



## Crime Scene Cleanup

By: Keith W. Strandberg

**Y**ou've probably seen it all. Horrific crime scenes—shotgun suicides, violent homicides, decomposing bodies and more—filled with blood, tissue and fluids. In the past law enforcement has processed these crime scenes, then walked away. After all, it's not the police's job to clean up a crime scene.

Unfortunately, cleaning up a crime scene by default falls into the hands of the victim's family, often resulting in additional trauma. Law enforcement really had no other recourse.

Now, companies are surfacing which specialize in crime and trauma scene cleanup. These companies, who often work very closely with police departments, can take almost any scene, no matter how bad, and make it livable again.

Blood and tissue is considered a biohazard, and have to be treated as such. There are strict requirements for the handling, cleanup and disposal of biohazards, and companies who do this kind of work must have the necessary qualifications.

### The challenge of crime scenes

Cleaning up a crime scene isn't the cop's responsibility, but it still feels horrible to just walk away from a messy crime scene. "The investigators always were troubled having to leave a homicide or suicide, turning it back over to the family and have them traumatized a second time," says Sgt. Carl Richardson, Phoenix PD, Homicide. "We knew there had to be a better way. Everyone in the police department agreed that we would take the money for the cleanup out of our budget. If it's just a family member, and they do not have other resources available, we will call our contractor and get it done for them."

It's a safety concern as well as an emotional one. People who clean up biohazards need to do it correctly, and that doesn't mean someone showing up

with a bucket and a mop. "The relatives or the landlord certainly can clean up a crime scene, but they shouldn't," says Kathie Jo Kadziauskas, Crime Scene Steam and Clean, Inc., Santa Paula, California. "The problem is that there is so much bacteria and contamination from a decomposing body, people are exposing themselves to health hazards. The blood itself generates bacteria, that's how bodies break down.

"There is practically nothing off the shelf that will kill the biohazard and the waste," she continues. "There is a very high health risk involved. They pay us to take the risks and we use the right kinds of products and we protect ourselves. Our clients want to make it go away, and we have to make it safe and habitable for the next person to live there."



Done right, crime scene cleanup restores the location to its original condition. "I've never had a job where it wasn't possible to save a property," says Kadziauskas. "Decomposing bodies are the toughest – if a body has laid on the floor for a while, I often recommend that the piece of the floor be replaced. I've seen body fluids drip all the way through a cement slab."

Dealing with biohazards at crime scenes can be dangerous for police officers. Some departments recommend the use of gloves, others go a little farther. The crime scene cleanup companies don't think that's nearly far enough.

"Police officers should wear masks, gloves and booties in such scenarios," says Capt. Lawrence A. Dordea, Alliance

PD in Ohio, and owner of Trauma/Klean. "The proper training would include blood borne pathogen kits, including [the above items]. When I go on calls, I wear a complete suit to protect myself."

Phoenix has instituted a policy for their officers to guard against exposure. "Our officers glove up, we have masks for them if need be, we have biosuits for our investigators, so they are covered from head to toe," says Phoenix's Richardson. "We are very concerned about exposure to our officers, so we make sure they have adequate protection."

Kent Berg, president, Berg and Associates, LLC, and president of the American Bio-Recovery Association (ABRA), a fledgling organization of trauma and crime scene cleanup companies, thinks that police should err on the side of more protection. "In the last few years, medical diseases have been recognized to be prevalent in blood," he says. "Diseases are mutating faster than ever before, and it's made blood a biohazard. Not every blood spill," he continues, "but you can't tell which ones are dangerous and which ones aren't. I would say that police officers shouldn't go looking through blood and tissue unless they are training and properly protected."

### Crime scenes

The risks are so great, biohazards have to be handled carefully, and disposed of properly. "When you are at a crime scene, and you are talking about a rifle or a shotgun, you're talking about an explosion," says Dale W. Cillian, Specialized Services Cleaning of Phoenix. "You wouldn't believe where things go. You can have fragments everywhere, and you don't need the families finding something two weeks later, or having an odor problem later."

Some states have clear-cut regulations and licenses for crime scene cleanup companies, other do not. It's extremely important that the company doing the work knows what it is doing. "In Arizona, I don't need a license to do biohazard



cleaning,” Cillian details. “That’s a problem – people who don’t know what they are doing are risking their health and other people’s health. I get a little irritated when other companies who are not capable do the cleaning – what if they don’t clean it completely up. And there are dangers still there?”

### Reputation a must

Crime scene cleanup contractors can uncover evidence while they are working. A bullet casing might be lying in a pool of blood, or removing a carpet might uncover evidence. “It’s extremely important that the company be bonded, because there is a lot of liability on the city when they are at a crime scene,” says Richardson. “They periodically find our evidence. They might move a refrigerator and find an expanded bullet, and then they become part of our chain of evidence, so they have to be reputable.

“They have to be equipped to haul the biohazard and waste away and dispose of it,” Richardson continues. “It can’t be just a cleaning company. In Maricopa County, they are required to have a permit to transport the biohazard material. Then, OSHA controls all the things they have to do. It’s a liability to the city if anything is negligent and left out where someone could get exposed.”

Some departments are having these companies do their squad cars and holding cells as well. “In the back of a police cruiser, you get all sorts of bodily fluid: blood, spittle, fluids, urine, feces, and more,” says Alliance PD’s Dordea. “If the cruiser isn’t cleaned right away, which isn’t likely, it gets turned over to the next officer. Infectious disease can spread without decontamination and clean up.”

### Who pays?

It depends on each case. If the victim’s family or the building owner has insurance, then insurance usually covers it. If they don’t the department or the city sometimes will pick up the tab.

The cost isn’t cheap, but the work isn’t any picnic in the park, either. Whether you are talking about a decomposing body or cleaning up a shotgun suicide, it is physically and emotionally taxing. The price of cleanup ranges anywhere from

\$200 to \$275 an hour or more. Some cleanups are simple, and take about an hour. Some are more involved, and can take several days.

“The fees for service tend to be high, simply because of the danger and the repulsive nature of the work,” explains ABRA’s Berg. “There aren’t many people who are willing to do this, and most cleaning companies refuse to do it. As soon as you mention blood and blood borne pathogens, insurance rates go through the roof. A blood spill in a hospital is cleaned up by trained personnel wearing protective suits, gloves, masks using high grade professional germicides and disinfectants. If it’s dangerous enough for a hospital to take such precautions, it’s dangerous enough for us to protect the public and enforce the same precautions. That’s why it makes sense to use a crime scene cleanup company.”



### Referrals

Referrals are the blood of crime scene clean up companies. “There’s really only one way for victim’s families and property owners to find out about us, from cops, coroners and law enforcement professionals,” says Kadziauskas. “The guy you ask is the officer on the scene, the coroner, the body transport guys, the victim’s assistance people. Those are the people that are very important for me to reach.”

Cillian has a contract with the city of Phoenix. “It’s the detective’s call,” he says. “If they feel the people have insurance, they’ll give out our name. If they don’t have insurance, or it’s a real biohazard, they call us.”

Being able to refer the families or the building owner to a qualified company can help a police officer feel better. Walking away from a terrible scene leaves a pit in the officer’s stomach.

“I’m very comfortable now with any situation where we can turn it over to our contractor,” says Richardson. “They will

return the scene to its original condition. Out here, we have a lot of outdoor scenes. We used to wash a lot of debris into the sewer system, and OSHA says that you can’t do that anymore. Now, it’s very nice because our contractor has the equipment to do a sidewalk, a front yard, no matter where it is, and they can desensitize it, get it into their equipment and dispose of it. I feel a lot more comfortable as an officer, knowing that we are more responsible when we leave a scene now..”

Crime scene cleanup companies are not in every city, yet. The American Bio-Recovery Association, (888) 979-ABRA, can refer your department to a reputable company nearest you, if there is one.

“Law enforcement needs to know these businesses exist,” says Alliance’s Dordea. “There are a lot of police officers who feel inadequate when asked by the victims what they do with the mess. It’s a gory scene, and it’s terribly dramatic. They need to be aware of the dangers they encounter inside those scenes.”

Departments do have to be careful about the companies they hire or refer. The need is there, the market is wide open, and some companies claim to be qualified to do crime scene clean up, but are not. When considering contracting or referring a crime scene cleanup company in your area, keep the following in mind:

Do they provide detailed reports and photographs to document their procedures? Ask to see their MSDS sheets. Ask to see their blood borne pathogen plan. Are they insured and bonded? Can they provide the name and registration number of their medical waste transportation company? Can they provide references?

Crime cleanup is not a police department responsibility, but it certainly has been a worry. Now, that worry can be eased by professionals who are trained to handle any kind of crime or trauma scene. ■

*(This article originally appeared in the March 1998 edition of “Law Enforcement Technology”. Keith W. Strandberg is a contributing editor to Law Enforcement Technology and is a writer/producer living in Pennsylvania.)*