

# Shots fired on campus

## 5 communication lessons from Central Michigan University's March 2018 campus shooting

### Lesson 1: The obvious — communicate immediately and often

- **Our audiences needed to hear from us immediately** — Our initial post warned the campus community of shots fired and instructions to shelter in place. That was all we knew at the time.
- As soon as we were able to **confirm it was a domestic situation**, fear lessened.
- Frequent **communication mattered**. The suspect **was on the** loose all day and into the night. People appreciated hearing from us hourly, even if it was only to affirm law enforcement was still working to find the suspect.
- **Social and traditional media needed to be monitored closely** from the onset of the situation to stay on top of rumors, etc.
- **Culture, values and reputation will impact your outcomes** — build them in advance, then leverage and reinforce them during the crisis. Key stakeholders will proactively convey them.

### Lesson 2: Collaboration is key

Close collaboration with our police department and key partners was fueled the effective management of this incident.

- **Cohesion, trust and mutual respect are critical**. We were fortunate to have no power struggles.
- This **wasn't just a CMU incident**. It affected our whole community.
  - Our team was in frequent communication with — often working side-by-side with — leaders from throughout the community
  - **Media briefings included CMU and community leaders**.

### Lesson 3: Expect the unexpected

You cannot prepare for everything. Stay nimble. Remember to breathe.

- When views on CMU's website reached 90,000 in just 30 minutes, we **switched to an emergency website** housed off of our university system. While this blocked access to the full CMU site, we were able to maintain one page with information about the emergency.
- **Other law enforcement organizations released details** prematurely. We reminded people we were the official source and would release information once it was confirmed and could be shared without jeopardizing law enforcement efforts or safety.
- **Our campus community was not well educated on terms** such as lockdown vs. shelter in place.
- The shooting happened the Friday before spring break, so hundreds of parents were preparing to pick up their children. We **set up a staging area for parents at a local hotel**.
- We were notified mid-afternoon **the governor was en route**, creating another layer to manage.

### Lesson 4: Media chaos is swift. Management of it will be different than normal.

- **Media from across the world contacted us within minutes** and their attention continued through the day. While keeping them informed was important, communicating with our campus community was the No. 1 priority. We told them that, and they largely respected it.
- **We did not have the staff to return all inquiries**, so we directed reporters to our social media and website for up-to-date information. We also added them to the list of media who received all updates as they were released.

- **CMU staff, faculty, students were contacted by media for interviews** within minutes. Some talked. We will better educate our campus community on media relations in these situations.
- A **media staging area was established** in an on-campus building and all media were directed to camp out there. Media briefings were held in the same area.
- Media briefings allowed us to provide on-camera/live/recorded interviews and minimize the need for one-offs. **Three briefings were held** within a 24-hour period.

### Lesson 5: It isn't over when it's over

- Following the suspect's arrest, **a final media briefing** provided details that put most media on the road back to their home bases.
- **A message from CMU's president** to CMU faculty, staff, students and alumni was sent via email and posted to social media the same day the suspect was captured.
- A **post-incident communication strategy was developed** to convey support and comfort to our campus community, parents and families, and alumni. This included:
  - A web page communicating **how to access counseling and support services**.
  - **Videos** from the CMU president — one to all students and another to faculty and staff on the first day of classes after spring break.
  - **Timing for resuming "regular" content** on our news site and social media channels.
- **Debriefing was critical**. A key aspect of the emergency management process is to analyze the event, obtain feedback and make refinements.
  - Several debriefings happened: with all involved departments, within the communications team, with key faculty members and student leaders. This helped us refine our procedures IF we ever have a situation like this again.