



**Circle of Trust**  
Training Systems

# Emotional Responsibility in Room Clearing: Communication as a Lifeline in Schools

BY ANDY ARNOLD





Typically, this blog has focused on the three foundations of AEI's mission statement: Leadership, Wellness, and Resilience. I'm going to get a little more specific and technical in this one, though, as this topic has been on my mind as of late.

In this edition, we're going to zero in on a particularly complex problem that involves both of my audiences. It's an emotional topic (quite literally) that I certainly don't claim to be an expert in. I do, however, assume the title of stakeholder in this matter. I truly hope it generates good, healthy debate, either with me or within your own organization and agency. If it starts a conversation, I'll consider it a win.

The 1999 Columbine attack highlighted the need for patrol officers to increase their base skill sets in breaching, movement, room clearing, and tactics in general. Just as the gap in skill sets has narrowed in the military between infantry units and Special Operations units, the same is true in law enforcement. Without putting a universal metric on this, I feel confident it is undeniable that the "average" patrol officer's room-clearing abilities have improved since Columbine, if for no other reason than the sheer amount of training time dedicated to it in the past 26 years. That's the good news.

The bad news is, there may be no more hotly contested topic in the tactical community and amongst law enforcement training cadres than room clearing tactics, techniques, and procedures (TPPs). Now, inject an unthinkable scenario with a vulnerable population that has no other choice in the current times than to recognize that an active threat incident is indeed a possibility (albeit a very statistically low possibility) on any given day at school. Besides, 1 out of 1 is 100%, and nobody really cares about odds when it's happening in your building.

Additionally, between drills, hoaxes or "swatting", false notification system activations, human errors, and the notion that it is always in the best interest of safety to err on the side of caution, staff and students will undoubtedly experience "lockdowns" in their life regardless of whether there is an active attack or not.

Why does this all matter? Universal feedback from those who law enforcement and school leadership intend to protect is clear: lockdowns can be very scary. Even scarier? When the





police conduct clearing operations. Scarier yet? Long periods of time without receiving any information while under undue stress, often while in austere conditions.

I recently read a post on LinkedIn that generated a high volume of conversation, debate, and sometimes downright argument. The author pointed out that in the recent Florida State University attack, police had apprehended the perpetrator approximately 4 minutes after the attack was initiated. Depending on which information source you ingest, the clearing process took no shorter than 3 hours (conservatively) and likely much longer. Similar to other active attack incidents, staff and students who were locked down or “sheltering in place” reported that spending long periods of time in this state skyrocketed their anxiety. Furthermore, when doors were breached or other room-clearing operations took place, it was very upsetting.

The author then made the bold statement that, as there have been no follow-on attacks reported in 60 years of data, law enforcement should consider abandoning these time-consuming and often traumatizing clearing operations. As you can imagine, it sparked a “spirited conversation” from both sides (which I have to believe was the real intent).

As a former watch commander, instructor, tactical operator, and eventually a team leader, I cannot imagine a scenario where law enforcement completely abandons 100% clears based on statistics. There’s just too much liability involved. That said, we can do better. Although called many different things, emotional responsibility in room clearing has been a topic of conversation in the tactical community for well over a decade. Is it feasible? I think so. It’s an area where the availability of technology and its viability during critical incidents have improved so much over the years that it can make a massive impact.

When a school moves to lockdown, every second feels like an eternity for students and staff. I would argue that law enforcement’s mission of 100% room-by-room clears is non-negotiable to ensure safety. That said, the how matters just as much: how officers move, speak, and communicate with anxious and emotional occupants can deepen trauma or foster resiliency.

Emotional responsibility means blending precision with empathy, using communication



as a lifeline to keep locked-down classrooms informed, calm, and ready to recover. By leveraging designated communicators, technology, and stakeholder collaboration, this necessary process can be completed while reducing the effect on impacted persons. In a lockdown, information is oxygen. Without it, it's easy for staff and students huddled in physical and mental darkness to imagine the worst. A 2024 study from the Journal of School Safety found that uncertainty during active threat incidents spikes anxiety by 40% compared to scenarios with clear updates.

Yet, incident commanders seldom share real-time info due to inability, being overwhelmed by events, or the fear that it could compromise operations and cause panic. The solution isn't silence: it's controlled, purposeful communication. Regular updates, delivered thoughtfully, give occupants a sense of agency, reduce anxiety, and pave the way for resiliency.

Let's examine some talking points you can share with your team, regardless of what role you play in the response mechanism.

First of all, emotional responsibility starts long before a crisis. Agencies must build communication systems through regular, cross-disciplinary conversations with all stakeholders: law enforcement, school staff, mental health experts, fire, dispatchers, EMS, and even parents or student reps. These talks aren't just feel-good meetings, they're data-driven planning sessions to boost efficiency and cut trauma. How does your end user actually feel?

Preparation should include identifying tools like intercoms, tech platforms, or two-way radios for real-time updates. Test them all in drills to log what works. Figure out courses of action for when they don't work ("One if by land, two if by sea.").

For schools, law enforcement, or security teams, training specific communicators to relay updates to locked-down rooms can provide consistency and reduce the volume of messaging going out. This communicator should work at the direction of and in concert with the incident manager. This frees responding patrol officers assigned to contact teams





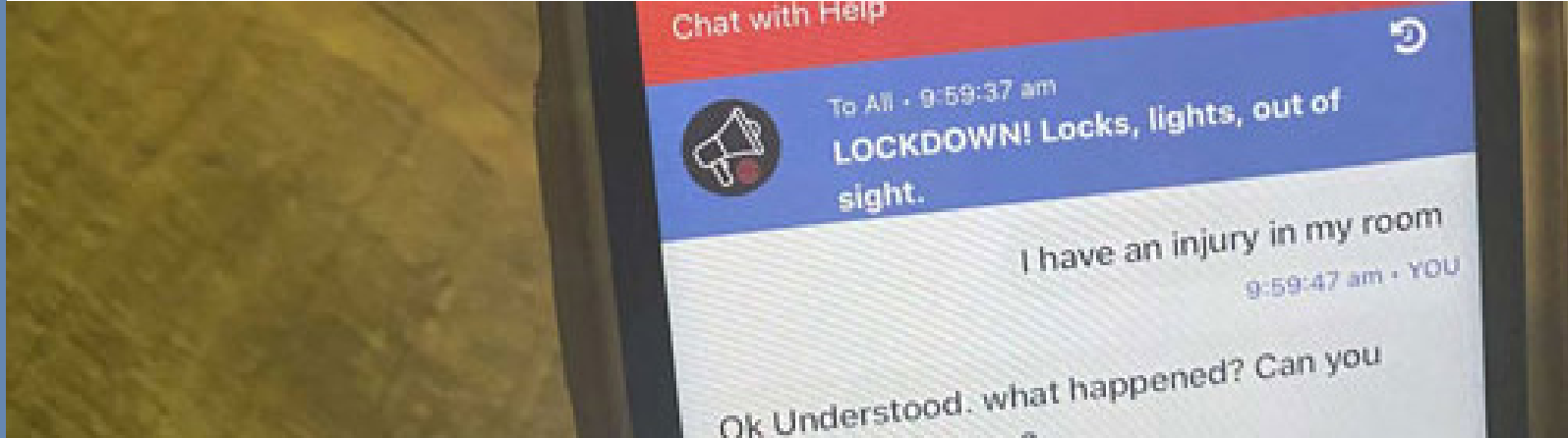
and/or tactical teams to focus on clears while ensuring consistent messaging to support their mission.

Oftentimes, this information can be used to give police units conducting clears an “off-ramp” to adjust their response if it was initiated dynamically before more information was obtained. Knowing that a line of communication exists between responders and those impacted by the event, after the initial chaos settles, a tactical pause may be appropriate. This would allow school personnel and law enforcement to regroup.

As soon as the stimulus that initiated the lockdown is dealt with, a tactical pause allows school personnel and law enforcement to regroup and take a few minutes to develop a hasty plan for conducting the rest of the clearing. Have a conversation about emotional responsibility at this time. This is true whether there was an actual stimulus or the event was verified to be a false alarm or hoax. This meeting might entail verifying that police have appropriate keys, determining if there is a need for an evacuation point, the method of entry into rooms, etc.

This may even translate to a more relaxed, but still controlled, security posture. If a hoax call was received and quickly verified to be a hoax, maybe it’s transitioning from a lockdown to a hold/secure combination while law enforcement conducts less dynamic clearing operations.

Common language and protocols are essential. Stakeholder input has revealed that universal pain points (like unclear lockdown signals) can add confusion and slow response. I’m a big fan of the Standard Response Protocol (SRP) based on its common language and flexibility in application to a myriad of crises. As a school administrator, the SRP provides a set of five tools that can be used alone or in almost endless combinations to help mitigate any crisis.



Next, use real-time updates to keep the information lifeline open. A skilled incident commander working patch to patch with school officials, fire, and other law enforcement assets can use a designated communicator as the voice of safety and reason. Incident commanders can literally manipulate the overall temperature of an incident through skillful dissemination of information. Conversely, poor management or execution of communications can exponentially adversely affect the crisis response.

This designated communicator acts as a force multiplier during incidents and drills. The designated communicator's job: deliver regular, concise updates to locked-down classrooms, using tech to amplify reach.

This isn't about oversharing, it's about giving enough to ground occupants without overwhelming them. This is a two-way street that can also result in very relevant information being generated by room occupants. This affords the incident manager the ability to address emergencies and minimize secondary and tertiary problems before they become emergencies.

#### **I RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING:**

- Set a Cadence: Update every 3-5 minutes, even if it's just "Police are still clearing, you're safe, stay in lockdown." Consistency reflects control.
- Use Clear Language: Avoid jargon or vague terms like "the situation is ongoing."
- Leverage Tech: There's a myriad of tech platforms now that offer two-way communication between people in lockdown and responders. Ideally, this platform is readily available to all of a building's occupants, including visitors, substitutes, or contractors.
- One voice: When conducting clearing operations, law enforcement entry teams should designate one person to issue commands or dialogue with room occupants to avoid confusion and reduce cognitive overload with already stressed-out room occupants.

Additionally, drill with efficacy. One of my favorite quotes is, "The body will not go where the mind hasn't been." Whereas I am adamantly against conducting traumatizing drills with students involved, I am a huge proponent of regular, well-thought-out out



effective drills to test your processes. Integrate tech and communication into your drill practices. Simulate lockdowns with stakeholders taking active roles: teachers report via tech, designated communicators practice updates, law enforcement applies sound tactics, and counselors observe for trauma cues. Log metrics from each drill: Did updates calm or confuse? Was tech reliable? Adjust and repeat.

Resist the temptation to build your response around certain personnel. Build your response around roles and develop deep-rooted redundancy to account for that one key person being gone on the day (or everyone in the case of one North Dakota school district I worked with).

Once the clearing is done, communication shifts to recovery. Officers, led by the communicator, could make contact with occupants to explain: “We checked every room to ensure your safety.” Answer simple questions, like “Why were guns out?” and connect to counselors: “Ms. Carter will take it from here.” These moments close the loop, reducing lingering fear.

Finally, when it’s all over, everyone involved should talk about it. If you’re not conducting post-drill or post-incident debriefs, you’re stepping over dollars to pick up nickels. Every stakeholder who took part in the response may have a critical piece of information, a key suggestion, or a slight modification that improves the end result.

Sadly, if these are occurring at all in the educational space, they traditionally only involve leadership positions, administrators, security teams, and law enforcement. Include the responding patrol officers, teachers, and support staff. They can provide valuable insight through their perspective.

Emotional responsibility in room clearing isn’t soft; it’s strategic. Regular updates, powered by tech and honed through practice and stakeholder collaboration, make clearing faster, safer, and less traumatic. Every drill, every conversation, every tweak is a step toward precision. It’s not about perfection, it’s about using your processes to make a school that’s safe and resilient.