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A law enforcement official stands at a municipal building that was the scene of a mass shooting on May 31 in Virginia Beach, Virginia. // Patrick Semansky/AP

The Hard Questions About Staying Safe in City Hall

LAURA BLISS JUN 13, 2019

After the Virginia Beach shooting, cities struggle with providing security for municipal employees while still welcoming the public they serve.

For those who work in city government, part of the job description is being available to any member of the public, at nearly any time. "You are the government closest to the people," said Joseph Casey, the administrator of Chesterfield County, Virginia.

That's part of the honor of public service. But it can also be part of the risk, especially in the wake of acts of violence that target city workers. In the mass shooting that occurred at a Virginia Beach municipal complex on May 31, 12 people were killed by a coworker who used his security badge to enter the premises carrying two handguns.
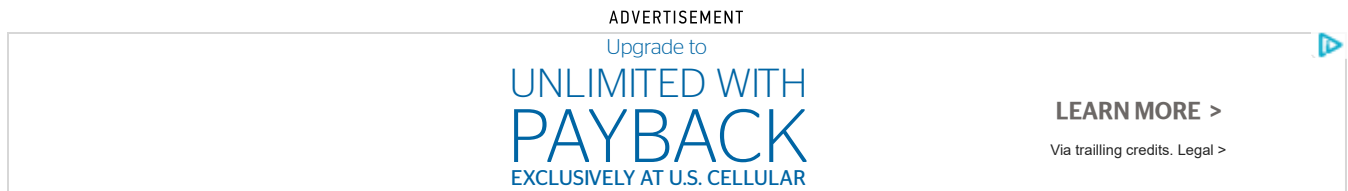
Now city leaders around the U.S. are grappling with what they can do to better secure these very public workplaces—spaces that often serve as arenas for confrontation and grievance-sharing. It is a question that has re-emerged with tragic regularity: In major cities like New York and San Francisco, and in small towns like Kirkwood, Missouri, and Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, fatal acts of gun violence have erupted inside municipal buildings and at public meetings.

"I want people to be able to walk into my office and sit down and [tell me] about their headaches and heartaches," said C. Seth Sumner, the city manager of Athens, Tennessee.* But he has also had the experience of glancing up to find angry or unstable-seeming individuals leering over his desk. "I also need to make sure we're not putting ourselves at undue risk."

Athens was already reviewing its workplace safety procedures and security infrastructure when the Virginia Beach shooting occurred, Sumner said; now, those plans have accelerated. The city intends to install new doors with keycard access and set up checkpoints, so that staff can make visual contact with individuals without a pass and direct them to their destination. Employees who've been fired can also be blocked from the premises as soon as their termination is effective.

In Riverside, California, a list of recommendations made in a recent security consultation was recirculated among city staff in the aftermath of Virginia Beach's tragedy. Riverside has made an ongoing effort of beefing up its protective measures, too: A new badge system that requires IDs for outside visitors appeared a few years following the 2015 attack on a regional facility in San Bernardino, just 20 minutes away. In that incident, a county employee and his wife killed 14 people and wounded 22.
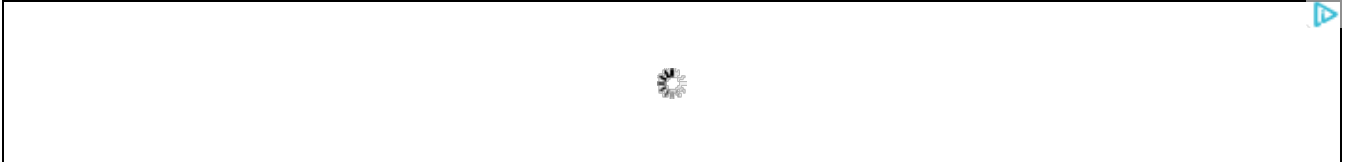
And after a shooter stormed Riverside's own city hall in 1998, wounding six people (including the mayor and two city council members), Riverside installed metal detectors (which it subsequently removed) and hired armed guards, which are now commonplace in many city halls around the country.

But the Virginia Beach incident was a reminder of how vulnerable city employees still are. "We're trying to stay prepared and keep the safety of our employees and guests as a top priority," Steve Massa, Riverside's senior project manager of innovation and entrepreneurship, said via email. The consultant's recommendations included more routine active shooter trainings, helping staff become attuned to shifts in personality or behavior among their fellow employees, and hiring another guard, at the cost of $40,000 a year.

But new security infrastructure and labor costs can present a financial challenge for budget-strapped cities. And the benefits can be hard to calculate: Adding extra security staff may make some workers feel safer, but it's not clear that it does much to protect them against events that inspire much fear but are statistically rare.

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"If you look at it from a risk-analysis standpoint, you look at frequency," Chris E. McGoey, a security consultant who works with large employers and national chains, told a local paper on the 20th anniversary of Riverside's city hall shooting. "Because of one incident that involved a disgruntled worker, then do you spend an enormous amount of money, restrict access to everyone forevermore going forward? Is that the standard?"

Randy Reid, the regional coordinator for the International City & County Management Association and one-time administrator in several counties in Florida, said the Virginia Beach shooting is also raising discussions about biometric scanners and physical fortifications among his member cities. But there is such a thing as going too far. "You don't want a bulletproof screen on your dais," Reid said. "People would not that find that facilitating for the democratic process."

What's more, some security technologies can also end up posing a risk. In the midst of the Virginia Beach rampage, for example, police officers were delayed from confronting the shooter because they didn't have the proper key cards to access the area. "There will be a post-mortem on what worked and what didn't," said Reid.

Further complicating these murky trade-offs, the Virginia Beach shooting is also turning into something of a Rorschach test for what "gun safety" in public buildings looks like. In Virginia Beach, city employees aren't supposed to bring weapons to work—that's employee policy. But there is no law against it, because Virginia statutes preempt cities and counties from establishing local restrictions around firearms.

That tension is fueling debate about the kind of gun safety measures that might have combatted the attack, especially in light of a new account from a lawyer representing the family of one of the victims, Katherine Nixon, a longtime city engineer. According the lawyer, Kevin Martingayle, Nixon had considered carrying a pistol into the office that day because of her growing concern about two coworkers, including the man who became her suspected shooter a few hours after resigning from his post. But Nixon decided against bringing the weapon because of her employer's rule against it, says Martingayle.

Martingayle has been relaying this story to local media in Virginia Beach as part of his call for an external investigation that delves into the circumstances that led up to the shooting, as well as its aftermath. Virginia Beach has stated that the suspect had been in good standing as employee. But the *New York Times* reported, based on an anonymous source, that the suspect had been behaving oddly in recent weeks, getting into physical "scuffles" and one altercation on city property.

The fact that Nixon had contemplated carrying a firearm for her own safety could also mean that the alleged shooter had displayed other warning signs, Martingayle told CityLab. "It raises a few issues," he said. "One: Is the city of Virginia Beach doing an adequate job of assessing threats and threatening conduct?"

But pro-arms groups are using Nixon's story to question the city's workplace policy and the safety of "gun-free zones" in general. One gun advocacy nonprofit, the Crime Prevention Research Center, called Martingayle's testimony a "dramatic revelation" that illustrated the fallibility of gun-free zones. "Unlike all his law-abiding colleagues, the killer didn't obey the ban," an earlier post stated. Another pro-gun website, Concealed Nation, wrote:

> There's no way of knowing whether Nixon, had she taken her pistol to work that day, could have saved her own life or those of others. What's clear is that, with everyone disarmed by policy, the shooter had no opposition at all, gunning down defenseless victims until police finally forced their way into the building.

Being a microcosm of the public they represent, city officials are also split on the matter of what constitutes gun safety. Sumner, who is licensed to carry a gun, said that Athens's policy of barring employees to bear arms at work is a worry when he encounters disgruntled employees and angry citizens. "I understand the liabilities being removed from the city by not allowing anyone to carry, but that also means you don't have anyone who is able to respond in that worst-case scenario," he said.

Whether gun-free zones make public places more secure or more vulnerable is a matter of longstanding debate. An extensive review of academic research studying that question by the RAND Corporation in 2018 was inconclusive, largely as a result of inconsistent data. "More rigorous research around some of the most contentious gun policies could actually help bridge the gap in opinion, the researchers concluded," CityLab reported at the time.

But other forms of gun control policies do have a documented effect on reducing rates of violence and suicide. And the Virginia Beach shooting has raised calls from that side of the debate, as well. Virginia's restrictions on weapons are loose, receiving a "D" grade from the Giffords Law Center to Reduce Gun Violence, which grades states by the strength of their firearms restrictions. Under state law, local governments in Virginia have little authority to regulate firearms or ammunition, with the exception of establishing employment conditions for the workforce.

In January, local lawmakers pushing for stronger gun safety laws, including expanded background checks, bump stock bans, were voted down in committee by Republicans in office. Following the shooting, Democratic Governor Ralph Northam is trying to revive that effort, this time including a ban on sound suppressors like the ones used by the Virginia Beach shooter.

For Yucel Ors, the program director for public safety at the National League of Cities, the question of securing public spaces boils down to a matter of those preemptive state laws, which are extremely common. Whatever the restrictions and protections, "city governments should be able to determine what is best for them," he said. Yet pushes for local control over heightened security measures can often subject certain groups, including the poor and people of color, to excessive surveillance.

After yet another mass shooting, city leaders are finding no easy answers.

"One thing that always plays through my mind," Sumner said, "is that when someone is determined to come in and hurt people in any way possible, there is really little we can do to stop that."

CORRECTION: A previous version of this article misstated that Sumner is the city manager of Athens, Georgia.