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2016-10-11

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Alum spreads lessons of Aurora

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The tragic 2012 theater shootings in Aurora, Colorado, provides a wealth of lessons learned for first responders, and Lt. Sam McGhee is fusing his experience with his master's degree education in amplifying those lessons for homeland security professionals across the county.

The 2014 [master's degree](#) graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security is leveraging his academic and field experience by writing in academic journals, lecturing at conferences and teaching in classrooms about what worked and did not work in responding to the gun and chemical irritant grenade attack that left 12 dead and injured more than 70 at a showing of the movie "The Dark Knight Rises."

"I feel that because of the amazing opportunities that I've been offered both in my profession and with education I have an obligation, a debt of gratitude, to repay for the benefit that I've received," McGhee said during a recent interview. I feel like I have something to offer, and unfortunately that includes lessons learned from the horrible event in Aurora on July 20th. The police department was dying to tell its story for three years, during which there was court-imposed gag order in place; we wanted to share our successes as well as areas where we could improve."

His message has come, to name a few, in the form of an article for The Police Chief magazine, "[The Aurora Theater Shooting Experience: Considerations for Multi-Jurisdictional/Multi-Disciplinary Response to Mass Shooting Events](#)," this past summer, participating at this year's National Homeland Security Conference as a featured speaker discussing the lessons learned in Aurora, as well as returning to CHDS to lecture alongside fellow alumni discussing important aspects of crisis decision making.



Aurora (Colorado) Police Lt. Sam McGhee.

A central message is the importance of pre-event planning among various agencies located in proximity to one another. In the case of Aurora, it is part of a 10-county North Central Homeland Security Region of Colorado as well as Denver's Urban Area Security Initiative, an area that covers city and county governments along with state and federal assets. The Region has identified and filled preparedness gaps as well as conducted various inter-agency exercises such as a 2009 active shooter scenario with Buckley Air Force Base that involved 40 agencies and 200 volunteers.

The seeds of this multi-agency partnership are rooted in the 2008 Democratic National Convention that was held in neighboring Denver. Preparations mandated solidifying agreements among agencies in the region beyond usual day-to-day mutual aid agreements.

"Not that we weren't cooperating before but this took it to a new level where we needed to indemnify officers that were going to be working in the city of Denver, make sure everyone was trained on same crowd management philosophy and tactics, and that everybody was equipped the same," McGhee noted.

Pre-existing bonds proved critical on July 20, 2012, when a gunman armed with a shotgun, a pistol and an assault style rifle fired upon movie-goers at a Century 16 theater. Not only were there dead and wounded on the scene, but investigators soon learned of the culprit's apartment which was found to be rigged with incendiary devices that had to be defused.

"The pre-incident planning efforts made calling on area partners from the multitude of first responder agencies in other jurisdictions, non-governmental agencies, and numerous other levels of assistance much easier," McGhee

wrote in The Police Chief article.

Another important take-away from the theater shooting is the important value of crisis decision making, he added. Not every needed action can be found in a manual. Early during the response a 911 dispatcher made a crisis decision and issued an all-hands metro-area broadcast on the state-wide radio system, the first and only time that has occurred. Police officers at the chaotic scene are also credited with saving lives as they transported 27 victims in patrol cars to area hospitals as first responders were besieged by the overwhelming numbers of critically wounded.

“The first responder world is para-militaristic, particularly in law enforcement, there’s an emphasis on command and control and authorization,” McGhee said. “You’ve got to couple that with emphasizing the importance of critical thinking, critical assessment and implementing in-the-moment crisis decision making.”

McGhee plans to write a future article on the importance of crisis decision making. This comes on top of a piece in the August/September 2016 edition of Homeland Security Today magazine examining the emerging challenges facing law enforcement in the U.S.

Continuing his research and writing is a way to give back to the CHDS program, he said, and the master’s degree curriculum honed his skills and crafting his message. McGhee shares the lone status of having completed two of the Center’s programs as well – Executive Leaders Program, Fusion Center Leaders Program.

“The atmosphere at CHDS is to challenge the status quo thinking in all of us,” he said. “It helped me as a student and practitioner to think far beyond my past experiences and to embrace complexity science and the implications complex systems will have on the future. It made me much more comfortable infusing all of those components to think about what the potential problems and threats of the future can hold and how we can advance today’s thinking to meet those challenges.”

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