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Case Study: 2017 Mass Shooting at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center

Introduction: In 2017, a mass shooting occurred at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center, led by a lone gunman and former employee, Dr. Henry Bello. The shooting resulted in one death and six wounded. This attack led to an evaluation of security at the hospital and a test of New York City's new anti-terrorism tactics.¹

Facts of the Case: On June 30, 2017, at around 2:50 pm, a former doctor of Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center opened fire on the 16th and 17th floors.¹ Dr. Henry Bello worked for six months at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center and then quit after allegations of sexual harassment arose in 2015.¹ On the day of the attack, Bello was wearing a white lab coat and used an AR-15 rifle in the attack. He killed a doctor and critically injured five other people.¹ Ultimately, Bello set himself on fire and shot himself in the head.¹ After the attack, Bronx Lebanon Hospital Center renovated its top floors and installed turnstiles at multiple entrances for increased security. The facility also implemented employee badge-verification lanes and stickers for visitors.²

Epidemiological aspects of the event: Due to the scale of this event, only a few reports of the epidemiological data exist. The police used the event as an opportunity to test city-wide anti-terrorism responses. The New York Times reported that at the time of the attack, 2,000 police officers were equipped with long guns to confront terrorists, and 10,000 officers were trained in active shooter response.³ While many police and government officials maintained that the response to the shooting went very well, there is potential for bias. Observers would find it beneficial to hear from others who were present at the event.

Management of the event: After New York City police received calls of an active shooter at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center, they enacted anti-terrorism protocols. Patrol officers, counterterrorism teams, and the "Rescue Task Force" flew to the scene—180 police vehicles arrived at the hospital within minutes of the report.³ As part of the force's anti-terrorism protocols, the first officer to the scene was designated to confront the threat. Officers from the 44th Precinct ran inside. They determined that people knew the attacker and moved from floor to floor. When they went to each floor, they announced Dr. Bello's name on the radio and shared his photo with those present so they would know he was a risk.

The Rescue Task Force consists of armed officers who escort paramedics to the scene. Members of the task force are trained to face gunfire and care for victims who are seriously wounded. As part of their protocol, officers will find an area they consider safe and create a temporary place for a "force protection team" to respond to medical emergencies.³ As officers

¹ Nir, Sarah Maslin. (2017). Doctor Opens Fire at Bronx Hospital, Killing a Doctor and Wounding 6. New York Times. Retrieved on May 28, 2024 at

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/30/nyregion/bronx-hospital-shooting.html>

² Wang, Vivian. (2017). 'Bonded in Fire,' Staff at Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Recovering from Tragedy. New York Times. Retrieved on May 28, 2024 at

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/nyregion/bronx-lebanon-hospital-shooting.html>.

³ Baker, Al. (2017). Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Siege Offers Counterterrorism Lessons. New York Times. Retrieved on May 28, 2024 at

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/nyregion/bronx-lebanon-hospital-siege-counterterrorism-nypd.html>.

from the 44th Precinct were handling things indoors, Emergency Service Unit officers arrived and began forming teams of 12 with officers and EMTs.

Bello had set small fires in the hospital, but firefighters did not respond to them immediately so that police officers could find the gunman. Protocol was that had the fires have been bigger, officers would have escorted firefighters up into the building.³

From a city perspective, they had a strong response to this attack. It was convenient that counterterrorism officials recently tested their anti-terrorism responses so officers and first responders were prepared for the situation. Information regarding the Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center's response was not readily available online. Many public articles discuss how terrified patients were, which caused concern that Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center was unprepared to effectively communicate with their patients in the case of an active shooter. This gap could have been prevented and should be considered in the future.

Communications of the event: An Associated Press member was present at police headquarters when calls of the shooting began and started reporting on the event to the public.⁴ News sources then began citing the Associated Press' "AP News Alert" to inform the public about the situation.⁴

To communicate internally, first responder police officers went to each hospital floor announcing Dr. Bello's name and distributing his photo.³ Patients and families later recalled how chaotic the situation was, including how staff frantically asked patients to be quiet and lie down on the floor,¹ evacuated those who could walk,¹ and heard staff announce "Code Silver" on the loudspeaker.⁵

While it is difficult to know how well the event was managed, many patients reported how terrifying the situation was. Analysts believe that Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center could have prepared better to communicate more effectively with patients and families who were at the hospital. Officials could have improved in communicating with the staff in knowing how to keep people calm in this situation.

Summary: The key takeaway from this case study is that being prepared for situations like active shooters on both an organizational and city level is critical. Having prepared police and emergency response teams is crucial when responding to crises such as active shooters; it can be the difference between life and death. Investing in training staff, from hospital or organization staff to emergency responders like police officers, firefighters, and emergency medical technicians, is critical to prepare for and facilitate emergencies. It is also important to consider how to prepare for emergency communications for people, both internal and external, to an event.

⁴ The Associated Press. (2017). Long Leads Team Coverage of Fatal Hospital Shooting. Associated Press. Retrieved on May 28, 2024 from <https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/best-of-the-states/2017/long-leads-coverage-of-nyc-hospital-shooting/>.

⁵ CBS News. (2017). Multiple people shot at New York's Bronx Lebanon Hospital, cops say: Live updates. CBS News. Retrieved on May 28, 2024 from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bronx-lebanon-hospital-shooting-new-york>.