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PROTECTING PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE DURING PROTESTS OR VIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS

January 2021

The year 2020 was unprecedented in many ways, including the rise of large social movements and mass demonstrations. Coupled with the incidents of political violence around the election and the breach of the U.S. Capitol building by individuals seeking to delegitimize the election results, public safety leaders must take a closer look at preparing for events.

In the wake of the breach of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, additional demonstrations and protests in D.C. and state capitals are likely. The consequences of poor planning and the failure by many civilian law enforcement agencies and the federal government to work cohesively offer some lessons that support a more robust response to similar activities in the future.

Below, we offer recommendations for law enforcement and public safety officials to reconsider how they frame threats and responses to large-scale protests, demonstrations, and events.

Short-term preparations for possible events in January 2021:

➢ **Do a historic review of where demonstrations have occurred in the past.** Demonstrations and protest activity are likely to be concentrated in similar areas. Seats of government and federal buildings are often the locus.

➢ **Identify critical infrastructure in demonstration zones and adjacent areas.** Federal, state, and city agencies have already developed a list of critical facilities and installations that can be used as a resource. Furthermore, the federal Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has developed [comprehensive guidance](#) for securing facilities of vital importance, as these locations could represent significant disruption of services or cause cataclysmic loss of life. Two examples to illustrate this necessary preparation:

 o The Christmas morning bombing in Nashville on Dec. 25, 2020, and the subsequent outage of the city's 911 services, revealed vulnerabilities in communications and emergency response.

 o Reports from the events on Jan. 6 indicate that improvised explosive devices may have been left near the Democratic National Committee and Republican National Committee offices.

➢ **Review the critical infrastructure list in your jurisdiction by contacting your state or regional Fusion Center and expand to other facilities that may be at risk.** Infrastructure review should be expanded beyond demonstration zones and include adjacent areas with an appropriate threat assessment.

➢ **Conduct physical assessments of identified structures for vulnerabilities, including points of entry, soft breach points, ability for hardening or protecting, and staging areas for force-multiplier personnel.** The Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol revealed several security vulnerabilities exploited by the insurrectionist mob; inadequate physical outer perimeters – including weak outer perimeters (bike racks), multiple points of entry, and other factors contributing to a multi-point attack – successfully overwhelmed security forces. In addition, when issues arose, force multipliers and support were not appropriately staged and delays in response created a dangerous situation.

➢ **Leverage relationships with community and group organizers to continue to foster communications.** As much as possible, communicate in advance with leaders of demonstrations and protest groups, norming acceptable behavior and outlining how public safety officials will communicate with groups.

➢ **Conduct comprehensive threat reviews, including public sourcing, and analyst-contributed and covert sources.** Throughout the post-election period and leading up to Jan. 6, groups utilized social media and other online networks and forums to plan demonstrations and events. Law enforcement should continue to monitor and assess threats received through a variety of sources.

➢ **Develop an Incident Action Plan and share with city leaders. Ensure unified command roles are established.** In line with best practice for preparing for and responding to large events, public safety leaders should establish a plan for communication and command.

➢ **Set norms and expectations with community and protest organizers via briefings and Public Information Officer.** In the period leading up to and before an event, public safety leaders should be very deliberate in their communication about what is permissible and what the response to impermissible behavior will be.

➢ **Stand up a unified command center in advance of the event.** A unified command center functions as the hub for communications and responses during an event, identifying threats, coordinating responses, and directing support as needed.

➢ **Plan to communicate with the public following the event.** Public information officers need to ensure that the response is clearly explained so the public is updated on arrests and casualties, and that a groundwork for norming – indicating what is acceptable and what is not – is well-laid.

Longer-term preparations for large-scale events and demonstrations:

➢ **Agencies must consider planning for large events and demonstrations a priority.** The use of unified command centers and the Incident Command System (ICS) is a critical component.

➢ **Review critical infrastructure task databases and check against regular demonstration routes.** These databases exist in all 50 states, as per Department of Homeland Security guidance. Public safety officials should ensure adequate protection for these locations during any future events. These locations include:
   o *Public buildings:* state capitol buildings, critical state office buildings
   o *Public utilities:* electric power grid hubs; natural gas facilities and network; oil processing plants
   o *Telecommunications facilities:* landline and mobile switching centers, carrier hotels (IT and broadband colocation internet hubs), public safety radio system sites

- o Police, fire and emergency medical services, and state emergency management agency (EMA) coordination centers, 911 Centers, unified command centers
- o Food distribution hubs
- o Public water supply locations

➢ **Consider the response to demonstrations of different groups (e.g., Stop the Steal, Black Lives Matter, racial justice, anti-COVID restrictions) and identify cases of implicit and explicit bias.** There is a growing national perception that responses to mostly white protests (e.g., Stop the Steal, COVID restrictions) are treated differently from demonstrations led by Black, Indigenous, and people of color.

➢ **Review policies and communications regarding the participation of police and public safety officers in organized militias, which are illegal in all 50 states.**

➢ **Review policies and communications regarding public safety officers posing for pictures with demonstration groups while on duty.**

➢ **Examine practices regarding creating permanent and temporary outer perimeters for critical infrastructure sites.** The Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol revealed a lack of planning and understanding regarding creating a physical barrier to a sustained, large, and determined group of individuals.

➢ **Formal critical infrastructure protection plans must be developed.** Administrators at each facility should work with local law enforcement to identify points of weakness, and white board a consequence scenario plan for if the facility is compromised. Components of the plan should include 24/7 access, building and content hazards, and detailed floor layout of the facility. If there are life-safety hazards, then Fire and EMA agencies should be included.