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Frank Bolz Jr.: Hostage Negotiations

Jagannathan Srinivasaraghavan MD

Captain Frank Bolz Jr. opened his Saturday lunch speech - "Mental Health Professionals and Police Negotiators: Forensic Crisis Colleagues, Not Adversaries" - noting that this was his first power point presentation. Drawing from his work with the New York City Police Department for more than twenty-seven years, Captain Bolz presented a lively speech on the principles involved in hostage negotiations to the AAPL audience. He has personally negotiated in more than 285 incidents, bringing about the safe release of more than 850 hostages, and has trained representatives from over 3,900 law enforcement agencies in the United States, Canada, and abroad.

Captain Bolz began by stating that New York City is the biggest human laboratory in the world with a population of eight million and an additional four million "floating" population on any given day. Considering that five percent of this population could have an emotional disturbance, the sheer number of Emotionally Disturbed People (EDP) in New York City account for nearly 600,000 persons. He stressed the importance of being conservative in dealing with hostage incidents - even if we do not make the situation better, we

should not make it worse. He explained hard-line positions versus soft-line positions with examples and further described a theory of cognitive dissonance which states that something is worth what someone is willing to pay for it.

Captain Bolz clearly articulated that the hostage negotiation program will not work if there is an intent to kill and only physical interdiction will prevent a perpetrator from killing. In the typical hostage situation the first principle to remember is that the hostage in and of himself has no value to the criminal. The hostage is only a means to get what the criminal wants to obtain. The criminal creates an audience and makes an announcement. The criminal may be a professional or an emotionally disturbed person. A professional criminal is most dangerous in the first fifteen to thirty minutes of hostage taking as he would be in a state of panic. He explained this principle with some examples and also the publicity value created by groups such as the SLA.

Describing the second principle that it is in the interest of the criminal as well as the police not to become violent, Captain Bolz described the role of the

criminal and the role of the law enforcement personnel. If more than one criminal is involved, usually one of them would be the person you could talk to and the other person would act crazy to get a rise out of the law enforcement personnel. If it is only one criminal, he would alternately talk rationally and act in a manner to get a rise out of the law enforcement personnel. The law enforcement role includes reassurance to the individuals who are in distress - more or less like psychiatric first aid.

Captain Bolz then went on to compare the hostage situation and kidnapping. In a hostage situation there is confrontation. Sometimes even without talking to the hostage taker, the situation would end as the hostage taker may get tired over time and give up. On the other hand, in the kidnapping situation, there is no confrontation, there is anonymity, and the kidnapper can walk away from a situation and may not be caught.

Describing the psychology of hostage recovery, Captain Bolz stated that the police are often action oriented. He teaches them to be there and slow down the process, which he calls "dynamic inactivity." When he stated that he learned of dynamic inactivity

from the psychiatrists, the whole audience burst into laughter.

Controlling the environment and setting the pace may bring about a resolution, especially by altering the heat, light or noise level. He described that the good negotiator should be like a good talk show host who should be able to stimulate the

hostage taker to talk, which can help understand the psychology of the hostage taker. In situations in which the police act more in the mode of providing psychiatric first aid, mental health professionals can be helpful in advising what areas to touch on and what areas to avoid based on a reasonable

understanding of the hostage taker.

Captain Bolz illustrated his points with good examples of cases. His presentation was humorous, and kept the audience spell bound. A lively question and answer session followed.