"These kids were obliterated"

Uvalde parents angered over lack of answers in school shooting

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More than a month after the massacre at Robb Elementary School that killed 19 children and two teachers in Uvalde, Texas, the families of the shooting victims and survivors pressed city officials for more details on the investigation into the shooting and decried the lack of transparency at a Thursday city council meeting.

For weeks, families of the victims and Uvalde residents have demanded explanations about why local and state police took so long to respond to the shooting, and why authorities did not act on prior concerns about the gunman's behavior.

Since May, the police, local and state officials have changed their account of what happened inside Robb Elementary and what police did for over an hour as the 18-year-old gunman mowed down children and teachers.

"We're looking for some answers that nobody seems to be getting, and it's just making Uvalde PD and everybody else look even more guilty," said Berlinda Arreola, grandmother of Amerie Jo Garza, one of the students who died.

Uvalde Mayor Don McLaughlin, who has previously expressed frustration with his inability to get answers about what happened from state officials investigating the shooting, told those gathered that he could not provide any answers.

"The one thing I can tell you is, we don't know anymore," McLaughlin said. "We're not trying to hide anything from you."

Citing letters from the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) and Uvalde County District Attorney Christina Mitchell Busbee requesting that no information be released until the investigation—currently being conducted by the Texas Department of Public Safety and the FBI—is complete, McLaughlin claimed city officials could be prosecuted if they released any details about the investigation.

The letter from Busbee, dated June 8, does not mention prosecuting anyone but says, "Any release of records to that incident at this time would interfere with said ongoing investigation and would impede a thorough and complete investigation."

Similarly, the letter from the Texas DPS said, "[R]elease of records related to that incident at this time would interfere with the ongoing investigation."

Those gathered Thursday criticized McLaughlin for his statement and urged officials to work harder to obtain information that can be shared with the public. "You're in charge of this city," one parent yelled.

"We're sitting here just listening to empty words," said Velma Lisa Duran, the sister of Irma Garcia, one of the fourth grade teachers who died attempting to shield her students from bullets.

"These kids were obliterated. My sister was obliterated. It was a closed casket. I couldn't hug her. I couldn't touch her. I couldn't say my last goodbye," Duran said, while fighting back tears.

"We need something to happen now," said Duran, who drove more than 80 miles from San Antonio to attend the meeting. "We need change. Enough is enough."

Duran and others said the children of Uvalde are afraid to return to their classrooms.

"These kids are not going to go back to school, and it's going to be on your hands," Duran said. "This blood is on your hands because you failed to do anything."

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Angel Garza, whose daughter Amerie Jo Garza was killed in the shooting, asked the mayor and other city officials if they had children, imploring them to act as if their own children had been massacred at Robb Elementary.

"We want y'all to look at this—not as a mayor, not as a city council member," he said. "Look at it as a dad, as a parent. Don't do what you can do as a mayor. Go beyond that. ... What if it was your kid?"

During the meeting, attendees blamed Busbee for how the investigation was being handled. The families complained the district attorney has dodged their questions and has refused to release evidence, including 911 calls and surveillance footage. Some attendees considered recalling Busbee because of her withholding information on the investigation.

Some residents also demanded to know why Pedro "Pete" Arredondo, a city council member and the school district police chief whose actions during the shooting have been heavily criticized, failed to show up for a second consecutive city council meeting.

Last week, Arredondo was placed on administrative leave by the school district, but the families of the victims have demanded he answer why police disregarded long established training instructing police to immediately engage with or attempt to otherwise distract an active shooter if children are in immediate danger.

Uvalde police have also been the subject of withering criticism for harassing a mother who ran into the elementary school during the mass shooting to rescue her two young sons as law enforcement officers stood outside. Angeli Rose Gomez's attorney, Mark Di Carlo, told the *Huffington Post* there have been at least two definite instances where Gomez was harassed.

According to Di Carlo, she was pulled over for a traffic stop and falsely accused of having illegal immigrants in her vehicle. In a separate incident, a police vehicle parked outside of her home for about 45 minutes and flashed its lights at her and her mother while they were going for a walk.

Thursday's city council meeting came as a Texas House committee held its second straight day of private interviews as part of an investigation into the shooting. The committee, chaired by Representative Dustin Burrows, heard testimony from the mayor, teachers, Uvalde police and state law enforcement. Burrows said the interviews were private because he believes witnesses would give more candid testimony away from the public eye.

In June, Texas officials holding a special Senate hearing claimed that Uvalde residents never reported that the gunman Salvador Ramos had any prior "abhorrent behavior" and animal abuse issues to law enforcement, despite it being common knowledge in the small town of just 17,000 people.

Steve McCraw, director of the Texas Department of Public Safety, claimed that in interviews after the shooting many residents reported incidents such as seeing Ramos carrying a bag of dead cats, but there was no known record of it from either the school district or law enforcement before the shooting.

However, the families of the victims have pushed back against these claims, saying officials have only been concerned with distancing themselves from the tragedy.

Tina Quintanilla-Taylor, whose daughter survived the shooting, made a direct plea to state leaders who have details of the investigation and have not shared them with the community. "We're not here just to sit around," she said. "We are demanding answers. Show your face, answer our questions now!"

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