

# **ACTIVE SHOOTER**

**Is Your Theatre Prepared for  
the Unthinkable?**

**POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS**

by Stefanie Maiya Lehmann  
and Dominic Yeager

Manchester, Paris, London, Fort Lauderdale, Fort Hood, San Bernardino, Columbine, Virginia Tech, Orlando, Aurora, Newtown ... the list goes on. Active shooter events have become all too common internationally and here in the U.S., where the number of active shooter events increased from just one in 2000 to 20 in 2015, according to the FBI. Locations where events occurred varied greatly – from schools to movie theatres to nightclubs to arenas – but all were places where citizens gathered together.

Because of their role as community gathering spaces, theatres and other arts venues are recognized as potential targets for those wishing to cause harm. Whether you work for a college theatre, a large performing arts center, or a small community theatre, your facility needs to invest the time required to prepare for an active shooter event.

### **What Is an Active Shooter?**

The Department of Homeland Security defines an active shooter as “an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a populated area.” Chris Grollnek, a Texas-based consultant who is one of the nation’s leading experts on active shooter events, notes that the term is not used just for events involving guns: “Although a firearm is often used, the term ‘active shooter’ is also applied to incidents involving other weapons, such as vehicles, knives or bombs.”

Having a plan for what to do if an active shooter event occurs is critical to the safety of both the staff and the audience attending an event.

“I don’t believe in fear tactics,” says Grollnek. “However, [let me share] a statistic central to this discussion: zero to seven minutes. The average active shooter incident is over within seven minutes – and, on average, it takes 17 minutes for police to arrive on scene.”

An organization’s safety plan for an active shooter event should be focused on preparing for what could occur during those seven minutes, Grollnek says.

### **It’ll Never Happen Here**

Perhaps you’re thinking, “Our staff is swamped, and we’re just a small venue. We don’t really need to worry. It’ll never happen to us.” Although the statistical probability of an active shooter event touching your organization is small, things that have never happened before happen all the time.

The unthinkable happened to the Town & Gown Players of Athens, GA, in April 2009, when three of its members were shot and killed by the husband of one of the victims at a reunion picnic outside the Athens Community Theatre.

Even after hearing about such events, arts organizations typically don’t make readiness planning part of their current business standard, according to *A Vision for Emergency Readiness, Response and Recovery in the Arts Sector*, published by the National Coalition for Arts’ Preparedness and Emergency Response.

“When South Arts surveyed arts and cultural organizations across the country in May 2008, results showed that 68 percent of these organizations had experienced a crisis situation and did not have a plan in place before the event, and still did not have one in place afterwards,” the report said.

The two main reasons for this resistance, the Coalition noted, are that individuals don’t know where to begin and that planning is not a current priority for leadership.

Organizations of all sizes need to make planning a top priority, says Steven A. Adelman, vice president and resident active shooter response expert for the Event Safety Alliance, an international trade association dedicated to changing the culture of live event production to emphasize “life safety first.”

“There is no reason to think that armed bad guys go only to large events,” Adelman says. “To the extent that active shooters are a realistic concern, they are a concern for everyone, in venues of all sizes. ... The fact that a reasonably foreseeable event is relatively unlikely absolves no one from the duty to plan and train for the possibility.”

Just hoping it won’t happen at your theatre is not enough. “Hope is not a plan,” says Adelman. “Or, to paraphrase Hunter S. Thompson, ‘Call on God, but row away from the rocks.’”

That advice was echoed by Jeffrey A. Slotnick, president of Setracon Enterprise Security Risk Management Services, a critical architect in the Homeland Security Enterprise, and a senior regional vice president of ASIS International, a professional organization for security professionals.

“Just because you ignore risk, doesn’t mean it isn’t still there,” Slotnick said. “And you are still liable. ... Not having a system in place and addressing your risk is simply unacceptable. ... Everyone should have a plan – every organization, every family.”



*Security consultant  
Chris Grollnek  
(above) says  
venues need to  
understand that law  
enforcement won't  
immediately be on  
the scene:  
'The average active  
shooter incident is  
over within seven  
minutes – and, on  
average, it takes 17  
minutes for police to  
arrive on scene.'*



**Security expert  
Steven A. Adelman**  
(above), says:  
*'To put it bluntly, if  
the event is unsafe  
and people get  
hurt, no one will  
remember the show.  
It's like the quip,  
'Other than that,  
Mrs. Lincoln, how  
was the play?''*

### Being Prepared Is Part of Your Mission

Arts organizations place an emphasis on serving their missions, but many don't focus on how important it is from a mission standpoint to have a strong program in place to protect their patrons' safety. Connecting those dots is vital.

"To put it bluntly, if the event is unsafe and people get hurt, no one will remember the show," says Adelman, whose firm, Adelman Law Group, offers active shooter response training for venues and events. "It's like the quip, 'Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?'"

He also notes that active shooter or similar events at arts organizations can have a domino effect that impacts the overall industry.

"If there are too many high-profile incidents, guests won't want to come to shows at all," he says. "Then we'd all have to find something else to do with our lives."

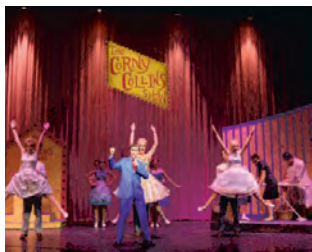
In advocating for safety initiatives at theatres, Slotnick notes: "You would never consider sending an actor onstage without proper rehearsals. Why would you treat the safety of your audiences and staff any differently?"

He explains that safety risk assessment and training have a lot of parallels with the production process. In presenting a play, "you need to analyze the script, identify the roles that need to be cast, cast the right person for the right part, direct the character, memorize the part, and practice-practice-practice, and then you're ready for the show," he says. This process is nearly identical to that of emergency preparedness, he notes: "Have a plan, train the plan, practice the plan."

Live events require special consideration for numerous reasons, including the nature of the work being presented, technical elements, audience behavior and the overall environment. Unfortunately, there are no one-size-fits-all handbooks or ready-to-use standards for the theatre industry.

### Who Can Help Create a Plan?

A lot of information about active shooter training and strategies can be found online. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security and FEMA have published thorough safety manuals outlining general guidelines. There are also trade organizations, publications and reports that may help explore the considerations for live event venues. Local police departments also have crime prevention officers that



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can be valuable sources for consultation.

Best practices for event safety are continually evolving and being debated, which can make it complicated for venues to develop and maintain emergency plans.

This is illustrated by Grollnek when he discusses the well-known mantra, "Run, Hide, Fight." He notes that "what we see now is that [Run, Hide, Fight] can forget the human element. This is what I call the forgotten 'F': Freeze." Instead of running, hiding or fighting, many people simply freeze and are unable to do anything out of fear, he says. To overcome this, Grollnek recommends a new slogan, "Get Up, and Get Out," aiming "to shift the paradigm of a generation: 'Yes, it is okay to run.'"

If your institution has little knowledge and limited local resources in event safety, the best place to turn for help creating a plan may be an organization or a professional that specializes in event safety and active shooter incidents. These sources will be able to assist your organization in seriously examining the unique challenges at your individual venue and the potential threats to plan for.

Slotnick advises that organizations look into any

benefits they may accrue from spending money to improve the venue's safety. "For a smaller organization, you might be looking at a \$3,000-4,000 investment," he said. "However, insurance companies may discount their rates or cover the costs as it minimizes their risk exposure."

While some leaders may balk at the money required to develop an individualized plan, Adelman warns, "If something bad happens, no one will be sympathetic to the boss's desire to stay within the annual planning budget."

#### Elements of a Plan

Once you have decided to develop a plan, take time to get it right. Talk to the boots on the ground, imagine a variety of hypothetical crises, have the discussions that no one wants to think about. Grollnek, who advises at the highest levels of government and leads a coalition of the nation's leading security experts, suggests, "It's not putting aside all other recommended practices – it's merging [them] all together and leading with a basic common-sense approach."

Just remember: Whatever plan you develop must be simple, actionable and reliable.



**Security expert Jeffrey A. Slotnick (above) says:**  
*"You would never consider sending an actor onstage without proper rehearsals. Why would you treat the safety of your audiences and staff any differently?"*

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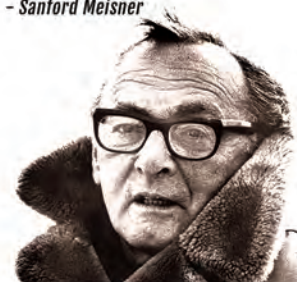
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Event Safety Alliance:  
[www.eventsafetyalliance.org](http://www.eventsafetyalliance.org)  
2017 Event Safety Summit  
Nov. 29-Dec. 1  
Lititz, PA

ASIS International:  
[www.asisonline.org](http://www.asisonline.org)  
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2017 ASIS International Annual Conference  
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ArtsReady (a national initiative of SouthArts):  
[www.artsready.org](http://www.artsready.org)

Steven A. Adelman:  
[www.adelmanlawgroup.com](http://www.adelmanlawgroup.com)

Chris Grollnek:  
[www.chrisgrollnek.com](http://www.chrisgrollnek.com); [www.cgpgmg.com](http://www.cgpgmg.com)

Jeffrey A. Slotnick, CPP, PSP:  
[www.setracon.com](http://www.setracon.com)

Below are some actions typically included in a plan, but do not hesitate to individualize the components to serve your organization.

### 1 Complete a venue risk assessment.

This is often recommended as a good first step in overall emergency planning for a venue, but you can also focus this assessment on a specific concern, such as the potential for an active shooter event. A risk assessment will allow you to identify areas of vulnerability through visual inspections of the venue, review of critical documents, and interviews with key personnel. Once this step is completed, venue managers can begin the process of creating an emergency action plan.

### 2 Develop an Emergency Action Plan.

Venues should have action plans for all potential emergencies. However, creating an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) specifically for an active shooter event is of new significance in today's society. An EAP can help reduce the disruption of operations, avoid a prolonged shutdown of the venue, and prevent injuries and even death.

In creating your EAP, be sure to involve a variety of stakeholders, not only in your venue but in your community as well. The Department of Homeland Security suggests you involve your employee management, facility owners and operators, local law enforcement and emergency responders. The DHS says the components of an effective EAP include:

- A preferred method of reporting emergencies.
- An evacuation procedure.
- Emergency escape routes and procedures, plus contact information for and responsibilities of individuals to be contacted under the EAP.
- Name, telephone number and distance to local hospitals from your location.
- Emergency notification system to alert various parties of an emergency, including individuals at remote locations within premises, local law enforcement and area hospitals.

### 3 Designate specific roles for staff.

In any emergency, the ability to respond in an efficient manner should be the first goal. The DHS notes certain responsibilities that human resources and facility managers have in preventing an adverse event and responding if one occurs.

#### Human Resources responsibilities:

- Conduct effective employee screening and background checks.
- Create a system for reporting signs of potentially

violent behavior.

- Make counseling services available to employees.
- Develop an Employee Assistance Program that includes policies and procedures for dealing with an active shooter situation, as well as an effective action plan.

#### Facility Manager responsibilities:

- Institute access controls (e.g., keys, security system passcodes).
- Distribute critical items to appropriate managers and employees, including: floor plans, keys, facility personnel lists and telephone numbers.
- Coordinate with the facility's security department to ensure the physical security of the location.
- Assemble crisis kits containing radios, floor plans, staff roster and emergency contact numbers, first aid kits and flashlights.
- Place removable floor plans near entrances and exits for emergency responders.
- Activate the emergency notification system when an emergency situation occurs.

### 4 Carry out training exercises.

To develop a full-scale training exercise, you need to identify the purpose, scope and objectives of the event. Once these three areas are addressed, it's time to develop and publish an exercise schedule. This schedule is an important tool to communicate how long the event will last, whom it will involve and what specific community or communities it will affect. Items to consider entering into the schedule include a pre-exercise orientation and safety briefing, and a post-mortem meeting.

In an active shooter exercise, there would be several categories of participants, with defined rules for each. Common categories include safety officials, controllers, players, actors and observers. All participants should wear identifying badges or lanyards with a specific color T-shirt identifying their participation category.

Once all of the participants have been defined and given their exercise parameters, the next step is to provide the entire team with the rules for the exercise. These can vary depending upon how you want the exercise to be run. However, the No. 1 rule for this type of exercise is safety.

As a performing arts venue, your theatre faces extra challenges in training for active shooter events because the majority of individuals witnessing an active shooter event will be unknown audience members. These individuals will not know your

plan and will not be able to train alongside your employees. You can help prepare staff for this obstacle by including “audience members” in your training exercises and spelling out procedures for helping patrons exit the venue in your overall plan.

**5 Schedule continuing education.** The difficulty of planning these types of events is often enough to persuade venues to never do them again. However, theatre managers must be diligent in planning continuing education on this topic and doing follow-up assessments of their capability to handle emergency events. Training that is one-and-done creates the potential for staff to forget what they are supposed to do when an emergency situation happens – adding to the chaos.

Recommendations vary on how often venue managers should go over the responsibilities of the staff in an emergency situation. While it is not necessary to complete a full-scale training exercise every quarter, it is good practice to participate in some type of training event once a year. Experts recommend planning for quarterly small-scale training operations if possible. Small-scale training could include something as simple as a staff walk-through of the

facility or taking time to re-evaluate practices and the evacuation plan. At this same time, staff can ensure emergency supplies are in working order and stored appropriately, and can integrate new staff members into the plan. Although this quarterly training session is valuable for the entire staff, it is essential for staff working in the front-of-house, production, security and facilities areas.

#### **Enhance Planning with Awareness**

Planning is critical, but encouraging workers to be aware of their surroundings on a daily basis is just as important in preventing or dealing with an active shooter event at a venue. As Adelman points out, “The key to responding to an active shooter is the same as the key to avoiding safety and security issues of all kinds: situational awareness.”

The staff working live events need to be especially observant – even more so than they would be in their daily lives.

“Anyone who works in a theatre environment knows that people make mistakes and miss obvious problems all the time,” says Adelman. “We are able to get through our days precisely because we don’t

*(Continued on Page 36)*



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## Active Shooter

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focus on everything equally. Unfortunately, this means that we all suffer from an acute absence of situational awareness. To some extent, this can be addressed and overcome with training and practice ... by placing considerable emphasis on enhancing situational awareness of the routine risks in live event production."

Do not be the venue that waits to formulate a plan until the worst has already happened. Planning, implementation, training exercises and continuing education

will provide you with essential tools to protect your staff and your audience should the unthinkable happen at your theatre. Be prepared, and be safe. ■



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