

Executive Summary

Why Was Boston Strong?

Lessons from the Boston Marathon Bombing

On April 15, 2013 at 2:49 pm, an improvised explosive device (IED) detonated near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Three people died, and more than 260 others needed hospital care, many having lost limbs or suffered horrific wounds. Those explosions began about 100 hours of intense drama that riveted the attention of the nation. The response by emergency medical, emergency management, and law enforcement agencies and by the public at large has now become known colloquially as “Boston Strong.”

This report, through analysis of selected aspects of the Marathon events, seeks lessons that can help response organizations in Boston and other locales improve preparation both for emergencies that may occur at “fixed” events like the Marathon and for “no notice” events like those that began with the murder of Officer Collier at MIT and concluded the next day with the apprehension of the alleged perpetrators in Watertown. The report is primarily based on a series of intensive interviews conducted in the summer and fall of 2013 with senior leaders of major law enforcement, emergency management, and emergency medical organizations who candidly shared their experiences in and insights about these events.²

Viewed as a whole, the events following the Marathon bombing posed enormous challenges. The response spanned geographic boundaries, levels of government (local, state, and federal), professional disciplines, and the public and private sectors, bringing together in both well-planned and spontaneous ways organizations with widely varying operating norms, procedures, cultures, sources of authority, perspectives, and interests.

through which responding organizations were deployed and managed by response organizations particularly at senior levels

and Friday apprehension of the second suspect in Watertown in part because of an overload of individual public safety officers operating as individuals rather than in disciplined units.

- Public safety organizations should develop improved doctrine, better training, and practice through exercises to ensure effective “microcommand” in crises. While officers typically look for command authority when operating at a scene with groups from their own agencies, they are less likely to do so when they have deployed as individuals and arrive at an emergency site on their own. Except for situations when near instantaneous action is required to preserve life, doctrine should be developed and officers should be trained to look for authority at a scene of mass action, even if command is taken by someone from another organization.
- Improved discipline and training is needed to control weapons fire when public safety officers from many organizations are present. Control over fields of fire and authorization to fire is another critical microcommand issue in a rapidly-evolving, high stress, emotion-laden event. It is dramatically more complicated when a “sudden tear” of people from different agencies are thrown together under circumstances where there is no predetermined command structure.
- Improved protocols and control systems for parking emergency vehicles at an actual or potential emergency site must be developed and effectively communicated, emphasized to officers by dispatchers and on-scene commanders during an event to prevent obstruction of further movement that may be required.
- In complex, multi-agency events, teams of responders in the field should be structured to take advantage of both the local knowledge of conditions that the “home” organization possesses and the quantity and specialized resources that outside

materialize at a fixed event as happened and after the 2013 Boston Marathon. Skills honed at such events can also prepare responders and response organizations to perform more effectively even in “no notice” emergencies that may occur at other times.