

# THE CHESTER COUNTY COURTHOUSE ATTACK

A case study in judicial security planning and training

By John F. Muffler and Capt. Jason Suydam

Courthouses require unique, detailed, customized, and flexible emergency and security planning. Front and center at our courthouses are security screeners whose duties range from the mundane to the critically important; moreover, they are positioned at extremely vulnerable points of entry. Unless buttressed by a forward watch position or a perimeter patrol, these stationary interior posts are the first line of defense in courthouse security.

Save for the benefit of working behind ballistic material, personnel assigned to these positions are defenseless to a targeted attack. The attacker has the advantage because only that person knows when and where the assault will take place.

Screeners can be at a disadvantage in a fight, being left to counterpunch initially. We have seen these attacks occur at a TSA screening station at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), the U.S. Capitol, and the Las Vegas federal courthouse, to name just a few. In each of these attacks, screeners—two of whom were armed and one who was not—were shot and killed at their posts. The assailants were later apprehended or killed in the pursuant gun battles with law enforcement.

## Assessing the threat risk

When the Chester County (Pennsylvania) Courthouse was being built in 2008, Sheriff Carolyn (Bunny) Welsh requested an assessment of its security from the U.S. Marshals Service. Our offices collaborated, performed a walk-through, and prepared detailed briefings on policy/procedures, personnel, and physical security needs, comparing and contrasting U.S. Marshals Service best practices and how they might fit into this particular county courthouse. These combined best practices were implemented when the courthouse opened.

On Aug. 25, 2015, a young deputy sheriff was relieving a screener for a lunch break. The deputy was stationed at the end of the magnetometer table, looking out through the doors of the main lobby while a screener

reviewed a bin of material in the magnetometer's TV image.

Curtis Smith took one step into the courthouse, approximately seven feet from the screener, reached into his back pocket, and pulled out a knife, stating, "Let's do this shit." He took furtive and determined steps and launched himself at the screener, whose attention was still on the images.

The deputy drew his weapon and fired at Smith, who was airborne, hitting him center-mass. The distance between the attacker's committed movement with the knife to the protector's recognition point was no more than 15 feet. The time elapsed from commitment to recognition—when the deputy fired—was less than 2 seconds.

## The importance of being in the now

Chronicling hundreds of public figure attacks, the book *Just 2 Seconds: Using Time and Space to Defeat Assassins* by Gavin de Becker, Tom Taylor, and Jeff Marquart, details such action-reaction time in similar protective settings. A protector, who is focused, present in his or her surroundings, and not distracted, is said to be in the *now*, because now, not later, is when the attack will happen. Only if one is present in the now will he or she be able to achieve that moment of recognition when one is called to respond. Clearly, Welsh's deputy was in the now.

Due to the close quarters of the fight, the security screener—who was situated between Smith and the deputy—was shot in the hand. If the deputy had been one step to the left of the screener, he would not have had the same sightline and may not have been able to fire his weapon when needed; either by luck or design, that was a significant factor.

The screener was cleared to return for duty after medical treatment. Smith was revived by the same deputies he set out to attack, but later died.

Post-shooting, it was discovered that Smith had an Oct. 9, 2015, trial date for jumping the White House fence earlier that year. He also had a pending court case in

Chester County for burglary, disorderly conduct, harassment, and simple assault, with an Oct. 7, 2015, court date. All of this information was unknown to sheriffs' personnel at the time of the attack.

A protector who is in the now is vital because the mindset of the people who walk through the courthouse door each day is largely unknown. Magnetometers and X-ray machines can detect metal objects; they cannot detect *mental objectives*. Research on attack behavior suggests people who engage in this behavior are often undergoing personal and/or professional difficulties. Based on his recent personal history, it appears Smith was under such life-altering stressors.

The Chester County sheriff's preparedness embodies textbook Department of Homeland Security emergency protocols of planning, organizing/equipping, training, exercising, and evaluating/improving. This preparedness enabled the court to recover properly because the plan worked—people were safe by sheltering in place and locking down—and because of the quick and appropriate actions of all deputy sheriffs.

The measure of success on Aug. 25, 2015, can be directly attributed to the active planning, practice, and dedication of the men and women of the Chester County Sheriff's Office and its leadership. Unfortunately, there was a loss of life that day, but it could have been far worse. There is much to be said for proper planning and practice, mental toughness, physical readiness, being in the now, and being committed to a career in law enforcement. 🌟

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