Terrorism Response In Mercer County

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This paper has been reviewed by Sheriff Grey, Chief Lefeld, and Eric Rosenbeck.
Certification Statement

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of other is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and that appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

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Abstract

Terrorism is usually associated with large cities and densely populated areas; however, a threat does lie within the small towns across the country. The purpose of this paper was to focus on such events that fall into the category of terrorism and how a small rural country would react to such events given the limited resources available. Specifically, this paper focused on a couple of scenarios, including a bomb threat and an active shooter threat, along with the training and logistics that accompany each situation. Interviews were conducted with Mercer County Sheriff Jeff Grey, St. Henry Fire Chief Matt Lefeld, and St. Henry High School Principal Eric Rosenbeck in order to gain knowledge on the state of Mercer County’s preparedness for a terrorism event.
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Introduction

Mercer County, 472 square miles with a population of 41,000 residents, is dominated by agriculture. Therefore, terrorism isn’t on the forefront of the minds of its residents. Residents of the county may not consciously be thinking about possible terrorism attacks, but that does not mean in any way, shape, or form that the local emergency response agencies have not been refining their abilities to train and handle possible events of terrorism. Departments, in today’s age, are having to deal with community relations deteriorating. Mercer County is way behind the curve in regards to that specific trend, due largely in part to the way Sheriff Jeff Grey runs and maintains his department. The idea that the government and emergency services ultimately work for the public has been imbedded into every aspect of operations.

Department Interactions

The Celina Police Department, serving as the largest local department in the county, consists of 15 sworn officers and five to six dispatchers listed on their roll call. Coldwater Police Department falls in line next with eight to nine sworn officers, St. Henry Police Department maintains three full time officers and one part-time officer, Fort Recovery adds two full time officers and one part-time officer to the team, and Rockford Police Department rounds out the county with two full time officers and various others working sporadic schedules. The Mercer County Sheriff’s Department, consisting of 30 sworn officers, works in tandem with each of the previously listed departments in their respective jurisdictions. Along with working alongside the local agencies, the Sheriff’s Department can call upon any other sheriff in the state per Ohio Revised Code, section 311.07, meaning that sheriffs in other jurisdictions have the authority to assist and respond in another county in Ohio. Lima, Ohio houses the closet FBI branch to Mercer County in which experience and mentoring are frequently observed. Relationships among all
levels of law enforcement can be described as healthy, working relationships. As Sheriff Jeff Grey puts it in regards to inter-departmental relationships, “Turf battles usually only occur when no one has anything to do. When situations become intense, professionals are able to work together to accomplish the task at hand.” Also according to Sheriff Grey, the biggest improvement made at the local level in terms of terrorism preparedness is the information chain. Before the attacks on 9/11, the flow of information was not the most efficient. Realizing, after the largest attack on American soil, that communication was not where it should’ve been, huge efforts were made to better connect agencies from the top to the bottom.

Matt Lefeld, Fire Chief of the St. Henry Fire Department, offered some insight on the structure of the fire services throughout the southern portion of Mercer County. Unique to small towns is the notion that the entire 30-member department is strictly a volunteer department. Upon receiving a call, Chief Lefeld says he can usually expect eight volunteers to arrive at the firehouse. He expands saying that response times depend on the time of day in which the call is received; however, the department is usually en route within two to three minutes of receiving the call. At the furthest location in the district, the response time would fluctuate near the eight-minute mark. St. Henry’s department participates in automatic mutual aid agreements with Burketsville, Fort Recovery, Chickasaw, Coldwater, and Montezuma. Within these departments a couple of members from each department will come together for training purposes and then carry the responsibility of bringing that training back to their respective departments. Another aspect that is unique to St. Henry’s fire department is that they do not house a medic or an ambulance. Both agencies are their own separate volunteer entities. However, the fire department has multiple volunteers that run on the squad in addition to being a part of the fire department.
Resources

Small agencies usually do not have their own deep pool of resources to utilize, largely in part due to funding. As expected a small agency, St. Henry for example, would not see the funding that a department in a city such as Dayton or Cincinnati would see. Despite not having the funding to have access to resources specifically for their own agencies, when the resources of the agencies across the county are brought together, the available resources are comparable to that of a larger agency. For example, on the law enforcement side of operations, Mercer County supplies the instruments needed for accident reconstruction, Allen County supplies bomb dogs, and Butler, Hamilton, and Marion Counties all supply helicopters. While a small agency may not be able to afford each of these assets, a computer database allows Sheriff Grey to log on and request a service from another department in the state. On the fire side of operations St. Henry, Coldwater, Burketsville, Fort Recover, Montezuma, and Chickasaw each house two engines, a tanker, and a grass truck. In addition to these, Coldwater houses a rescue truck, and Burketsville houses a ladder truck and a newly gained 75-foot aerial.

Potential Targets

Mercer County does not have a copious amount of targets that would be of interest to terrorists. As mentioned by Sheriff Grey, if terrorism were to be seen in Mercer County, it would more than likely be of the disruption and distraction variety. Grand Lake St. Marys sits in the northeast portion of the county. On the west side of the lake sits a spillway that helps maintain the water levels. See structure outlined in red on the visual below.
If terrorists were somehow able to disrupt the normal function of the spillway, possibly through a bombing, Celina would more than likely be taking on a serious enough amount of water. Emergency responders would be tasked with regaining control of the lake as well as dealing with any flooding that occurs in the area. This wouldn’t be the usual sort of attack that recently has been broadcasted, such as a Brussels, or Paris type of attack, but if it were timed out correctly with the weather the area could potentially take on a deadly amount of water. Portions around the lake already see light flooding in various areas during a moderate thunderstorm, so if terrorists were smart enough to wait until a large storm came rolling through and lake levels were high, serious damage could be caused by taking out the function provided by the spillway.

St. Henry is so small that other than at the church or school, acts of terrorism would be unlikely to occur. With that being said, one potential target does come to mind. Each year St.
Henry puts on the St. Henry Community Picnic that brings residents of the community together for a weekend long celebration over the Fourth of July day weekend. St. Henry is a very tight-knit community and the Community Picnic is notorious for bringing people that may not return to the area very often home for the weekend. Seen below, outlined in red, is the area that is the most densely populated and traveled throughout the weekend, especially on Friday and Saturday night.

This area is lined with various tents, specifically the band tent in which live entertainment from a local cover band is displayed during the night. Outlined in blue is the area that hosts the remainder of the Community Picnic. In this area, one will find various carnival rides and stands oriented towards children. Motivations for committing an act of terror at the Community Picnic will dictate the placement of bombs if that were to be the chosen method. The red zone would be targeted for a higher body count while the blue zone would be targeted to make a statement by
attacking the child oriented portion of the Community Picnic. St. Henry is not the only community in Mercer County to put on a community gathering. Coldwater, Maria Stein, Celina, and Fort. Recovery each hold their own community gathering during the summer months. Any one of these gatherings could be a potential target as the security for these events are not overbearing. The openness and outdoors aspects of these gatherings really lean in the favor of successfully carrying out an act of terrorism.

Both attacking the spillway and a community gathering in the county would be devastating to the area, but what would a terrorist organization really gain from an attack of this nature? Attitudes of terrorism in a small town usually resemble those of “that will never happen here” or “I will never find myself in that situation.” A higher level a peacefulness and safety is so evident in a small community. Residents do not feel the need to always have their houses and cars locked like one would in a larger city. The level of trust is exponentially larger in small towns than in cities. Terrorist organizations have one all encompassing goal and that is to instill fear into anyone who oppresses them and their ideas. If terrorists targeted a large city, a patterned thought of “Here we go again” would most likely be associated. However, if terrorists targeted the people that were the least expecting of a terrorist attack the psychological statement would trickle down into the smallest communities across the world. People that once shared the idea that an attack in their community could never happen may just begin to question how safe they really are. Al Qaeda wanted interests of the United States out of their territory and therefore chose to attack one of the biggest economic structures in the nation, the World Trade Centers. Nowadays, terrorist organizations are carrying out smaller scale attacks, and ISIS specifically seems to feed off of the psychological effects they can impose on an area or group of people. Terrorism just not only have to be seen through a large terror organization. Home grown
terrorism is continually becoming a bigger issue for authorities. The FBI believes they successfully prevented a terrorist attack in the small town of Montevideo, Minnesota, a town of about 5,000 people. Buford Rogers, 24, was believed to be in the planning stages of a terrorist attack in early May of 2013 when local law enforcement presented a search warrant to search his home in which they found, Molotov cocktails, suspected pipe bombs, and a Romanian model AK-M assault rifle (FBI). Authorities did not release whether or not Rogers was working alone or with a group, but either way these isolated forms of terrorism unfortunately are on the rise and are introducing a new form of terrorism geared toward inciting panic in even the smallest of communities in the country. Attacking an area similar to St. Henry or Mercer County in general would introduce a new element of psychological terror.

**Response to A Bomb Threat**

In the event of a bomb attack or threat in St. Henry’s district, the St. Henry Fire Department would take the lead. If a call comes in saying that a bomb has been detonated in the area, all four trucks from St. Henry would be pulled out along with tankers and engines from neighboring departments. The department is not trained to deal with situations involving bombs. Therefore, once arriving on scene, firefighters will clear the area of by-standers. Secondary explosions may be a threat in the situation so firefighters will use caution in respect to that aspect. The bomb squad out of Lima in Allen County is specifically trained to deal with explosives. Because the local department in St. Henry is not trained to deal with explosives, the bomb squad would lend their assistance. If a threat has been made, the bomb squad would also respond.

A pipe bomb was found in the Mercer County town of Coldwater in a two story duplex in the fall of 2014. Coldwater Police Department responded to the call that came in around 7:30 pm.
who then called in the Coldwater Fire Department. The Lima Bomb squad was on scene around 9:30 pm. Law enforcement along with the fire department evacuated the remainder of the duplex along with the residents in the surrounding area. Traffic within two blocks was shut down by police. Upon their arrival, the bomb squad placed sand bags around the explosive and detonated the device around 10:15 p.m. From there the police department took over the investigation into who placed the bomb in the area.

**Response To An Active Shooter**

In every school across the nation, regardless of the level of education, lies a threat for an active shooter scenario. Elementary schools all the way up through the higher learning establishments could, at any point find themselves in a situation in which an armed suspect enters the establishment and opens fire. St. Henry’s way of preparing and training for an active shooter situation has changed dramatically, in accordance with the rest of the nation, within the past five years. Principal of St. Henry High School, Eric Rosenbeck lent his breadth of knowledge along with Sheriff Grey for the completion of this section. According to Mr. Rosenbeck, a few years ago students were directed by teachers and other faculty members to turn off the lights, close the blinds, lock any doors, and hide in the corner away from doors and windows if an active shooter were to enter the building. Security professionals across the nation really began to look into this and realized that this strategy may not be the best way to react to this type of situation. ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate) is a fairly new method of combating active shooters. In order to decrease the chances of becoming a victim, students and faculty are highly encouraged to fight back. St. Henry does not use the exact ALICE model, however, a very similar model is set in place within the school.
Upon receiving any knowledge of an active shooter threat within the school, a member of the faculty is directed to alert the rest of the building via the intercom system. If known, the location of the shooter will be disclosed allowing everyone else in the building to decide which course of action would be best suited for their location. Ideally, the first option in this type of situation is to evacuate the building if possible. This is something new that has been introduced as the old method was to be put on lockdown preventing the flow in and out of the building. Second, students are encouraged to help take down the shooter. Research has shown that a shooter’s accuracy dramatically decreases when distractions are present. Two or three students should be posted at the door ready to attack upon the opening of the classroom door while the remaining students in the classroom are instructed to provide any type of distraction possible which could include throwing pens, calculators, books, chairs, or anything else that is at their disposal. The idea behind this method is that if students are spread out across the room, the body count should be lower than it would be if students were huddled in one spot not fighting back, basically offering a free target practice to the shooter. If neither of these options are able to be carried out, the final option is barricade the door and present the image of an empty classroom; this is the least encouraged option.

Response from emergency services would look as follows. According to Sheriff Grey, whoever arrives on scene first in terms of law enforcement is directed to enter the building with the goal of eliminating the threat. A unified command would be set up between the Sheriff, Chief of Police, Bob Garman, and Fire Chief, Matt Lefeld. However, if Chief Garman arrived on the scene first he may not be a part of the command as he should already be inside the building. Twenty years ago school shootings were conducted more like hostage situations. As the realization was made that this tactic was resulting in the loss of too many lives, specifically the
Columbine Shooting, the quad tactical entry formation was developed. In this formation, law enforcement would wait until four officers were present on scene to enter the building. One officer would lead the group, two would be posted on each side, and the fourth would be positioned in the rear forming a diamond shape. A tactical entry would be made into the building, clearing each room until the threat was eliminated. This method worked better than the previous method of negotiation, but waiting for four officers to arrive was still a waste of valuable time, especially in small communities where there may only be one officer on duty during the school day. This prompted officers to not waste time and immediately enter the building upon arrival. Sheriff Grey mentioned the hopes of possibly training tactical EMS units sometime in the future, so instead of stepping over victims, help could be offered. Specifically for St. Henry, Chief Lefeld does not foresee tactical EMS being implemented any time soon due to the fact that the EMS services are voluntary.

St. Henry High School has definitely stepped up their game in terms of security in the last 2-3 years. Before 2014, the school did not have a security system installed. According to Mr. Rosenbeck, the school received grant money in which they decided to purchase a security system which was installed in the spring of 2014. The school is locked shortly after 8:15 in the morning, and in order to gain entry to the school, someone in the administrative office, usually the secretary, must buzz one in. Because the school is so small, the budget is also small. St. Henry would not be able to take on the cost of a school resource officer, so the REDI committee for the school system brainstormed another idea. Instead of having Chief of Police Bob Garman complete his administrative work at the police station in town, he sits in an office in the school for about 15-20 hours a week. This allows the school to have a police presence in the school as well as allowing the local police to maintain positive relations within the community. The state
also mandates that the school conduct three safety drills. St. Henry will usually see a relocation drill, which would be protocol for a bomb threat, an active shooter drill in which students discuss how they would respond in different active shooter situations, and the drug dogs will be brought in to complete a sweep through the hallways searching the lockers for any signs of drug paraphernalia. Along with these drills, the faculty participates in a real life active shooter drill set in the high school once every couple of years. Sheriff Grey coordinates this training for one school in the county each summer.

At the end of the day the faculty’s number one concern is the well being of each and every student. While some situations cannot be avoided, the faculty does everything within their power to hopefully diffuse any situation before they become threatening. Mr. Rosenbeck calls the entire student body together on the first day of school and expresses his desire to see each and every student happy and healthy at the conclusion of the academic year. Providing an environment for students in which they know they have people that care about them goes a long way in the prevention of students becoming involved with negative, life-altering activities.

Conclusion

A small town may not come to the front of most people’s minds when the subject of discussion is terrorism, but that does not mean that sparsely populated areas do not have a plan in place for these types of acts. Terrorists do have something to gain by attacking a small town and that is fear. To strike America in its heart would be devastating to citizens across the world who think that they could never possibly find themselves in the midst of a terrorist attack. Mercer County has done a fantastic job in keeping up with the evolving world of terrorism.
References


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