

Trooper shootings tested hospital reflexes

Albany Med's trauma protocol is put to use in incident's wake

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ALBANY -- The warning call came around 9:10 a.m. Wednesday: Four police officers shot, three wounded coming by helicopter, one by ground.

Like many initial reports to Albany Medical Center Hospital's emergency department, the information was wrong. Two state troopers were shot, not four, and only one made it to the hospital. The other, Trooper David Brinkerhoff, died before he got there.

Albany Med is a level 1 trauma center, the destination hospital for 27 counties for the most severely injured victims of any tragedy, man-made or natural. The hospital drills regularly for disasters and mass casualties. Just a day earlier, Albany Med conducted a mock scenario to test how the staff handled a major power outage.

On the morning of the shootout at a Delaware County farmhouse, patients occupied 39 of the emergency department's 45 beds, including one trauma patient from a car accident. Just a typical day in the life of the emergency division, said Bernadette Pedlow, chief operating officer for Albany Med.

But this emergency wasn't typical. The victims were police officers, a profession with strong ties to the medical staff. And this one cut even closer. Trooper Brinkerhoff's wife, Barbara, worked as a nurse at Albany Med. She was on duty.

"It's a very strong connection," said Lyn LaBarre, patient care director for emergency services. "People in health care and people in the public safety arena see themselves as closely aligned and many know one another personally and many of us are in family relationships, as happened in his case."

The emergency staff hustled to prepare for the incoming patients. They called the blood bank and alerted specialists whose skills would be needed for gunshot wounds, including vascular surgeons, neurosurgeons and respiratory therapists.

"By letting people like the trauma surgeons and the operating room and the blood bank know, it gives everybody the chance to drop what they are doing to prepare for what's happening," LaBarre said.

In an unusual move, the hospital sent out a message on the emergency dispatch system telling area EMS companies that all other traumas should be diverted to other hospitals.

Albany Med can handle up to 10 traumas simultaneously, but hospital staff didn't know how many more troopers might have been wounded.

"The siege was still under way," said Gregory McGarry, vice president of communications at the hospital.

Before diverting, Albany Med called the emergency department at St. Peter's Hospital, a level 2 trauma center, and Albany Memorial Hospital to see if they could handle any cases that came in, and both agreed they could, LaBarre said.

Albany Med rescinded the diversion order within an hour after talking with staff at Margaretville Memorial Hospital in Delaware County and learning that two police officers, not four, were hurt, LaBarre said.

The hospital set up a room for Brinkerhoff's wife and for family members of Trooper Richard Mattson, who had been shot in the arm. In another area of the hospital, a boardroom was commandeered for law enforcement officers who traditionally come to the side of a fallen comrade.

The gray uniforms flooded the mezzanine outside of the conference room. The troopers and officers from local police departments leaned on the glass railing overlooking the hospital's waiting area.

"It was an overwhelming presence," McGarry said.

A few doors away from the hospital CEO's office, the administration opened the Incident Command Center in "administrative standby level," not the full-out "Code D" that puts the hospital in a crisis mode.

Administrators unlocked the cabinets that store tools needed in an emergency: fluorescent green vests to identify key managers, walkie-talkies, fax machines, poster boards to track details like how much blood is available and other gear.

On Wednesday, the administrators donned the vests.

Brinkerhoff was shot in the chest, protected by body armor, by fugitive Travis Trim and then shot in the head in the crossfire. The fatal shot was fired by a fellow state trooper, according to State Police. Brinkerhoff died almost instantly, according to police, and was pronounced dead at Margaretville Memorial Hospital.

The helicopter carrying Mattson landed at Albany Med around 10:45 a.m. The trooper underwent six hours of surgery and remains in serious but stable condition.

Mayor Jerry Jennings arrived at Albany Med before Mattson and spoke with the staff and law enforcement officers who had already gathered. Later, Gov. Eliot Spitzer visited and spoke to the families of the troopers.

Had the emergency risen to the level of a Code D, the hospital would have rolled out more resources. During a Code D, available medical staff from all areas of the hospital gather in one location and are reassigned to new duties. A phone bank is opened to call in more staff. For regionwide disasters, the hospital taps into the Healthcare Emergency Operations Coordination Council, which consists of hospital, fire and police leaders in Albany and Rensselaer counties.

Code Ds have been called over the past several years including after a bus accident, an E. coli bacteria outbreak at the Schaghticoke Fair and a wave of heat exhaustion among fans at Bleecker Stadium, Pedlow said.

By Wednesday afternoon, the command center closed up and the emergency department fell back into its busy but normal rhythm. Inside the staff break room, a TV was locked on a news channel as the standoff continued to unfold.

"It was a terrible day," Pedlow said.

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Memorial services

The funeral for Trooper David C. Brinkerhoff will be Wednesday at Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Below is a list of the services.

Viewing: 2 to 4 p.m. and 7 to 9 p.m., Monday and Tuesday, W.C. Brady's Sons Funeral Home, Mansion Street, Coxsackie, NY 12051

Funeral: 11 a.m. Wednesday, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 85 Elm Ave., Delmar, NY 12054

Burial: Immediately following the funeral, at St. Mary's Cemetery, Route 385 just outside of the village of Coxsackie

How to help

At least three funds are accepting donations: The New York State Trooper Foundation established a trust fund for Brinkerhoff's infant daughter. Make donations at any Trustco branch or mail checks to the Isabella Grace Brinkerhoff Trust, Trooper Foundation, 3 Airport Park Blvd., Latham, NY 12110. For information, call 785-1002 or go to <http://www.nystrooperfoundation.org>. State Police in Catskill set up an account for the family. Donate through any branch of the Bank of Greene County or make checks to the Brinkerhoff Family, Bank of Greene County, Attn: Brinkerhoff Family Account, Box 470, Catskill, NY 12414. The State Police PBA accepts donations for the Signal 30 Fund for troopers' families in emergencies. Donors can specify who they want their money to help. More information is available online at <http://www.nystpba.org>.