

Uvalde victims’ families get an official acknowledgement of botched shooting response — but some want criminal charges

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UVALDE — Relatives of some of the 21 people killed in the deadliest shooting in Texas history sat in a community center on the outskirts of this town Thursday, clasping each other’s hands, nervously tapping their feet and passing around a box of tissues.

They sat in front of the nation’s top law enforcement official more than a year and half after some of them joined the throng of residents anxiously gathered outside Robb Elementary School, begging a swarm of law enforcement to go inside and save their kids trapped in a classroom with the shooter.

But responding officers waited 77 minutes to confront a gunman indiscriminately using an AR-15 against students and teachers in two adjoining fourth-grade classrooms. In the months since the May 24, 2022 massacre, the grief-stricken

families of those killed have pleaded with local and state leaders to hold law enforcement accountable.

On Thursday, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland and other top federal officials finally acknowledged — in critical, explicit, unapologetic terms — that some of the Uvalde victims’ worst nightmares were true: Law enforcement’s delayed and bungled response cost lives.

“When he says that lives could have been saved, I just couldn’t believe it,” said Jerry Mata, who lost his daughter Tess in the shooting. “For these officers to sit there and not do anything, and still be out there on the streets like nothing happened, and my daughter’s gone — it was hard, it was hard.”

Garland and other national leaders traveled to this town straddling Hill County and South Texas about 80 miles west of San Antonio to release the U.S. Justice Department’s review of the police response. At a press conference Thursday, Associ-

ate Attorney General Vanita Gupta shared details that families remember all too well about the day of the shooting: Children with bullet wounds were put on school buses without medical personnel, state agencies shared inaccurate information and officials incorrectly assured families waiting at the reunification center that loved ones were on another bus of survivors that never came because their kids were actually among the dead.

While Thursday’s report did not reveal significant new information, families praised the Justice Department for the most comprehensive official report to date about the shooting — and putting what they already knew in “black and white.”

“Because the DOJ stamp is on there, maybe y’all will start taking us seriously now instead of telling us to move on, telling us to sweep it under the rug,” Brett Cross, who lost his son Uziyah in the shooting, said outside the Herby Ham Activity Center immediately after Garland’s press conference.

After enduring burial after burial, waiting hours at the Texas Capitol urging lawmakers in vain to raise the age to buy semi-automatic guns, watching media investigations confirm their assumptions and pressuring the local prosecutor to pursue criminal indictments, families are still waiting for what they consider justice — criminal prosecutions for at least some of the officers who fumbled the response.

So Thursday’s federal report and Garland’s comments were in some ways also a painful reminder that governmental reports can only have so much impact.

“It’s hard enough waking up every day and continuing to walk out on the streets and walk to an H-E-B and see a cop that you know was standing there while our babies were murdered and bleeding out,” Cross said. “I also hope that this lights a fire up under the district attorney’s ass because we know that she has not done a damn thing and we refuse to accept that.”

The Texas Department of Public Safety has yet to make public their own investigation, and the city of Uvalde and the Uvalde County District Attorney’s Office are also still conducting their own investigations.

City officials said in a Thursday statement that they anticipate their independent investigation will be completed this month. Uvalde County District Attorney Christina Mitchell, meanwhile, has provided scant details on the status of her criminal investigation.

On Friday, a 12-person special grand jury was selected to determine if law enforcement officers who responded to the shooting will face criminal charges, the Uvalde Leader-News reported. The special grand jury will spend six months studying the shooting at Robb Elementary School, though it’s not clear what the focus of the investigation is or if officers will face charges.

Though the special grand jury was selected just one day after the release of the Justice Department’s report, the Uvalde Leader-News reported that the effort to convene the grand jury took several months.

Public officials and advocates echoed the sentiments of the families Thursday, saying they hope to see justice in the form of police accountability.

“There’s no justice until some cops get indicted for their malfeasance,” said state Sen. Roland Gutierrez, D-San Antonio, at the Uvalde town square on Thursday, prior to the DOJ press briefing.

In a statement, the president of The League of United Latin American Citizens expressed disappointment that federal investigators failed to prosecute anyone.

“Nineteen children and two teachers died, mostly Latino, and not one person is facing criminal charges yet,” said Domingo Garcia, LULAC president. “How can that be when this report affirms much of what we have known for the past 20 months.”

Garland on Thursday did not directly answer whether any officers responding to the shooting should face criminal charges. He said he would leave that to the local district attorney because the Justice Department only has jurisdiction over federal crimes.

Since the tragedy, family members have been demanding transparency and answers from government officials about the botched police response. Some of those demands created division within Uvalde, a town of about 15,000 near the Mexico border.

Vincent Salazar, whose granddaughter Layla died in the shooting, said deep division remains in Uvalde between those who are seeking answers and accountability and those who want to move on from the tragedy.

“Without justice this is going to be a split town,” Salazar told The Texas Tribune after families spoke to reporters.

Speaking of his granddaughter who was 11 at the time of the shooting, Salazar said she was an “angel” even before she died.

He remembers sitting in his recliner, the front door would slam open, Layla would rush past others in the house to greet her grandfather first. He still sits in the recliner everyday and is reminded of what was taken from his family.

After the shooting, Gov. Greg Abbott provided the first media briefing at 3:23 p.m., during which he announced an inaccurate number of victims and an incorrect last name of the subject, the DOJ report noted. The following day, the governor incorrectly stated that a Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District officer had engaged with the shooter outside the school.

At Thursday’s press conference, Garland also emphasized the need for gun control measures to prevent future tragedies.

“Our children deserve better than to grow up in a country where an 18 year old has easy access to a weapon that belongs on the battlefield, not in a classroom,” Garland said, to nods of agreement from family members.

Weeks after the shooting, federal lawmakers passed the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, the most significant federal gun reform in almost three decades. The measure enhanced background checks, limited access to some guns and increased funding for mental health treatment.

During last year’s legislative session, the first since the Uvalde shooting, Texas lawmakers closed a loophole in state law that allowed people who had serious mental health issues as juveniles to later purchase firearms legally. But several other proposed gun control measures failed to pass, despite advocacy from families of Uvalde victims.

Notably, a bill to raise the minimum age required to buy a semi-automatic firearm from 18 to 21 did not pass. The Uvalde gunman purchased his firearm just days after his 18th birthday.

While families of victims acknowledged that the report contains the most extensive account of the shooting, many are still hoping for more accountability.

“We’re going to continue fighting that some type of change is made in honor of our kids,” Veronica Mata, mother of Tess, said. “We have nothing left but to fight for them. We are their voices now.”

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Updated Property Tax Information Now Available for Texas Taxpayers

Property owners have certain rights that may reduce their property taxes.

New and updated property tax information has just been compiled and is available to assist taxpayers. This property tax information is current and covers a wide range of topics, such as taxpayer remedies, exemptions and appraisals, and has information for select groups, such as disabled veterans and persons age 65 or older. This includes information about the following programs.

HOMESTEAD EXEMPTION

Persons who own and occupy their residence during 2024, may claim their home as a residential homestead. A homestead is generally defined as the home and land used as the owner’s principal residence on Jan. 1 of the tax year. A person who acquires property after Jan. 1 may receive the residence homestead exemption for the applicable portion of that tax year immediately on qualification for the exemption if the preceding owner did not receive the same exemption for that tax year. A homestead exemption reduces the home’s appraised value and, as a result, lowers property taxes. Applications are submitted to the appropriate local appraisal district.

RESIDENCE HOMESTEAD TAX DEFERRAL

Texas homeowners may postpone paying the currently delinquent property taxes due on the appreciating value of their homes by filing a tax deferral affidavit at their local appraisal district. This tax relief allows homeowners to pay the property taxes on 105 percent of the preceding year’s appraised value of their homestead, plus the taxes on any new improvements to the homestead. The deferral postpones the remaining taxes, with interest accruing at 8 percent per year but does not cancel them.

DISABLED PERSONS

Persons who are disabled under Social Security law are entitled to additional exemptions on their residential homestead. Disabled applicants must apply with the appraisal district and furnish a determination letter from Social Security. Disabled persons now receive all benefits on their home that are available to persons who are over 65 years of age (see next paragraph).

PROPERTY TAX DEFERRAL FPR PERSONS OVER 65 YEARS OR OLDER OR DISABLED OR DISABLED VETERAN HOMEOWNERS

Texans who are age 65 or older or disabled, as defined by law, or who qualify for a disabled veteran exemption may postpone paying current and delinquent property taxes on their homes by signing a tax deferral affidavit. Once the affidavit is on file, taxes are deferred, but not cancelled, as long as the owner continues to own and live in the home. Interest continues to accrue at 5 percent per year on the unpaid taxes. You may obtain a deferral affidavit at the appraisal district.

PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTIONS FOR DISABLED VETERANS

The law provides partial exemptions for any property owned by disabled veterans or surviving spouses and surviving children of deceased disabled veterans. Another partial exemption is for homesteads donated to disabled veterans by charitable organizations at no cost or not more than 50 percent of the good faith estimate of the homestead’s market value to disabled veterans and their surviving spouses. The exemption amount is determined according to percentage of service-connected disability. The law also provides a 100 percent homestead exemption for 100 percent disabled veterans and their surviving spouses and surviving spouses of U.S. armed service members killed or fatally injured in the line of duty. Details and applications may be obtained from any appraisal district or the State Comptroller.

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY APPRAISAL – FARM AND RANCH OWNERS

Property owners who use land for timberland production, agricultural purposes or wildlife management can be granted property tax relief on their land. They may apply to their local appraisal district for an agricultural special appraisal which may result in a lower appraisal of the land based on production, versus market value. Productivity value appraisal provides tax relief on their land and is available to farms and ranches commercially raising crops or livestock or used as a wildlife habitat granted under State guidelines. An application for agricultural use value and additional information is available from your appraisal district. Refiling an application is only necessary if requested to do so by the Chief Appraiser.

BUSINESS PERSONAL PROPERTY OWNERS RENDERING TAXABLE PROPERTY

If a business owns tangible personal property that is used to produce income, the business must file a rendition with its local appraisal district by a specified date. Personal property includes inventory and equipment used by a business. Owners do not have to render exempt property such as church property or an agriculture producer’s equipment used for farming. Personal property includes inventory and equipment used by a business. Failure to file the rendition by the specified date will result in a **10% penalty**. If a fraudulent rendition is filed, a 50% penalty is mandated. A rendition can be obtained from the appraisal district office where the property is located. A 30-day filing extension is available by written request. Owners do not render exempt property such as church property or farming equipment.

PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTION

Non-profit organizations that meet statutory requirements may seek property tax exemptions and must apply to their county appraisal district by a specific date. Businesses that receive tax abatements granted by taxing units; ship inventory out of Texas that may be eligible for the freeport exemption; store certain goods in transit in warehouses that are moved within 175 days; construct, install or acquire pollution control property; own and operate energy storage systems; convert landfill-generated gas; or store offshore drilling equipment while not in use may also be eligible for statutory exemptions.

APPRAISAL NOTICES

Normally, taxpayers receive a notice of appraised value from the appropriate local appraisal district. The city, county, school districts and other local taxing units use the appraisal district’s value to set property taxes for the coming year.

NOTICE OF AVAILABILITY OF ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

In appraisal districts located in counties with a population of more than 200,000 or that have authorized electronic communications, and that have implemented a system that allows such communications, chief appraisers and ARBs may communicate electronically through email or other media with property owners or their designated representatives. Written agreements are required for notices and other documents to be delivered electronically instead of mailing.

PROPERTY TAXPAYER REMEDIES

This Comptroller publication explains in detail how to protest a property appraisal, what issues the county appraisal review board (ARB) can consider and what to expect during a protest hearing. The publication also discusses the option to request limited binding arbitration to compel the ARB or chief appraiser to comply with a procedural requirement and the options of taking a taxpayer’s case to district court, the State Office of Administrative Hearings or binding arbitration if the taxpayer is dissatisfied with the outcome of the ARB hearing.

PROTESTING PROPERTY APPRAISAL VALUES

Property owners who disagree with the appraisal district’s appraisal of their property for local taxes or for any other action that adversely affects them may protest their property value to the appraisal district’s ARB.

INFORMAL MEETINGS

Property owners can request an informal meeting with appraisal district staff to try and resolve their disputes prior to attending ARB hearings.

For more information you may contact:

SCURRY COUNTY APPRAISAL DISTRICT
2612 COLLEGE AVE, SNYDER, TX 79549
Phone: (325) 573-8549 Fax:(325) 573-8458
Chief Appraiser: Jackie Martin
Email: scad@scurrytex.com
Website: www.scurrytex.com

Or

PROPERTY TAX ASSISTANCE DIVISION INFORMATION SERVICES
TEXAS COMPTROLLER OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
comptroller.texas.gov/taxes/property-tax