SUMMARY

Through the use of real-time interoperable communications and multimedia sharing technologies, rapid response challenges can be mitigated and overall response and operational effectiveness improved. The Hartford, Conn. Police demonstrated the significant benefits that can be realized using a technology of this type called Mutualink.

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HARTFORD, CT ACTIVE SHOOTER EXERCISE

IMPROVING SCHOOL SAFETY THROUGH ENHANCED SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

> By Joe Mazzarella

The mass school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. serves as another grim reminder of a disturbing pattern. Schools are attractive targets for those seeking to carry out high-profile mass killings. This trend is not limited to schools and has spread to other places of public mass gathering, such as movie theaters, malls and workplaces of all kinds.

These shootings know no boundaries and can and do occur anywhere from rural communities to large cities. Whether or not we are seeing the manifestation of a new societal pathology fueled by pervasive and easy access to social media coupled with worldwide Internet media outlets that enable anybody to get their 15 minutes of fame (or infamy), the fact is our schools are now high-profile targets.

One legacy of past school shootings, particularly after Columbine, is that law enforcement response tactics to these threats have changed from isolate, contain, negotiate, and tactical response to that of immediate entry and engagement by the first responding officers on the scene. This tactical change rightly recognizes that prior shootings indicate there is an unacceptable risk probability that school attackers have the primary intention to kill as many as possible. Thus, time is of the essence. Simply put, the operative assumption must be that an assailant intends to kill and must be neutralized as soon as possible.

While a necessity, this tactic heightens the need to quickly achieve and sustain situational awareness from both an operational success perspective as well as for the safety of responding officers and others in the vicinity. However, paradoxically, immediate entry and engagement have the effect of speeding up events, shrinking the window of time for information gathering and assessment, overtaking conventional command and control communications structures, and compressing decision-making time.

Further, while law enforcement is the primary actor in any school-shooting response effort, there are a host of other parties involved. They range from directly impacted parties such as students, teachers and staff, as well as neighboring law enforcement agencies, and other emergency response and support entities such as Fire and EMS and local hospitals providing aid.

Improving Operational Effectiveness

Through the use of real-time interoperable communications and multimedia sharing technologies, these rapid-response challenges can be mitigated and overall response and operational effectiveness improved. In the first school shooter exercise conducted in Connecticut after Sandy Hook, the Hartford, Conn. Police demonstrated the significant benefits that can be realized using a technology of this type called Mutualink.

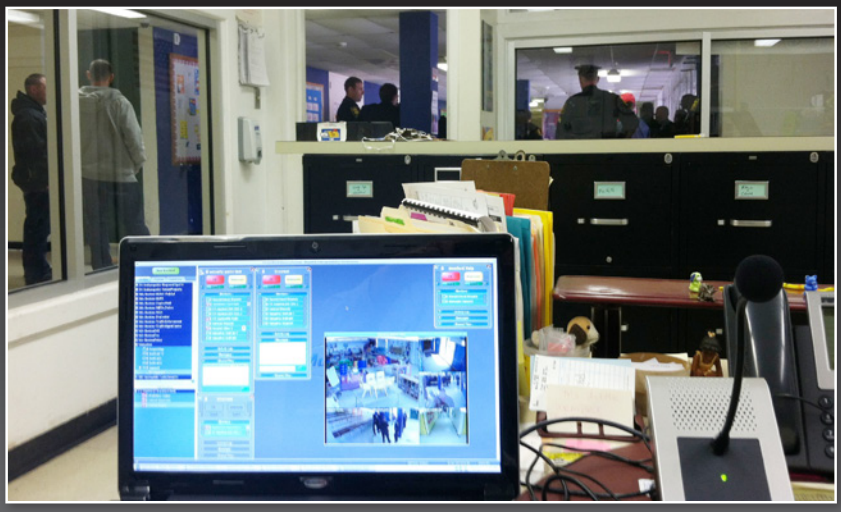
Set up at a local grade school, the Hartford Police conducted several exercises involving the school staff, the area school resource officer (SRO), responding HPD patrol units, HPD SWAT, the Hartford Office of Emergency Management (OEM), St. Francis Hospital, a local trauma facility, and Sonitrol Security of Hartford, a local security monitoring company.

Through Mutualink, all available media and communications systems among the participants were enabled to permit participant communications to be bridged and media assets to be seamlessly shared on an ad-hoc, as-needed basis, including radios, mobile phones, telephones, public announcement systems, and video systems.

The Hartford school-shooter exercise scenario involved a shooter near the school with shots fired being reported to police dispatch from a citizen. Thereafter, the suspect forcibly entered the school. From a panic alarm triggered within the school's administrative office, a distress signal was sent to the school's emergency alarm monitoring company, Sonitrol, which utilizes Mutualink as part of its overall security platform.

Through Mutualink, the alarm automatically created an interoperable communications incident between the school, Sonitrol emergency dispatch, HPD dispatch, and Hartford OEM. Instantly, real-time video views from inside the school were transmitted and shared with HPD and OEM. At the same time, HPD radios were bridged with the school's internal radio system, enabling HPD dispatch and field officers en route, OEM, and the area SRO to communicate with school personnel inside the school.

▲ Officers from the Hartford, Conn. Police rush into the school in response to a report of an active shooter during an April 2013 drill.



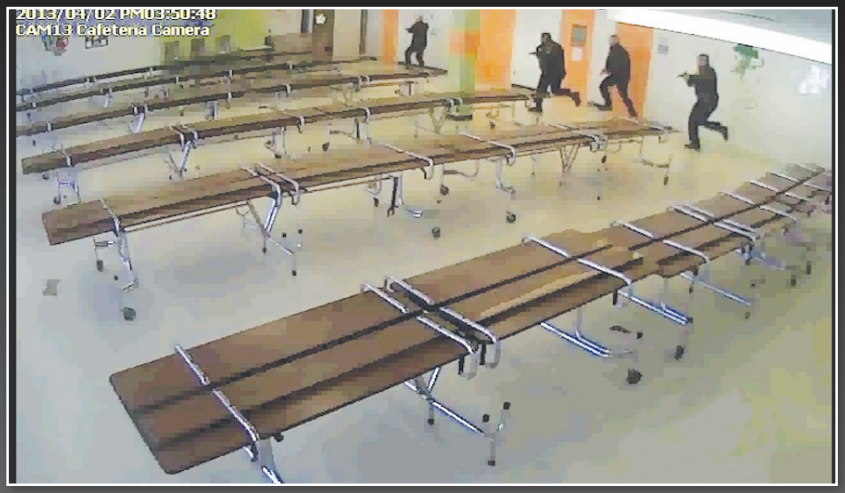
▲ Mutualink's IP-based peer-to-peer interoperability platform enables situational awareness trhough the sharing of audio, video, text and data in real time.

As officers responded and entered, the suspect's location inside the school was determined and continuously tracked through the school video system. The school video system views were shared in real time with HPD dispatch, OEM, and commanders and officers on the ground via Mutualink.

Additionally, school maps were shared through Mutualink with all parties to enable actual location and orientation to be determined for responders. In one exercise flight, this proved very useful as personnel in dispatch observed an officer heading down the wrong hall, and through the radio system they were able to quickly communicate with the officer and redirect him with visual landmarks. ("No. Back out and head down the yellow hall on your left.")

Through Mutualink, the Sonitrol audio monitoring system was able to listen in to events occurring inside the school and share them live with officers and commanders on the ground. Additionally,

During an Active Shooter preparedness drill, the police in Hartford, Conn. conduct a rapid building search.



As police run through the school cafeteria, Command & Control stays informed via video cameras from Sonitrol and Mutualink's interoperable communications platform..

commanders on scene were able to visually monitor the event through video, audio and push-to-talk (PTT) communications from a Mutualink LTE wireless iPad application, and HPD dispatch and OEM were able to receive live video streamed from the iPad as events unfolded.

Through bridging to the school's public announcement system, Mutualink enabled commanders over radios and from dispatch to broadcast instructions inside the school. Finally, through Mutualink, the St. Francis Hospital emergency operations center was able to seamlessly communicate with first responders and prepare for triage and trauma response.

Communications Sharing

The Hartford School shooter exercise proved to be a tremendous success. Most importantly, through Mutualink, a powerful and agile communications and media sharing capability, emerged where all communications and media assets were brought to bear and shared as and when needed.

This capability transformed a school-shooter response scenario where responders are entering a school with 1) limited or no situational awareness; 2) no information as to where suspects may be or what they look like; 3) limited understanding of the weapons or threat capabilities they possess; 4) no clear mental picture of the physical premises layout; 5) limited or no communications with school staff seeking instruction and capable of providing valuable information.

That almost worst-case information scenario was transformed to an environment where critical information can be exchanged, viewed and monitored in real time to all relevant parties. Essentially, many eyes and ears are connected, bringing the ability to share critical information, assess circumstances in real time, and make more effective operational decisions.

With Mutualink, the capability demonstrated is a permanent, always-on, always-available community-wide and community-to-community capability. Minimal training is required because the system is simple and intuitive and does not require communications experts performing difficult patching through complex systems at times of crisis.

Most importantly, the Mutualink system is designed to be a community-wide capability where first responder agencies and other critical community entities participate in a virtual network. No matter the type of incident or emergency, it offers an all-hazards, all-disciplines real-time collaboration system with ad-hoc capabilities that enable all relevant parties to securely come together as and when needed to share communications and media assets with each other.

For schools, the Hartford school shooter exercise demonstrates that technology like Mutualink can make schools safer and save lives. The ability to communicate and see events in real time inside schools, and across agencies and partners when needed, provides critical capabilities that can make a real-world difference in terms of safety outcomes for potential victims as well as responders.

Joe Mazzarella is the Senior Vice President and Chief Legal Officer at Mutualink, Inc.

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