

NEWS

These employees survived the Planned Parenthood shooting. They say the organization could have done more to help them.

The Colorado Sun spoke with four former Planned Parenthood employees who were in the Colorado Springs clinic the day of the attack and all insist the health care provider didn't do enough to support them afterward



Jesse Paul 5:00 AM MST on Dec 2, 2019



In this Nov. 27, 2015 file photo, emergency personnel transport an officer to an ambulance after reports of a shooting at the Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs. (Daniel Owen/The Gazette via AP, File)

Credibility:  Original Reporting  Sources Cited

Cristina Jiminez, assistant manager of the Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, felt the “warm whisper” of a bullet passing by her head as she hid on the floor of a bathroom during a gunman’s five-hour rampage in 2015.

Lindsey Raymond, a health center assistant, holed up in a room with a patient she’d never met before. In between deafening bursts of gunfire, she tried to keep track of the time by listening to the HGTV shows starting and ending on a nearby TV. Raymond believes she was hypothermic when rescued, exposed to the snowy, 17-degree air because police at one point drove an armored vehicle into the building in an attempt to end the standoff and rescue victims.

Dr. James Boyd thought he was going to die as he huddled with several others in a back office with a door that did not have a lock, intermittently checking on patients stuck in a nearby room. Another health center assistant who was with him wondered when the shooter would reach their part of the building and end her life.

“We were able to hear his steps when he was walking in front of our hiding area,” Jiminez said. “We are very lucky that he decided not to open the door where we were and kill us.”



Three people died, including University of Colorado Colorado Springs police Officer Garrett Swasey, and nine others were wounded during an attack on the clinic on Nov. 27, 2015. It was one of the longest active shooter events in recent U.S. history; attacks of this type typically last less than 10 minutes

While the four, all former employees, have the shared experience of making it through that harrowing day, they also all feel Planned Parenthood could have

done more to help them through the aftermath of the shooting.

The workers say the nonprofit should have provided them with more access to counseling and better prepared them to return to work by increasing staffing levels and anticipating difficulties that would arise, like questions from patients about the attack and building damage that triggered painful memories. They say they're still dealing with the effects today.

They also say they've had little or no contact from Planned Parenthood since they left the organization.

Dr. Steven Berkowitz, a psychiatry professor at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus who has worked with survivors of mass shootings across the country, says making sure employees are prepared to return to work and adequately supported is a determining factor in how people recover from trauma. He responded to the STEM School Highlands Ranch attack in May and in 2017, to the shooting at a Las Vegas music festival that left 58 people dead and hundreds more injured.

“The key is early identification and intervention and support,” he said. “If that doesn't happen, we're really setting up people to have difficulties. It's incumbent upon us to make sure that people get these services early because that's going to be the key to preventing long-lasting difficulties.”

Berkowitz said many organizations and businesses now have extensive protocols in place should a mass tragedy event occur, though it can be incredibly difficult to tailor a response. “Lots of businesses do, hospitals certainly do, unfortunately schools do,” he said. “Lots of places have contingency plans already in place. They obviously adapt and modify depending on the situation. It's an unfortunate reality.”

The Planned Parenthood survivors want other companies to take notice and be better prepared to help their employees cope with similar tragedies.

“My personal experience was that I was treated fair, or so I think,” Jiminez said. “They didn't give me any special treatment because I was part of a

shooting. They didn't look down on me. Do I believe that they could have gone an extra mile to help us? Yes, I do. I feel like they could have done a little bit more.”

Raymond is more direct.

“I would say I haven't been supported,” she said in a recent interview. “... What it really comes back to is I don't want this to happen to anybody else. There was just a shooting today at a high school. This is happening all the time, everywhere, and I want to know what politicians, what businesses and corporations are doing for people when they go through this.”

Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains declined to make president and CEO Vicki Cowart available for an interview. But in a written response to questions from The Colorado Sun, the health care provider defended its response and the aid it provided to staff members after the shooting. That included bringing in an outside psychology consultant, meetings and check ins with employees, and offering an assistance program.





Colorado Gov. Jared Polis, left, speaks at to Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains CEO Vicki Cowart in Denver in August 2018. (Jesse Paul, The Colorado Sun)

“In the immediate aftermath of that horrible day, meeting the needs of our Colorado Springs staff was our paramount concern. And that concern continues today,” said Whitney Phillips, vice president of communications and brand experience at Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains. “We stand with our staff – those who remain at Planned Parenthood, and those who have moved on – as they each heal from the attack in their own way.”

Phillips added: “Despite the passage of time, the memories of Nov. 27, 2015, remain all too fresh for many of us and our hearts go out to all whose lives were forever changed by the actions of the gunman.”

The interviews the four former employees granted to The Sun represent some of the first detailed accounts of what happened inside the clinic the day of shooting and provide new insight into how Planned Parenthood responded and how those affected have tried to recover.



A police car sits covered in snow near Colorado Springs' Planned Parenthood clinic early Saturday, Nov. 28, 2015, the day after a gunman opened fire inside the health care center. Three people were killed and 9 others wounded in the attack. (AP Photo/David Zalubowski)

“We can actually learn from it”

Boyd is the most outspoken and critical among the four former employees who talked with The Colorado Sun.

He was the only doctor on duty at the clinic that day. There were 15 employees in the building when the attack began, a limited staff because it was the day after Thanksgiving.

On the Sunday before the shooting, Boyd -- who had worked one day a week at the clinic for about four years -- sent an email to Planned Parenthood management detailing his concerns about security and discussing the need for “resources for the providers and staff regarding overall security (at work, home, other locations), identity protection, emergency resources.”

It was a sensitive time for Planned Parenthood, which was facing widespread criticism, predominantly in conservative and anti-abortion circles, after an

anti-abortion activist secretly recorded videos trying to reveal, falsely, that the organization was illegally selling fetal tissue. The videos were distorted -- the activist recently was ordered to pay Planned Parenthood \$2 million for breaking laws in making the recordings -- but the organization still was prompted to apologize for showing a lack of compassion.

“Those fake videos had come out and tensions at that time had really ratcheted up. We got threats on a regular basis anyway, but kind of that rhetoric was really a lot worse at that time,” Boyd said.

(The Colorado Springs gunman reportedly made a remark about “no more baby parts” during the shooting.)

Boyd says he was worried staff at the Colorado Springs clinic weren't adequately prepared to deal with a threat.

Several victims of the attack sued Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains, alleging that the health care provider didn't provide enough security at the Colorado Springs clinic and should have been able to anticipate that it was a target.

“Our organization is, and always has been, committed to assuring the safety and security of all those who visit, and who work in our health centers,” Phillips said. “The violence unleashed by the gunman that November day was beyond anything we could have prepared for or stopped. Former staff's statements to the contrary are both inaccurate and hurtful.”

Boyd was fired by Planned Parenthood in May 2016, about six months after the shooting. He says it was because he spoke out about the provider's response to the shooting and his concerns about security shortcomings.

A termination letter from Planned Parenthood that Boyd showed to The Sun noted that he was not being removed for his medical work, but that it was “clear that Dr. Boyd is substantially dissatisfied with, and lacks trust in, the organization's management and its operational policies and procedures.”



Dr. James Boyd, the lone doctor among 15 employees who were at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs when a gunman opened fire on Nov. 27, 2015. (Jesse Paul, The Colorado Sun)

Boyd said he was sad to leave the organization but is speaking up now to make sure that others aren't treated the same way. He added that the message he took away from his experience with Planned Parenthood after the shooting was that employees are "kind of on their own when it comes to surviving and recovering from one of these experiences."

"I think there's a whole place for Planned Parenthood to revisit and reopen a conversation about what went right and what didn't go right so that we can actually learn from it and be better prepared and better support the survivors should an event like this happen in the future," Boyd said.

Raymond, the medical assistant, said staffers had limited access to counselors and that when they returned to work, employees were handling patient charts that had bullet holes in them and not given adequate information about preparation for how to respond to patient questions about the attack.

Another medical assistant who survived the attack told The Sun that she remembers returning to work and seeing a cabinet where birth control was stored riddled with bullet holes. “Everything was just destroyed.”

She asked that her name not be published because she fears for her safety. She left her job at the clinic in September 2016. She went into therapy last year, after the emotional pain of the attack caught up with her. “I think what happened in the wake of the shooting was kind of worse than the actual event itself,” she said.

Berkowitz, the CU psychiatrist, says it’s not unusual after a shooting for companies to make sure their employees are prepared for everything they will see and hear once they return to work. That might include giving them a scripted response to questions from patrons about what happened.

“There are going to be triggers regardless,” he said. “If you don’t know how to manage those triggers and reminders, then you’re going to have a difficult time and some increased symptoms.”

Raymond, who quit her job three months after the shooting because being in the clinic was too much to bear, said staff were required to participate in an active-shooter drill in the weeks after the clinic partially reopened following the shooting. That upset staffers because of how it reminded people of the actual attack. The drill included loud noises simulating gunfire, Raymond said.

The other medical assistant said she, too, remembers the drill.

Planned Parenthood said the drill was requested by the staff in Colorado Springs and that participation was not mandatory.

Raymond says she went into debt paying for therapy -- it was later covered by worker’s comp -- and still has nightmares about the attack. Recently, she woke up punching a friend in her sleep. Another time, she awoke kicking her bed as if she were running.

She says she has post-traumatic stress and anxiety and has seen a counselor weekly since the shooting. Raymond says Planned Parenthood has not reached out to her since she left the organization.

“It’s definitely still an everyday occurrence for me,” she said. “I’m reminded every day of what I went through.”

“People need to pay more attention to the victims”

Jiminez was working at the front desk of the Colorado Springs clinic when she heard something hit the window. She thought it was a rock.

But then the loud noise kept repeating and people started screaming about a gunman. Jiminez didn’t immediately realize how dire the situation was.

“At first I thought, ‘Gee, this is probably someone, maybe like an angry partner, he’s just firing a couple of shots and he’s going to leave,’” she recounted. “And I was very, very wrong.”

Soon Jiminez was holed up in a bathroom with a colleague where they stayed for hours while the shooting unfolded just feet away. At times, she could hear and see the gunman walking by their hiding spot. She thought all of her colleagues had been killed. (The clinic’s armed security guard left just before the attack began, and the clinic’s administrative staff had the day off because it was a holiday week.)

At one point, she says, a bullet passed into the bathroom and near her head.

“Just to feel this warm whisper, this sound right next to my ear — to this day, I still remember that sound,” she said. “That very unique sound. I felt like the whole time it was happening, that it was just (a matter of) time until he kicked the door open and killed us both.”

Eventually she was rescued by SWAT-- “I have no idea how they got us out, but they got us out” -- but not before she made sure it wasn’t the gunman trying to get her to open the bathroom’s door. She made one of her rescuing officers recite his badge number twice before she would gingerly open the door.

Jiminez said she felt she needed to return to work as soon as possible to make a strong statement that she wouldn’t be deterred by the gunman.

“I felt like he couldn’t win,” she said.

But returning proved difficult.

“It was such a traumatic event for all of us, and we definitely had to put on this big, strong mask that we’re doing well,” she said. “I remember, at the beginning, especially at the partial opening, there was extra staff in case one of us needed to take a breather. After the full opening, which happened in May 2016, after two to three weeks, we no longer had that support. Trauma, it doesn’t go away.”

She wants the public to know how life-changing mass shootings really are -- even if people who survive them aren’t physically wounded. She, too, has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, which she says was difficult to accept and that “made me feel so icky with myself.”

“It doesn’t mean that we’re not injured,” she said. “It doesn’t mean that we can be forgotten. Maybe people need to pay more attention to the victims of shootings, of this kind of violence, because we definitely do struggle.”



A stalled resolution

Four years after the attack, among the most frustrating parts of recovery for the victims who spoke with The Colorado Sun has been the unresolved case against the gunman, Robert Lewis Dear Jr.

The criminal case against him has been stalled since May 2016 when a judge first ruled that he's not mentally competent to stand trial and thus unable to participate in and understand the case against him. Every 90 days since, that ruling has been revisited and continued.

Most recently, the competency decision was renewed last month. On Jan. 9, victims will again find out if he is finally able to face the 179 counts leveled against him or if the proceedings will drag on.

There's a chance that Dear, now 61, might never be found competent. And that worries Boyd because victims might never know when they have to testify in the case, an added stressor as they try to recover.

Some have attended court hearings, wanting to keep up with the case.

"I think for me, personally, I would like it to be closed just so that we have that closure and we also get some more access to the evidence related to this event," Boyd said.

Jiminez said she's infuriated by the slow pace, especially since Dear has admitted to being the gunman in both open court and in interviews with reporters.

"I saw him holding the gun and pointing it at us," Jiminez said. "Robert Dear even said, 'Yes, I did it.' He's getting three meals a day. He's in a warm place when it's cold. He's in a cold place when it's warm. It makes me wonder: Are all the victims in the same place he is?"





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Jason Blevins 4:20 AM MST



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