



Standards for SWAT

Beslan, Russia. Bovensmilde, the Netherlands. Cokeville, Wyoming. Bailey, Colorado. What do these municipalities have in common? All of these towns and cities have populations of less than 35,000 residents, and all of them became well known as the site of hostage-taking incidents.

Many small towns and rural jurisdictions assemble SWAT teams — some of them part-time, some of them multijurisdictional — with little expectation that these teams will ever be called on in a crisis situation. However, incidents like the ones mentioned above can happen anywhere, at anytime, in places like unincorporated Cokeville and Bailey, a town of far less than 1,000 residents, as well as in major cities.

To help teams in towns large and small be better prepared to handle incidents and to work together if the need arises, the National Tactical Officers Association (NTOA), has developed *SWAT Standards For Law Enforcement Agencies* “to serve as an efficient core set of concepts, principles and policies to standardize and enhance the delivery of tactical law enforcement services” (p. v).

NTOA produced the standards on a quick turnaround timetable, beginning a series of meetings in February 2008 and releasing the standards in September of the same year. The association received assistance in that effort from the Rural Law Enforcement Technology Center (RULETC), which provided input into standard development and offered a training track on multijurisdictional SWAT teams at the September 2008 NTOA conference. RULETC is a component of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center system, a program of the Office of Justice Programs’ National Institute of Justice (NIJ). RULETC focuses on addressing the technology needs of small and rural law enforcement and corrections agencies.

RULETC has also developed a CD-ROM titled *Multi-Jurisdictional Special Weapons and Tactics*, which is available free of charge and includes the full text of the standards, a multijurisdictional best practices guide, a multimedia presentation and sample forms.

RULETC’s efforts to help small and multijurisdictional teams began not long after Deputy Director Scott Barker, a former FBI SWAT team leader and Hostage Rescue Team member, started at the Center in 2005. An officer from a small police department came to Barker with a request for assistance, because the officer believed that four to five officers, all his department could spare, were not enough for a SWAT team. His need for help in creating a multijurisdictional team led to RULETC’s efforts to create the best practices guide and CD-ROM, and the Center’s eventual involvement with NTOA.

The NTOA multijurisdictional committee and chair Tom Nolan provided input into RULETC’s efforts, and the Center in turn became involved in the development of the standards and presented a small agency training track at the annual NTOA conference held in September 2008 in Albuquerque.

“We were just in the right place at the right time,” Barker says. “We released our best practices guide, they introduced the standards, we did the class. It was like it was all planned, but it really just came together very well.”

“It can be done if you get the right guidance and the right leadership,” says NTOA Executive Director John Gnagey. “Scott and RULETC provided that under the leadership of Dr. John Morgan from NIJ.”

Gnagey says the enormous scope of the 2004 Beslan incident caused the tactical community worldwide to take a serious look at whether teams would be prepared to handle a similar incident. NTOA started Project Red, which involved convening focus groups of tactical commanders, supervisors and operators from around the country and asking them some basic questions; the answers they got back were resounding “no’s,” accompanied by requests for standardization of policies, procedures, equipment and training. Then, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Federal Emergency Management Agency came up with classifications — not standards — for SWAT teams and requested NTOA’s assistance in

reviewing and rewriting the National Incident Management System as it applies to SWAT teams.

At that point, Gnagey says, NTOA decided to stop waiting for a federal agency to take the lead in developing a SWAT standard, and to take on the task.

“The board of directors said look, we have feedback from members, we’ve been in business 25 years and we’ve been teaching things and suggesting model policies. Why not just go one step farther and say this is a standard,” Gnagey says.

NTOA assembled a committee of practitioners, drew on some existing documents developed by various states and asked RULETC if the Center would be interested in a partnership and alliance.

“Within about five meetings, we were able to knock this thing out and get it ready to release at the conference,” Gnagey says.

“They said they weren’t going to play around, and they didn’t,” Barker says. He adds that NTOA originally hoped that the standards would be published by NIJ. However, NIJ chose to provide funding and input, and NTOA published the standards.

As with NIJ standards, compliance with the NTOA standards is voluntary. Another point of similarity is that Gnagey and NTOA see the standards as “a living document, always ready for potential revisions.” Although copies of the standards have been distributed and are available, NTOA also sent copies to organizations such as the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the Fraternal Order of Police and the National Sheriffs’ Association asking for comments, and the association plans to incorporate valid feedback as needed. Ultimately, NTOA would like to see the standards adopted by the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the FBI, with compliance potentially tied to receiving certain types of federal funding.

While NTOA waits for feedback from these associations and agencies, feedback is already coming in from SWAT teams around the country. Barker says response to the standards has been mainly positive, although some jurisdictions seem to feel it is too tough.

“A lot of chiefs will say this is too expensive to do, but others will say this is what they’ve been looking for. The days of the four-man SWAT team are over, and some teams will be forced to combine to meet the standards,” Barker says. “NTOA is just trying to take the teams we have today and make them better, and RULETC is trying to facilitate NTOA to do this.”

To obtain copies of *Multi-Jurisdictional Special Weapons and Tactics*, RULETC’s CD-ROM that also includes the standards, or for more information about the cooperative effort between RULETC and NTOA, contact RULETC at (866) 787-2553, e-mail Ruletc1@aol.com/.

NTOA defines a Special Weapons and Tactics team, better known as a SWAT team, as a unit with designated members specifically trained, equipped and assigned to resolve critical incidents involving a threat to public safety. Handling these incidents exceeds the capabilities of traditional law enforcement first responders and/or investigative units. SWAT’s primary purpose is to provide a systematic approach to saving lives.

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