Importance of completing a Threat Assessment Matrix prior to S.W.A.T. activation

Thomas C. Bullock, III
Law Enforcement Specialist
VML Insurance Programs

Threat assessment matrices are used by many organizations to reduce risks from the threats posed. They provide a guidance framework to develop and implement the mitigation measures that would be necessary and appropriate to the identified threats to the community or personnel.

The threat assessment process is centered upon an analysis of the facts and evidence of behavior in a given situation. The appraisal of risk in a threat assessment focuses on actions, communications, and specific circumstances that might suggest that an individual intends to mount an attack or has the propensity to do so.

The Special Weapons and Tactics (S.W.A.T.) team brings specialized training, expertise, and equipment to bear in stabilizing and resolving critical incidents in order to save lives and minimize risk to community members and police officers. The primary purpose of S.W.A.T. is to provide a systematic approach to saving lives in accordance with the priorities of life, and increase the likelihood of safely resolving critical incidents.

While life safety is a priority of S.W.A.T., the specific circumstances will dictate the level of force necessary to adequately protect the public and the officers involved. Resolution of some incidents may require the specific application of various levels of force, up to and including, deadly force.

The objective of the threat assessment matrix for S.W.A.T. operations is to make an informed judgment regarding the activation of the S.W.A.T. team and should be used to assess the level of risk for any planned operation. In the matrix, points are assigned based on questions such as whether targeted suspects have a record of violence, resisting arrest, drug use, mental problems, gang ties or a law enforcement or military background.

Ideally, the matrix should be used for:
- Any search warrant for drugs or evidence of other felony crimes;
- Any arrest warrant involving a felony or other crime where the suspect has a history of violence toward, or has made credible threats of violence against, police;
- Any incident where there is credible information that the suspect is armed and that s/he may use the weapon(s) against police;
- Any situation which significantly elevates the risk to community members, officers, or suspects (e.g., fortification, multiple hostile suspects, counter-surveillance.)

The matrix actually forces officers to slow down and take a look at things instead of charging in, and ensures that the S.W.A.T. team only comes out when necessary. Completing the matrix is not only a liability reduction tool, it is also meant to ensure officer safety. This is evidenced in an
incident that occurred on February 25, 2010 in Fresno, California that led to the deaths of two law enforcement officers.

Homicide detective Joel Wahlenmeier and Officer Javier Bejar were both killed during a search warrant service attempt on a residence in Minkler, California. Fresno County Sheriff Margaret Mims directed an independent review to identify the challenges faced, the decisions made, the strategies utilized, and the lessons learned. This included law enforcement activities before, during and after the incident.

The report found, among other things, that a risk assessment matrix to determine if the S.W.A.T. team was needed was not completed. Had the matrix been completed, the point value would have mandated the use of the S.W.A.T. team. A component of the sheriff’s department’s threat assessment matrix required that officers conduct a check to see if any firearms are registered to the target or homeowner. In this case, had protocol been followed, those involved would have learned that the suspect had a total of 11 firearms registered to him - 13 weapons were later found.

Taking the time, when feasible, to fill out a threat assessment matrix can give officers the opportunity to make certain they have covered all the bases and ensure their safety and the safety of their fellow officers. When utilized properly, there is also supervisory oversight which is important to ensuring that the department’s mission is carried out successfully and safely.