

Police Criticized for Littleton Probe

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LITTLETON, Colo., April 29 – Amid mounting criticism of their methods, police investigating the Columbine High School shootings today acknowledged that nine days after the massacre they have still not formally interviewed the parents of the two boys who carried out the attack.

"We have not sat down for an interview with them, and we are trying to set it up now," said Mark Pautler, Jefferson County's chief deputy district attorney, who blamed "scheduling" problems for the apparent delay in interviewing the parents of Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17.

The concession by authorities contributed to an atmosphere in which the conduct of the investigation is coming under increased scrutiny as police fend off criticism of their tactical response to one of the worst acts of school violence in American history.

Police have yet to receive final autopsy reports on the 15 dead, leaving open the question of whether all the murder victims were killed by the two assailants or whether any may have been struck by police fire. And despite earlier promises, the sheriff's department has still not provided an authoritative time line of the attack and its response, spurring criticism about whether it moved swiftly enough.

Is it possible, victims' families and others have asked, that additional lives could have been saved if SWAT team officers had been more aggressive?

"It really makes me mad, because we know he could have made it," Angela Sanders, the daughter of slain teacher William "Dave" Sanders, said in a television appearance earlier this week.

While vigorously defending their conduct and the heroism of many officers involved, Jefferson County officials have yet to detail fully the actions of police units from the many departments that responded.

Police officials have also repeatedly had to backtrack and correct information released earlier, on everything from the number of dead, to the extent of the arsenal carried by Harris and Klebold, to how long the gunmen were firing inside the school (now estimated to be as short as 15 to 20 minutes, not an hour or more as first reported.)

After finishing what they said was a complete sweep of the school, for example, officials the next day discovered another large propane bomb, and later acknowledged they had miscounted the number of bombs found altogether. It was not 30, as originally reported, but 50.

Officials explain the discrepancies as the inevitable result of the chaos of the first day and of a sprawling investigation of an exceedingly complex crime scene. The investigation, police say in their defense, has involved more than 150 investigators, hundreds of leads and thousands of pieces of evidence scattered through a large, shattered school where the gunmen ranged from the first-floor cafeteria, through hallways, into classrooms and ultimately to the second-floor library, where they killed themselves after a final massacre of most of their victims.

Nonetheless, the misstatements have been embarrassing and repeated. On Wednesday, Jefferson County sheriff's officials were forced to explain away an interview given by their boss, Sheriff John P. Stone, who said three young men initially interviewed at the crime scene were still under suspicion. In fact, they had been cleared.

Today, authorities had to retract another statement made by a senior law enforcement officer. Appearing in New York on NBC-TV's "Today," Jefferson County District Attorney Dave Thomas said he expected the imminent arrest of the person who provided a 9mm TEC-DC9 handgun to the killers. Thomas had not been briefed on the most recent developments, said Pautler, the deputy district attorney. No immediate arrests are anticipated as investigators question an employee at the pizza shop where both boys were employed who apparently acted as the go-between in the purchase of the weapon.

Police involved in the probe are most sensitive to criticism that they did not do enough in the first half-hour of the rampage to stem the carnage and confront the gunmen. Critics have included a fellow police officer, Westminster officer Randy Patrick, who three days after the shootings called the SWAT response "pathetic."

Westminster police officials placed Patrick on non-disciplinary leave and ordered him to undergo a "fitness for duty" evaluation, a decision that was later rescinded.

In defending their actions, Jefferson County police now say officers engaged the gunmen within the first few minutes and heroically entered the school shortly after, throwing normal caution to the wind as they went room to room looking for victims, suspects and possible hostages.

Neil Gardner, a Jefferson County sheriff's deputy permanently assigned to the school, traded fire with Harris and Klebold from behind a car in the parking lot. Deputy Paul

Smoker, on patrol nearby in his motorcycle, responded next and also exchanged fire with one of the gunmen. "People who weren't there don't understand," Smoker told the Denver Rocky Mountain News in response to the critics. "It was unbelievable craziness."

But there has also been mounting criticism about how well prepared this SWAT team or others are to handle such circumstances.

"This kind of case requires a different approach, a strike-force mentality," said Peter Kraska, a professor of police studies at Eastern Kentucky University and a SWAT expert. "Where they know people are being killed inside, it's not a hostage situation and they have to go in and hunt people down. They really aren't trained to do that."

The SWAT team in Littleton, a makeshift group patched together from members of the Denver and Jefferson County departments, entered the school about 11:45 and began evacuating students. What they encountered was a tactical officer's maelstrom: explosive devices, hundreds of student backpacks that could have been booby-trapped, an unknown number of gunmen, a deafening racket from fire alarms, and water from sprinklers pouring from the ceiling.

"It was just a nightmare," said Sgt. George Hinkle, a member of the Lakewood Police Department SWAT team. "What parents need to understand is we wanted teams in there as quickly as we could. We were going into the situation blind. We had multiple explosions going off. We thought there could have been a band of terrorists in there. We had teams inside there doing good work from the get-go."

Denver police officer Jamie Smith, a seven-year SWAT team veteran who was mowing his lawn less than a mile from Columbine, was one of the first on the scene.

"I don't know what else could have been thrown into this situation to make it more chaotic," said Smith, who along with others immediately began going room to room. The worst element? The deafening fire alarms, he said, which kept them from hearing gunfire and pursuing the gunmen.

"We are trained to become the aggressor," he said. "Had we heard gunfire and screaming, we would have gone right to that." Bombarded by often erroneous information over their radios – as many as six gunmen, possibly hiding in catwalks and ceilings – and their senses overloaded by fire alarms and strobe lights, Smith and the other SWAT officers tried to enlist an assistant principal to turn off the alarms. She was so rattled she couldn't remember the code.

Facing a situation involving multiple gunmen, explosives and possibly hostages, said Danny O. Coulson, founder and former commander of the FBI Hostage Rescue Team, caution is the response called for in the training manuals.

"Standard procedure calls for caution whenever you have explosives and hostages together," said Coulson, co-author of the recently released "No Heroes."

The traditional separation between SWAT teams and explosives squads, said Coulson, is now being rethought in many departments, so tactical speed is not lost because of a lack of bomb expertise.

Kraska said there are also training issues to be considered around the issue of safety, and how important the safety of the SWAT teams involved should be.

A large part of SWAT training, he said, is geared to protecting team members' own safety in hostile situations. "It's an extreme preoccupation, as well it should be," said Kraska, "but the problem is it's a mentality that doesn't fit in well with this really bizarre, exceptional case."

Kraska said the Littleton massacre will be studied intensively by the SWAT community. "This is something really brand new," he said. "This is essentially what you see in the movies where some terrorist group takes over the school, goes inside with an untold number of bombs and heavy weaponry and kills people just for the hell of it."