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EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

The Face of Strength

Lessons learned from the Pulse nightclub tragedy



by Mayor Buddy Dyer
City of Orlando

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June 12 was indeed the most horrific and most difficult day in the **City of Orlando**. That morning, I said that Orlando would not be defined by the act of a demonic, hate-filled killer, but by our response. I couldn't be more proud of how our community responded with love, compassion and unity. I also couldn't be more thankful for the responses of love, compassion and unity shown toward our citizens from people all across the state, the country and the world.

The kind of violence that happened in Orlando, as well as in San Bernardino and Dallas, is no longer an FBI or a Homeland Security challenge, but a challenge to cities – mayors, councilmembers and commissioners – who must now learn how to prepare for and respond to these types of emergencies.

We as city officials have to start a different kind of conversation about emergency preparedness and the ability to respond. We live in a world that has a new normal, where any one of our cities could be the site of an intentional mass casualty event. We live in a world where soft targets – gymnasiums, parks, a gay club on Latin night – are targets of acts of violence and mass shootings.

As municipal officials, you are best equipped to appreciate the responsibility and the sense of dread that comes with getting that phone call in the middle of the night from your deputy chief or chief. I know you all know that fear, which is why I'd like to share some of the lessons I've taken away from the Pulse nightclub tragedy.



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- » Communication from the elected officials' perspective is absolutely critical. When the FBI took over the investigation, there was a discussion about further public communications and I insisted that trusted local officials deliver news rather than an unknown FBI agent. This is the single most important thing you're going to have control of. One of the hardest things I have ever had to do was keep my composure when I reported to the press that the number of casualties was not 20, but 50. I knew that news had to come from us, above all.
- » Recognize the value of existing relationships. My staff jokes all the time that everyone in the world has my cell number, and that's pretty much the case. From mosque leaders, to coordinated law enforcement agencies, to social services, to volunteer organizations, we did not have to go through intermediaries to coordinate the efforts needed to respond. We knew the people to call, and they knew how to reach us, thanks to our preexisting relationships.
- » Invest in preparedness. Invest in the tools, training and technology that your agencies need for the day you hope never comes. Before the Pulse shooting, Orlando police and fire departments had been running active shooter drills for years. I had come under scrutiny and faced claims that Orlando police were becoming too militarized when I purchased a bearcat for the Police Department. It

was the bearcat that breached the wall of Pulse nightclub and allowed SWAT to enter that night, when explosives had failed. I was sure glad we had it.

- » Have the contingency funds to do what you need to do. In the case of natural disasters, all Florida cities are likely prepared, but those are cases where FEMA comes in and provides funding. Mass shootings are a different situation, where no national-level agencies provide such relief. The City of Orlando had been seeking grant funds from outside sources like the Department of Justice. As an additional example, we had previously established a city not-for-profit. When Disney wrote us a check on the first day following the shooting, it was good to have a place to put it.

June 12 was, in fact, the worst day of my professional life. Standing in front of TV cameras and having to tell the world that your city is now the site of the worst mass shooting in United States history is a pretty hard thing to do. I hope that through Pulse, our cities are better prepared to react and respond and that as leaders, we'll do what's necessary to fund and execute the law enforcement and emergency response side of the preparedness equation. The other side of the equation that we have direct control over as leaders, is to foster more diverse, inclusive communities that are resistant to terror and hate.

Buddy Dyer has served as mayor of the City of Orlando since 2003, and he served from 1992 to 2002 in the Florida Senate. 