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Communication is key in a real or mock crisis

In early February, a steady stream of worrisome incident reports began to cross my desk at the Oxford Valley Mall.

Following the instructions in our “Mall Watch” program, several tenants said they saw suspicious activity. Security staff noted people taking pictures of our loading docks. The reports gave important details: times, places, physical descriptions, even license numbers of vehicles seen cruising our parking lot at odd hours.

As general manager of the 1.2-million-square-foot mall, normally this pattern of reports would be cause for great concern. In this case, each report made me smile.

That’s because the “suspicious” people and activities were actually part of an elaborate drill to evaluate our ability and the ability of area law enforcement agencies to identify and respond to a threat. Few key people were in on the secret: myself and senior mall and security management, Middletown Township Police Officer Jim Waltz, heads of area public service agencies and our public relations firm. Everyone



**GUEST
COMMENT**

Deborah
Tageson

else was responding the way they were trained — to protect the safety of our shoppers and tenants.

Eventually, police investigators developed information that a group with a grudge against corporate America planned to target an area mall. The exercise culminated with a very public display of how we would respond if such a threat were real.

I am happy to report our collective response was excellent. A dozen organizations were involved and everyone reacted quickly, decisively and professionally, taking care of their responsibilities and readily sharing information across organizations.

That was the most critical lesson we learned from this drill — and just about every similar exercise we’ve conducted the last few years. It is vitally important to keep lines of communication open among the varied players in a crisis. While we may have great working relationships with local authorities in day-to-day operations, those relationships are strained during an emergency because everyone is focused on attending to their priorities.

We have to make sure all pertinent information is shared among the parties involved as quickly as possible. If not, we end up with people out of the loop, and problems occur. Individually, we might have all the information we need to resolve an issue. But we must communicate within the group for our response to be completely effective.

Training exercises take an enormous amount of time and energy. When the final report is completed, it will certainly contain suggestions we can learn from. But for now, our tenants and shoppers should feel confident that we are prepared to protect them and the surrounding community in the event of a real emergency.

DEBORAH TAGESON is the general manager of the Oxford Valley Mall in Middletown, Bucks County.