

By Pete Sutsos



Emergency access control and the first responder

So many policy changes and advancements in technology have been implemented over the past several years in the area of first responders and the active shooter. When I worked the field as a patrol deputy sheriff and field training officer, we broadly taught the practice that, as a first unit on scene, we would assess, contain and call out the special incidents teams. This practice was not the most effective or efficient use of the first responders, and it went against the grain of the street cop/deputy to have to sit and wait for somebody else to come in and deal with the situation.

We would also instruct new recruits that any down time you were afforded the luxury of having should be put to productive use by evaluating forms of tactical response and approach to potential targets such as banks and convenience stores. Over the past several years we have been exposed to active shooter events with a different kind of target, the disgruntled employee or fanatical student. You may be called upon some day to deal with this kind of event, so advance planning and preparation are essential.

Some of these tactical response changes pertain to

law enforcement first responders who are confronted with an active shooter situation. They are taught to commit as quickly as possible in order to prevent or minimize the threat. More law enforcement agencies provide the necessary tools first responders need to be effective — such as the introduction of the assault rifle to the law enforcement arsenal.

What the fire department mandates may not necessarily support the law enforcement's first responder priorities.

Many changes are in the process of occurring or are already being implemented by way of the introduction of millions of federal dollars to be used for enhanced security devices and systems — especially in schools. The money is being used for better perimeter security fencing and even more sophisticated building entry control. Door control systems aim to prevent unauthorized individuals from accessing school and business facilities. But as access control systems get more sophisticated about keeping

unwanted individuals out, a greater challenge then confronts the first responder: How do they get in?

Imagine an active shooter scenario at a high school, with patrol units responding from throughout the region. The school may be surrounded by a 10-foot high chain link fence with electromechanical gates and highly fortified electronically controlled doors at key entry points. The first responder must determine which is the best point of entry. Second, they must determine the means of entry. This is where advance communication with the agency most responsible for specifying the overlay emergency access control system pays off. Typically fire departments have taken the lead in mandating the type and kind of emergency access control systems used in a city or county. The problem is that what the fire depart-

ment mandates may not necessarily support the law enforcement's first responder priorities.

In all the years that I worked in the field as a police officer and deputy sheriff I was never made aware of any comprehensive overlay emergency access control system/s that would support the needs of the law enforcement first responder. Typically the fire marshal or fire prevention bureau will be delegated the responsibility of specifying emergency access control systems/technology. When I speak with fire agencies around the United States about emergency access control technology systems, I always suggest that they should consider these uniquely different needs of law enforcement first responders.

The distinction between response criteria for fire/EMS first responders and law enforcement first respond-

TABLE-1: Product class strengths and weaknesses

Product Class	Strengths	Weaknesses
Keypads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proven technology • Simple to use • Allows for quiet entry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tracking code changes throughout jurisdictions • May have to exit unit to use
Locks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple to use • Allows for quiet entry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each unit must have a key • Typically no audit trail of use • Must exit unit to use
Cards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low Cost • Allows for quiet entry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each unit must have card • Requires access card reader • Must stop to insert card
Light	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No need to exit vehicle • Opens gate on approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Units must have strobe emitter • Must have vehicle to operate
Sound	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widely used • Simple operation • Low cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires a vehicle with siren • Siren must be sounded • No covert access to property
Transmitter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for rapid entry • Can ID individual units • Allows for quiet entry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each unit must have a device • Batteries must be maintained
Puck system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple operation • Transmitter affixed to vehicle • Allows for quiet entry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must have vehicle to operate • Not proprietary • No audit trail of use
RFID	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands-free operation • Individual user/s tracking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited range of operation • Not mutual aid compatible • All vehicles must have ID tag

Emergency response resources:

- U.S. Department of Homeland Security: www.dhs.gov
- Responder Knowledge Base: www.rkb.us
- Office of Law Enforcement Technology Commercialization: www.oletc.org

ers becomes obvious when we speak in terms of "officer safety" friendly systems/technology. For example, some fire agencies mandate the use of an overlay access control system that requires a siren to activate the gates. While a siren may well be acceptable for a fire or EMS agency, a law enforcement first responder using a siren to activate a gate for entry may well compromise a stealth approach, and thereby create an officer safety issue.

The most widely accepted and utilized emergency access control system in the United States today, which is always specified by the fire agency of jurisdiction, is a mastered key system. This mastered key system is not typically shared with the law enforcement community, and if it is shared they will allow limited use via gates only, not buildings. This system also creates problems with mutual aid operations, since it is keyed for only the city or county of record. Thus, you can have adjacent cities with common boundaries not being able to support each other during significant events requiring mutual aid response.

Seeking a universal overlay emergency access control system that will provide you with immediate, stealthy, tactical and mutual aid compatible entry control is absolute. An effective emergency access control response system should incorporate features such as:

- Allows responders, agencies, etc. equal access to barriers

- Allows any emergency responder access control
- Facilitates a fast response time
- Supports "officer safety" functionality and stealth operation
- Provides for control of electro-mechanical systems for both gate and door access control
- Is easily carried and used.

Some features of the most widely used access control systems in the United States are highlighted in TABLE-1. The various technologies are discussed in a "strengths" to "weaknesses" approach.

To summarize, the law enforcement community is acutely aware that in order to save lives and minimize harm, there is a significant need to be able to access gates and buildings quickly and safely. Providing a comprehensive overlay emergency access control system will give law enforcement first responders a tactical advantage in an active shooter scenario. It is extremely important that your agency keep the lines of communication open with your local fire agency in order to help them become aware of the critically different needs a law enforcement first responder has compared to that of a fire/EMS responder. ■

Pete Sutsos worked in law enforcement for 15 years and retired as a deputy sheriff in 1990 as a result of injuries sustained in the line of duty. The injury inspired him to found Click2Enter, Inc. and develop emergency access control systems and technology.