



Quiet On The Waterfront At least it was until the Republican National Convention and Tropical Storm Isaac arrived in town.

High Anxiety

National security events take collaboration, planning

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The Democratic and Republican National Conventions are two of the United States' most important and highest stakes 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.

2012's Republican National Convention (RNC) held in August in Tampa, Fla., and Democratic National Convention (DNC) held in September in Charlotte, N.C., were no exceptions. In August, a 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 beach communities of Pinellas County, where many of the pre-convention events were to be held, kept a wary eye on Tropical Storm Isaac.

Because conventions are designated

National Special Security Events by the federal government, 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 in communications.

Planning starts early in North Carolina

"We started planning for the convention in February 2011, 16 months before the event," said Kevin Staley, deputy director for the Mecklenburg EMS Agency (Medic) in Charlotte. "A National Special Security Event comes with a lot of additional preparations."

In Charlotte, those preparations included setting up and staffing 20 command and control operations centers, including a Multi-Agency Command Center (MACC) in a large office building near the airport that 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 Operations Center in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Police and Fire Training Academy, which was staffed primarily by medical professionals—EMS, physicians, hospitals, and local and state public health officials.

To monitor health-related threats, the Mecklenburg EMS Agency turned to First-Watch Real-Time Early Warning System, which tracks information entered into computer-aided dispatch (CAD) systems, ProQA, 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, such as a sudden spike in calls, or specific symptoms including fever, rash, cough, altered mental status, bloody diarrhea, and seizure.



Paying Close Attention A political convention coming to town means watching for unusual signs including trends in the nature of complaints coming into 9-1-1 centers.

“If we received three or four calls over a six-hour period about the same complaint, that would get our attention,” Staley said.

Information generated by the system at the Command Center at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department was also shared with the Joint Operations Medical Center.

In addition to looking out for terrorism, they also set triggers to look for signs of illness outbreaks, such as food poisoning.

“There were so many banquets and parties with prepared food to feed thousands of delegates,” Staley said. “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 that can’t function.”

Finally, they set up a “geo-fence” around high-threat areas, including the convention center (the Time Warner Cable Arena) and other key convention locations: 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 the Mecklenburg EMS Agency had been monitoring calls prior to the convention to look for spikes in flu activity and other trends, the convention “was a great opportunity to really test it,” Staley said.

“It would be impossible to have someone looking at every CAD report to see if there is something we should be taking a closer look at,” he said. “With FirstWatch, you have a system that is looking at calls in real-time

and mining your CAD, ProQA, and patient care report data that automatically alerts you if there is something that might need to be looked at more closely. The beauty of it was we’re not finding out 24 hours later something might have happened, I’m finding out literally as it’s happening. Then your subject matter experts can dig into it right away.”

Tropical Storm Isaac throws a wet blanket on RNC

While the RNC was held in Tampa in Hillsborough County, neighboring Pinellas County was playing host to numerous pre-convention events, while 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 rooms for outbreaks of illness, but there was an approximately one-day delay in getting the information from hospitals. To improve that, Edwards had them 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, ProQA, and electronic patient care reports. “We looked at all of our surveillance systems and asked, ‘What are we getting now and is there any-

thing we’d need to get from them more urgently, more timely, or in a different way to accommodate the RNC?’” Edwards said. “With FirstWatch, we could see things before the person even hit the hospital.” Like Charlotte, they set up triggers based on symptoms, location, and key words found in the CAD, ProQA, or the patient care report, such as “anarchist,” “RNC,” “delegate,” or “white powder,” which could indicate anthrax.

In the end, after more than a year of planning, Tropical Storm Isaac threw a wet blanket over the event. There were only 15 calls related to the RNC, said Stephen Fravel, EMS coordinator. The RNC cancelled the first day of the convention. 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.”

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,” said Medic Operations Manager Todd Sims. “There wasn’t an explosion of calls or something we aren’t used to dealing with. 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.” ■