the deputy does not sign up, his/her supervisor will be contacted. If necessary, the request will be elevated through the chain of command until compliance is gained. (Page 76)

**Recommendation #29:** Conduct ongoing training in the use of the ballistic shields and helmets. Both sergeants and deputies should be trained in the use of these tools. (Page 77)

**Recommendation #30:** Training in the area of critical incidents, command and control and scene management should be prioritized for newly promoted sergeants and incorporated into standardized training upon promotion. The sheriff's office should incorporate additional hours of training in these areas into a two-year training cycle for supervisors. (Page 79)



# *In Memoriam*



Sean Adler  
Cody Coffman  
Sergeant Ron Helus  
Alaina Housley  
Daniel Manrique  
Justin Meek  
Kristina Morisette  
Telemachus Orfanos  
Noel Sparks  
Mark Meza  
Jake Dunham  
Blake Dingman



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