

Best Practices

IN EMERGENCY SERVICES

Conventional Wisdom

The Democratic and Republican National Conventions require lots of planning—and some state-of-the-art technology.

The Democratic and Republican National Conventions are two of the nation's most important, and highest stake, gatherings. As thousands of elected officials, delegates and media representatives descend on the respective host cities, public health and safety officials from the local, state and federal levels know that preparing for threats that could disrupt the conventions—manmade or natural—is paramount.

Last year's Republican National Convention, held in August in Tampa, Fla., and Democratic National Convention, held in September in Charlotte, N.C., were no exceptions. In August, an FBI security bulletin warned of possible violence by anarchists during the Republican convention, according to media reports. At the same time, officials in Tampa and along the beaches of Pinellas County, where many of the pre-convention events were to be held, kept a wary eye on Hurricane Isaac.

Because the federal government designates conventions as National Special Security Events, the Secret Service is the lead agency for the design and implementation of the security plan. But key to the plan is partnering and coordinating with state and local law enforcement and public safety officials, according to the U.S. Secret Service

website, particularly when it comes to communications.

"We started planning for the convention in February 2011, 19 months before the event," says Kevin Staley, deputy director for the Mecklenburg EMS Agency (MEDIC) in Charlotte. "A National Special Security Event comes with a lot of additional preparations."

Putting it to the test in Charlotte

In Charlotte, those preparations included setting up and staffing 20 command and control operations centers, including a multi-agency command center in a large office building near the airport, which housed some 50 different agencies ranging from the FBI to Amtrak; a command center at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, which housed police, fire, EMS and some federal officials; and a joint medical opera-

tions center in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police and Fire Training Academy, which was staffed primarily by medical professionals: EMS, physicians, hospital staff, and local and state public health officials.

For their part, to monitor health-related threats, MEDIC turned to First-Watch Real-Time Early Warning System, which tracks information input into computer-aided dispatch systems and electronic patient care records in real-time and immediately sends an e-mail or text alert to public health and safety officials if it detects certain symptoms or trends of concern.

Prior to the convention, Staley and his team identified "triggers" that could indicate a chemical or biological attack. That included a sudden spike in calls, or specific symptoms including fever, rash, cough, altered mental status, bloody

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diarrhea and seizure. “If we received three or four calls over a six-hour period about the same complaint, that would get our attention,” Staley says. Information generated by FirstWatch at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department command center was also shared with the joint operations medical center.

In addition to looking out for terrorism, FirstWatch was set to look for signs of illness outbreaks, such as a rash of food poisoning. “There were so many banquets and parties with prepared food to feed thousands of delegates,” Staley says. “We were also providing boxed lunches for law enforcement and paramedics while they were on duty. You don’t all of a sudden want a lot of police officers or medics who can’t function.”

Finally, they set up a “geo-fence,” a virtual perimeter around high-threat areas, including the convention center (the Time Warner Cable Arena) and other key locations, such as hotels where delegates were staying and nearby businesses that could be potential targets for protestors or terrorists, such as Bank of America and Wells Fargo headquarters, and Duke Energy.

While MEDIC had been using FirstWatch prior to the convention to monitor the system for spikes in flu activity and other trends, the convention “was a great opportunity to really test it,” Staley says.


Mother nature lends a hand in Florida

While the Republican National Convention was held in Tampa in Hillsborough County, neighboring Pinellas County was to host numerous pre-convention events, as most convention delegates and other attendees were staying in hotels along its beaches. To gear up for the influx, Sharlene Edwards, public health preparedness manager for the Pinellas County Health Department, took a look at the county’s surveillance systems. They were already using Electronic Surveillance System for the Early Notification of Community-Based Epidemics (ESSENCE) to analyze data from hospital emergency EDs for outbreaks of illness, but there was an approximate one-day delay in getting info from the EDs. To improve that, Edwards had hospitals upload their data every two hours instead of daily.

They also turned to FirstWatch to monitor data in real-time from the CAD at Pinellas County Central Dispatch and electronic patient care reports. “We looked at all of our surveillance systems and asked, ‘What are we getting now, and is there anything we’d need to get from them more urgently, more timely or in a different way to accommodate the RNC?’” Edwards says. “With FirstWatch, we could see things before the

person even hit the hospital.” As in Charlotte, they set up triggers based on symptoms, location and key words found in the CAD or PCR, such as “anarchist,” “RNC,” “delegate” or “white powder,” which could indicate anthrax.

In the end, after more than a year of planning, the Hurricane threw a wet blanket over the event. They only had 15 calls related to the RNC, says EMS Coordinator Stephen Fravel. The Republican National Committee cancelled the first day of the convention, while the pre-convention parties on the beaches were canceled due to weather. Even the protestors seemed to stay home. While they were initially worried that protestors might try to block the three bridges between Tampa and Pinellas County, “there were more police than there were protestors,” Fravel says.

In Charlotte, MEDIC dispatchers sent EMS resources to 91 incidents, mostly related to the heat, in and around the convention center. “The actual incidents related to the DNC were the same as we normally handle. There wasn’t an explosion of calls or something we aren’t used to dealing with,” says MEDIC Operations Manager Todd Sims. “But you always learn from experiences like this—the things you need to continue to do and what you need to tweak for the next time.” 

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