



U.S. Department of Education

# LESSONS LEARNED

## From School Crises and Emergencies

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### RESPONDING TO AND RECOVERING FROM AN ACTIVE SHOOTER INCIDENT THAT TURNS INTO A HOSTAGE SITUATION

In recent years, schools nationwide have experienced active shooter incidents. An “active shooter” is a person who is actively discharging a firearm causing the immediate death or serious injury of one or more individuals. The duration of an active shooter situation may vary considerably from a short period of time, such as a few minutes, to a long period of time, such as several hours. The details of these incidents also tend to evolve and change as site-specific information about hostages, victims, weapons, bombs and other activities is obtained. This type of emergency requires that school officials and first responders react immediately to implement practices and procedures outlined in emergency management plans. They also must institute an Incident Command System (ICS) to establish control over the event and maintain a safe environment for staff and students until an evacuation can occur.

An active shooter incident occurred in the Valley School District,<sup>1</sup> a small district located in a rural community, with approximately 1,300 students. The district is comprised of three schools including Peak High School, a middle school,

and an elementary school. The Peak High School houses 476 students in grades 9–12 and shares a common building with a middle school, connected by a hallway, which serves 311 students in grades 6–8. The campus also includes a building that houses administrative offices, a large gymnasium, additional classrooms and a swimming pool. An elementary school that houses 550 students is located approximately 10 minutes by car (or about seven miles) from the main campus. The incident below describes how an active shooter situation quickly became a hostage situation that required multiple law enforcement agencies and other first responders and agencies to coordinate response and recovery efforts.

#### Pre-incident Preparedness

Several weeks before the incident, the Valley School District staff, faculty and first responders conducted an active shooter drill. Prior to the drill, first responders detonated equipment to demonstrate the sounds made by explosives and guns and displayed the various types of equipment that may be used in responding to an active

<sup>1</sup> The names of the school district, schools, and individuals have been changed to provide anonymity.

This issue of *Lessons Learned* is based on a recounting of actual events. School and student name have been changed to protect identities. Information for this publication was gathered through a series of interviews with school stakeholders involved in the events. The contents of this document are not prescriptive best practices for every school or school district, but rather suggestions to consider in a school or district’s emergency management efforts.

shooter incident. The drill involved practicing the responses and classroom evacuation procedures outlined in the district's emergency management plan. Procedures called for staff locking all classroom doors and sliding a blue card under their door into the hallway if the rooms were secure or a yellow card if a problem existed in the room. If the rooms were secure, law enforcement would slide official photo identification under the classroom door to signal that the teacher or staff could unlock the door and begin the evacuation following law enforcement's instructions. During the drill, school staff and first responders determined that:

- Teachers were opening doors for school administrators or first responders and not waiting for identification from law enforcement to be passed under the door.
- Several of the classes were held in open pods with a main door that led to a group of classes, and there needed to be a drill with students to show them what to do (e.g., divide the pods with doors that normally are hidden).

Students also participated in lockdown, shelter-in-place and evacuation drills and became familiar with the terminology used for each response, and on the day of the incident had thought the lockdown announcement was another drill.

## **The Incident**

### **The Intruder**

After sitting in his car, in the high school parking lot for about an hour, a 43-year-old man, wearing a hooded jacket and carrying a backpack, walked into the high school with a group of students who

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were also entering the building through one of the front doors. The door, used for students to go from one building to another during transition times, was not monitored. The intruder proceeded into the building and walked up the stairs to a math class at approximately 11:30 a.m. Upon entering the classroom, the man closed the door and put his backpack on a desk. The math teacher asked the man why he was in the classroom. The man then displayed a handgun and ordered the teacher and all students, except seven female students, out of the classroom. When the teacher told the intruder that it was her responsibility to stay with all of the students, the gunman fired one shot hitting no one. Concerned that the intruder would harm the students, the teacher and the rest of the students left the room. The seven female students remained in the room as hostages. Upon leaving the room, the teacher immediately ran to the front office to notify school staff about what happened. The school secretary immediately called 911. School officials issued an immediate lockdown of the school. The school principal assumed the role of the incident commander.

## The Response

Three minutes after the call to 911, the first officers arrived at the school in an active shooter formation. Upon arrival of the local law enforcement agency, transfer of command took place with the sheriff taking over the role of the incident commander from the principal. The ICS was established as additional responders (e.g., Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, emergency medical services and state police) arrived from different jurisdictions. Consequently, there was a communication delay between the on-site responders and the 911 dispatcher. Once it was learned that the intruder was barricaded in the classroom with hostages, the active shooter situation was termed a hostage situation, and deputies began to negotiate with the intruder. After the ICS was established, the school principal proceeded to the command center, and the assistant principal stayed with the first responders. Additional SWAT teams, bomb disposal units and hostage negotiators from other jurisdictions arrived to assist in the response. The SWAT teams, creating a joint SWAT team, secured access to the classroom and its perimeter. Multiple outside agencies also responded to the scene to assist with response, traffic and crowd control. While being interviewed, the math teacher told law enforcement that the intruder told the class that he had a bomb in his backpack and had threatened to blow up the school complex. A request was issued by the incident commander for help from the bomb squad in an adjoining jurisdiction.

Once the hostage negotiator arrived, she began communicating verbally through a hostage with the intruder. Over the next few hours, five of the seven students were released, and were

immediately interviewed by law enforcement officials to obtain additional information about the emotional state of the intruder and the well-being of other hostages. A victim advocate provided immediate emotional support to the hostages and was present as law enforcement officials questioned each released hostage. The intruder continued talking through a hostage to the hostage negotiator until about 1:30 p.m., when the intruder ceased communication with the negotiator. Prior to the end of the negotiations, the intruder had indicated that something would take place about 4:00 p.m. At approximately 3:35 p.m., about two hours after negotiations ceased, the joint SWAT Team forcefully entered the room and found the intruder and two hostages barricaded behind desks. One hostage immediately ran out of the room, while the intruder shot the other hostage as she tried to escape. SWAT members fired upon the intruder at the same time that he shot himself. The intruder was pronounced dead on scene, and the student who was shot died at the hospital about an hour later.

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## Evacuation and Parent Reunification

Law enforcement officials evacuated the classrooms using evacuation procedures that were practiced during the drill a few weeks earlier. During the evacuation, middle school students were sent to an adjacent field. High school students were evacuated to the large gymnasium in the administrative building next to the high school. School officials and law enforcement were concerned that students using cell phones might communicate inaccurate information to families; therefore, students were asked not to use their phones to call families. Students and staff were given information that kept them continually informed about the response activities and provided guidance for the evacuation process. To account for all students, the school secretary provided class and attendance lists for the day. During the student accountability process, it was discovered that four students with disabilities and three paraprofessionals were still located in the school building in a small room in the library complex. Because of the physical location of the room in relationship to the room with the gunman, it was decided to have them remain in the room until the situation was resolved.

While the intruder was still holding hostages, the middle school students who shared a common building with the high school, connected by a hallway, were the first to be evacuated off-site since they were congregated in an open field protected only by trees and a small hill. The buses took the middle school students to the parent reunification center that had been set up at the district's elementary school. The high school students, who were evacuated and housed in another building on campus, were transported to

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the parent reunification center after the middle school students. At the elementary school, school officials worked to simultaneously reunite elementary, middle and high school students with their families.

## The Recovery Process

The recovery process began before the incident ended through the use of the victim advocates who were employed by the local law enforcement agency. This program is designed to provide advocates who assist victims, witnesses, their families and friends following a crime or incident, provide resources and referrals for services, keep the victims and their families informed about the status of an investigation and accompany victims to court appearances.

The victim services director with the law enforcement agency that served the area played an integral part in coordinating support services for victims and families. She used her network of partners to call in other victim advocates throughout the region. Advocates were assigned to the police station, the high school campus and the elementary school. The advocates all wore

blue t-shirts so they could be easily identified and accessed to help answer families' questions, work with the families to identify their needs and field phone calls. One advocate was assigned to each hostage as they were released to support them through police questioning and to help access counseling or medical services. Each victim was given a quilt, donated by community members, to keep them warm and comforted while they were being questioned by law enforcement in the command center and subsequently receiving medical treatment at the hospital. The Victims' Services Program director stayed at the police station throughout the duration of the incident and communicated with the program's advocates and law enforcement through a dispatcher.

To begin the recovery planning process, school district staff met the morning after the incident at a local church where they were debriefed by law enforcement officials and provided with information about how to help students begin to recover from the incident. School staff met daily at a local church for the first few days after the incident. The school district also quickly identified mental health providers from a neighboring school district and the local mental health agency to establish a plan for addressing the mental health needs of students and staff. Utilizing these community resources, the district informed the community that counselors and school district staff would be available at the church for students and families. Knowing that school staff were at the church, students began to stop by to talk with teachers and to learn more about when school would reopen. Students also utilized the services of the various mental health providers available

at the church. These mental health services were made available to students and staff for the first three days following the incident.

The day after the incident, families received two types of communication to demonstrate the school district's support and concern for their well-being. The first was a letter from the principal of the elementary school that served as the parent reunification site thanking each family for their cooperation during the parent reunification process. The second was a phone call from retired school administrators from Valley School District that focused on empathizing with the families about the incident and offered them information about where and how to access mental health resources. A script developed in collaboration with school administrators and mental health professionals was provided to each retired administrator to ensure consistency. Each caller noted the demeanor of the family and asked about their well-being, which provided insight into the families' needs.

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The school was closed for five days following the incident to allow law enforcement to complete the investigation process and to allow for cleanup of the impacted areas in the school. During the evacuation process, staff had left behind many personal belongings, including car keys, purses and wallets. A key concern for staff immediately after the incident was how and when they would be able to retrieve their belongings. Therefore, two days after the incident, the school district arranged buses, staffed with law enforcement officials and mental health providers, to take staff to the school and obtain their belongings.

The day before classes resumed, the school was opened for students and families to enact students' daily schedules and meet with teachers (the room in which the incident took place was walled off). The school visit was one of the activities that school administrators and mental health professionals sponsored to begin restoring normalcy in the community. The principal and assistant principal greeted each person who came to school.

Prior to reopening school, the district worked with the state mental health agency to screen therapists who volunteered to provide additional counseling services. Names of therapists were given to staff, families and students as a resource. Combining resources from the state and county, two additional full-time therapists were assigned to the high school. The first two days after school resumed the focus was on restoring the learning environment through discussions among students and staff. Academic lessons gradually resumed.

**The incident described illustrates the extent to which a coordinated emergency management plan and preestablished relationships with the school community and first responders facilitated the response to and recovery from the hostage situation.**

The incident described illustrates the extent to which a coordinated emergency management plan and preestablished relationships with the school community and first responders facilitated the response to and recovery from the hostage situation. The experience of the Valley School District provides valuable lessons learned for first responders and school communities as they collaborate to develop, implement, refine and sustain a comprehensive emergency management plan.

## **Lessons Learned**

### **Lesson 1: Establish a Plan to Address Immediate Mental Health Needs of Students and Staff**

Traumatic incidents can have a profound impact on students and school staff. Students may be less able to focus on academics and may be preoccupied with concern for their safety and the safety of those around them. The range of the impact may vary among students based on several individual factors, including history

of past victimization and relative proximity to the incident and the victims. Often, students who have been impacted by trauma will experience academic challenges and difficulty concentrating. Similarly, staff also may be impacted emotionally and experience difficulty in maintaining student focus on academics.

Immediately after an incident, it is important to assess and address the mental health needs of students and staff. Valley School District recognized this as a key aspect of student and staff recovery, emotionally and academically, and made mental health a priority within the district. By prioritizing mental health and gradually resuming the focus on academics and learning, the district was able to ensure that students and staff had the appropriate emotional support needed to restore the learning environment.

## **Lesson 2: Incorporate the Principles of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS) Into the Response**

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) can be used for responding to any type or size of emergency. NIMS is structured so that different agencies (e.g., fire, police, emergency medical services, mental health, public health) can communicate using common terminology and operating procedures. Additionally, NIMS facilitates the combining of resources, personnel and equipment at the beginning of an emergency through to resolution.

The ICS is a management system within NIMS that creates a common set of procedures for organizing personnel, facilities, communications and equipment at an incident. Major management functions in the ICS include: command, finance

and administration, logistics, operations, planning, information officer, safety officer and liaison officer (see fig.1). ICS is a framework for all first responders to organize their activities and respond to various aspects of the incident as needed. For example, when the incident in the Valley School District began, it was treated as an active shooter incident. Once it was learned the shooter was holding hostages and possibly had explosives, SWAT teams and bomb squads were brought to the school.

As the law enforcement agencies responding to the incident at Peak High School discovered, it is important to formalize the ICS structure immediately at the beginning of the incident and modify as needed when additional agencies arrive at the incident. Not activating the system immediately can cause delays in establishing a command post and communication structure, facilitating decision-making in a timely fashion and obtaining critical resources. Since the incident began at the high school, the principal

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**FIGURE 1. ILLUSTRATIVE INCIDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES**

| <b>MEMBER FUNCTION</b>                   | <b>RESPONSIBILITIES</b>   |
|--|---|
| <b>Incident Commander</b>                |   |
| <b>Incident Commander</b>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Has overall responsibility for managing the incident</li> <li>■ Ensures overall incident safety</li> <li>■ Establishes and maintains liaison with other agencies participating in the incident</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Incident Command Staff</b>            |   |
| Public Information Officer               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Serves as the conduit of information to internal and external stakeholders</li> <li>■ Acts as the only liaison with the public, including the media</li> <li>■ Is well informed about the situation at all times</li> </ul>  |
| Safety Officer                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Monitors the safety conditions and develops measures for assuring the safety of all response personnel</li> </ul>  |
| Liaison Officer                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Serves as the point of contact between school administrators and response agencies</li> <li>■ Exchanges briefings and contact information with assisting agencies</li> <li>■ Monitors operations and identifies potential problems between school and response agencies</li> </ul> |
| <b>General Command Staff</b>             |   |
| Operations Section Chief                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Handles all emergency management jobs, including taking care of students and ensuring that medical and first aid services are available</li> <li>■ Supports parent reunification procedures</li> </ul>   |
| Planning Section Chief                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Tracks resources, assesses the changing situation, documents the response</li> <li>■ Maintains the site map at the command post</li> </ul>   |
| Logistics Section Chief                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Manages and distributes supplies, personnel, and equipment</li> <li>■ Secures and manages transportation for evacuations</li> <li>■ Deploys people to needed locations</li> </ul>  |
| Finance and Administration Section Chief | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Buys materials (e.g., food for first responders, communication equipment, and other supplies)</li> <li>■ Keeps financial records of expenditures and employee hours</li> </ul>   |

Source: Department of Homeland Security, *FEMA IS Course IS-362 Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools*, <http://training.fema.gov/EmiWeb/IS/IS3621st.asp> and *IS-100.SC Introduction to the Incident Command System, I-100, for Schools*, <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/IS100SC.asp>. (Last accessed on Dec. 18, 2007.)

was the immediate incident commander (IC), but quickly transferred that role to a first responder when that person arrived at the incident. The community’s emergency management plan and procedures should identify predetermined agency

responsibilities for the role of IC in various incidents. For example, in the event of a bomb threat, a fire department official will assume the role of IC. The size and structure of the ICS, which may evolve depending on the changing events



of the incident, provides a system for reducing confusion and redundancy of services and efforts.

An Incident Management Team, organized according to the principles of ICS, should be developed by school staff in collaboration with community partners to assist in responding to school-related events. Figure 1 lists illustrative Incident Management Team member responsibilities for various school-related functions within the ICS. Once the ICS is established, the system should be practiced and tested through exercises including school staff and first responders and, if appropriate, students. The superintendent of the Valley School District advocates that all exercises and drills be “scenario specific” and focus on situations (e.g., a fire drill during lunchtime, a bomb scare during a football game, an active shooter present while students are leaving school and boarding school buses). The superintendent believes that these types of exercises will help to empower administrators to make appropriate decisions by giving them various scenarios that develop decision-making skills.

### **Lesson 3: Establish an Incident Command Post at the Onset of an Emergency**

An Incident Command Post (ICP) houses the on-scene incident command and management organization, and typically includes the IC, managers of other functions and other staff (e.g., the school principal) designated essential to managing the incident. It is located at or near the incident site, such as the field across from Peak High School in the incident described above, and is the headquarters for directing on-scene control of tactical operations. An incident communications center also is housed at the ICP, and the IC should be working from the

ICP throughout the duration of the response. Additionally, the ICP should include other people familiar with the technology infrastructure and layout structure of the school. The Peak High School principal suggests that the school administrator assigned to the ICP have additional support to take calls regarding such issues as evacuation progress, care of hostages when released and communication with other education officials not at the ICP. Other suggestions from the Valley School District and first responders for managing activities at the ICP include:

- Diagram the ICS structure and indicate specific names of each management function on a white board or large paper and post in the ICP so that everyone knows the chain of command.
- Ask all ICS key personnel to wear different colored vests labeled with their agency or position or use other means to readily identify them and their roles.
- Assign a scribe to document all actions taken by the IC.
- Monitor all forms of communication in the

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school. For example, in a hostage or lockdown situation, there may be some concern that talking on a phone may reveal the location of people hiding; thus e-mail or text messaging is an alternative. Assigning someone to monitor the cell phones and e-mails of administrators during the lockdown may help to identify the location of staff or students not found during an initial sweep of the building.

- Include someone with expertise in technology and communications systems at the ICP.

When determining who has access to the ICP and the Incident Management Team, the Valley School District superintendent asked that the attorney for the school district be present to review the legal ramifications of any response actions. Additionally, the insurance carrier for the school district was stationed at the ICP and allowed immediate access to the school once the incident had been resolved. Following the incident, a rapid damage assessment of the school buildings and campus by the district's insurance company resulted in a swift cleanup of the classrooms and surrounding hallways so that the Peak High School was ready for an open house five days after the incident. The purpose of the open house was to continue communication with the school community and to further the recovery process.

#### **Lesson 4: Incorporate Communications Equipment and Procedures Into All Emergency Management Plans and Trainings**

An effective and efficient emergency management plan requires coordination, communication and sharing of information among all first responders and agencies involved in the response. However, when multiple agencies convene, they may have

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a variety of different types of radios that may or may not be compatible with each other. The U.S. Department of Justice warns: "Many jurisdictions are under the impression that an 800 MHz radio communication system solves interoperability problems, negating the need for an additional system. 800 MHz systems can incorporate units from neighboring jurisdictions if both systems have been programmed for that capability, and both are operating on the same brand of 800 MHz radios. However, they have no capability to incorporate other agencies with other brands of 800 MHz radios, or radios on other frequency ranges."<sup>2</sup> It is imperative that representatives of law enforcement, the fire department, emergency medical services (EMS), education, SWAT teams, as well as the public information officer (PIO) and other incident management personnel are able to communicate with each other during emergencies of all sizes and magnitudes. Multiagency interoperability communication is key to efficient

2 U.S. Department of Justice (n.d.), *Developing Multi-Agency Interoperability Communications Systems: User's Handbook*, [http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/odp/docs/acu\\_trp1000.pdf](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/odp/docs/acu_trp1000.pdf). (Last accessed on Dec. 18, 2007.)

communication; that is, the ability of two or more first responders to exchange information, even when different communications technology is used by each agency is essential for maximally effective emergency management.

As law enforcement officials in Valley School District discovered, it is important that exercises and drills include tests to determine if disparate communication systems can be linked to facilitate communications between all first responders and any multi-jurisdictional responders. Not only is it wise to test the interoperability of the communications equipment, but also to test the equipment in all parts of the school buildings and the surrounding geographic areas to determine where communication is weak.

### **Lesson 5: Activate a Media Communications Plan at the Onset of the Incident**

The core of a media communications plan is the designation of a PIO, who serves as the liaison between the IC and the media. The Valley School District did not have a PIO, thus families got much of their initial information from the media or by picking up information on police scanners. Upon hearing the news, parents flocked to the police substation and the schools, clogging the two-lane roads and preventing first responders from reaching the incident site in a timely fashion. Additionally, erroneous information was disseminated by students, community members, and the media, which required police dispatchers to spend several hours trying to dispel rumors and provide correct instructions for the parent reunification location and process.

If the PIO is not designated prior to the emergency occurring; the designated PIO may vary depending on what agency assumes the role of incident command. A PIO prepares and disseminates information about the incident size, cause and ongoing situation, and what is being done to ensure the safety of the students, staff and general public. Press releases also may include resources for counseling, food and shelter depending on the emergency. During an emergency the PIO oversees the media staging area where all media is located. The media staging area should be away from the site of the incident and parent reunification area and large enough to accommodate media trucks and numerous radio and TV reporters. To address the public's need for information about the incident and to control rumors, the PIO should schedule regular briefings (e.g., every two hours or other regular intervals). The rapid release of accurate information and instructions for parent reunification should be given to all media and will help to reassure families that their children are safe and will facilitate an orderly reunification process. It is important that the PIO have the appropriate equipment and access to the IC to obtain accurate, timely information.

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## **Lesson 6: Establish and Practice Parent Reunification Procedures**

Drills and tabletop exercises are common ways to practice the procedures outlined in the emergency management plan. Often missing from such activities are the procedures for organizing students, transporting them to the evacuation site and the actual process of reunifying the students with their parents. The elementary school, which served as the reunification location, had few procedures or processes for receiving the students and discovered that the lack of an established traffic pattern resulted in clogged entrances and exits as hundreds of parents arrived at the school wishing to pick up their children.

Preestablished partnerships with law enforcement, mental health agencies, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and area businesses can be a valuable resource for identifying and coordinating activities at reunification sites. For example, in Valley School District, the state police helped control traffic and maintain order. Other partners can help to feed hungry students, care for students with medical needs, calm parents' anxiety and counsel traumatized parents. When identifying staff to assist with the parent reunification process, it is important to properly assign this task to staff that can be both commanding and compassionate. The parent-child reunification process is often an emotionally charged and chaotic event. Having staff with the appropriate skill sets to manage such situations is critical.

Parents should be well informed of what documentation (e.g., driver's license) is needed

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to be reunified with their children and should not count on being recognized by school staff. This information can be disseminated to families during back-to-school nights, through school newsletters and on the day of the event via the media.

Finally, there should be a plan to care for or reunite the children of the first responders and others who are involved in the response efforts.

## **Lesson 7: Consider the Needs of Students and Staff With Disabilities**

Students and staff with disabilities may require additional support and considerations during an emergency that requires an evacuation. For example, the Valley School District middle school students in wheelchairs and other devices for mobility had difficulty navigating to the outdoor evacuation location that was in a field with rough terrain. To get the students to safety, a teacher loaded the students in the back of a pickup truck and took them to a part of the field that is blocked by trees. Transporting students

to a reunification site will require a bus fitted for wheelchairs, and this may not be readily available and, therefore, schools should have alternative plans in place.

Many students, not just those with disabilities, may require timely administration of medication. After the students were evacuated, the school nurse returned to the building with law enforcement protection to retrieve students' medication. School nurses may want to consider maintaining a go-kit with a current list of students' medications and dosage that can be passed on to EMS in the event of a long-term evacuation. A go-kit specially designed for the nurse's office should include such items as a blanket, a thermometer, a first-aid kit and other necessary supplies, all of which will be helpful if EMS is delayed.

### **Lesson 8: Work With Community Partners to Provide Short- and Long-term Support for Students and Families**

The importance of establishing relationships with community agencies and first responders prior to an emergency should not be underestimated. Since the Valley School District is located in a small rural town, many of the relationships with first responders began as personal relationships or revolved around involvement in extracurricular activities at the school. The superintendent of the Valley School District believes that the relationships established with law enforcement through school-based prevention programs in elementary schools provided a strong foundation for working with the middle and high school students during and after the incident.

Prior relationships with mental health organizations in the community resulted in a mental health consortium that rapidly organized and provided services to students and their families immediately after and for months after the incident. The consortium also worked to clarify procedures for maintaining confidentiality of students and families receiving counseling.

Additionally, professionals who worked in community mental health agencies prior to the incident were keenly aware of the additional challenges that these families would experience through the consortium. Prior to an incident, the superintendent of the Valley School District recommends that local mental health agencies and school districts partner with the state mental health association to prequalify and screen potential counselors who can be used to provide emotional support for students and families.

After a traumatic incident, such as the one at Valley School District, it is important to provide short- and long-term emotional support for

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everyone involved in the experience. Teachers and counselors discovered that several unreported traumas experienced by the students emerged after the incident. After winter and spring vacations, the number of students seeking emotional support also increased. Both middle and high school counselors reported that the April 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech angered students and caused them more trauma by bringing back memories of the incident at the high school. In planning for recovery, schools should make a variety of support options available so that each person can select an option that makes them most comfortable. Examples of Valley School District support included:

- Families were offered individual counseling by community mental health providers at no charge, and met with other families on a weekly basis.
- The students and paraprofessionals who were not evacuated formed a small group, they called "Pocket of Seven," and with the help of a therapist, also supported through state and federal funds, talked with school administrators and first responders about their needs and the feelings that they experienced during the incident.
- Male students who were ordered out of the classroom by the shooter were experiencing "survival guilt" and met weekly with a counselor to discuss their feelings of leaving the hostages behind.
- Each middle school student was seen by a counselor to identify any adverse trauma resulting from the incident. Students were given resources for in-school and out-of-school counseling.

**Both middle and high school counselors reported that the April 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech angered students and caused them more trauma by bringing back memories of the incident at the high school. In planning for recovery, schools should make a variety of support options available so that each person can select an option that makes them most comfortable.**

As discussed in the recovery process, the Victim Advocate Program played a key role in supporting hostages and their families during and after the incident. An advocate was assigned to each hostage as well as to the family of the student who died in the incident. The advocates, in partnership with the mental health consortium arranged for the hostages to meet as a group once a week during the school day with a therapist supported by federal and state funds. Advocates worked with families on a proactive basis. For example, before a formal report about the incident was issued publicly, victim's services requested that the report be previewed with families and that representatives from the various agencies be present during the preview. Victim advocates also attended the preview with the families.

### **Lesson 9: Remember That Caregivers Also Need Continual Support**

First responders, school administrators and mental health partners also can experience trauma and require support to continue functioning in their professional roles. To provide mutual support

after the incident the professionals who were key to the response and recovery efforts at Valley School District held weekly meetings. Initially the meetings focused on the needs of the students after the incident (e.g., school security, media access, hostage anonymity, funding issues), but, about six months after the incident, they began to focus on community challenges. Speakers identified by various means (e.g., via Web sites that provide support from licensed therapists) attended the meetings and shared both traditional and nontraditional options for supporting students. The meetings also had several secondary benefits. First, the group had a support system to make decisions about challenges (e.g., need for additional counseling services, additional suicide counselors) that emerged after the incident. Second, the group, all from different agencies, brought solutions to the challenges from their own discipline. Finally, the group identified and obtained resources from within the community to help the recovery process. For example, the community never had a youth recreation center and by combining resources from institutions of faith, businesses and community-based organizations, the drop-in center opened seven months after the incident.

Partnerships do not need to be limited to businesses, first responders or other community agencies. The Valley School District superintendent recalls that after the Columbine incident, students would gather in the kitchens of several homes to eat cookies and talk to the victims' mothers. This was tangible support that community members could provide. In the Valley School District, one family, who owns a hotel, offered free lodging to mental health workers and others who helped the district during the recovery process.

## **Lesson 10: Proceed With Caution When Planning Memorials and Tributes for the Victim(s)**

Research has shown that constructing or conducting memorials may result in recurring trauma and may require ongoing funding for maintenance. When considering memorials or tributes the community must consider the cultural norms of the community and the long-term implications for how the memorial will be viewed by students and the community five, 10 or 15 years after the incident. Memorials should never interfere with the teaching and learning environment.

Valley School District school administrators in collaboration with community partners and families made a decision not to conduct a memorial for the one victim who died during the incident. This decision received mixed reactions from the community because some felt that the incident, hostage taking and the death should be acknowledged. Thus, community groups and

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others organized a picnic and invited staff, faculty, students and families to acknowledge the end of the school year and to set-off balloons in memory of the victim and the hostages.

Ideas for two different tributes to the victim and hostages were suggested during the school year that recognized the event and engaged all students. The first was the idea of a teacher who thought that the quilts given to the hostages upon their release symbolized warmth and caring. She asked the hostages and other students in the class that the active shooter entered if they would like to be involved in designing and making a tributary quilt for display in the school. Several quilting shops were eager to supply their expertise, materials and time to make the quilt and helped the students with individual designs that represented the victim, her family, the names of all the hostages (concealed to maintain confidentiality) and strips of cloth signed by each student in the school. The quilt is displayed in a prominent part of the school. Another acknowledgment of the incident, the idea of a former law enforcement officer, was the building of a rock garden and waterfall. In addition to the materials, he worked with the high school students to build the structure. The garden is located outside the district administration

building, which the school community hopes is a respite for students from the day-to-day challenges they encounter.

## Conclusion

The tragedy in the Valley School District illustrates the importance of establishing the functions outlined in the incident command structure at the beginning of the incident. Each function within the IC structure is linked to a rapid and effective response and also establishes the processes for recovery to begin before the incident is resolved. Partnerships are vital—the school alone cannot manage all aspects of the response and recovery. Working with first responders, mental health agencies and the community helped the school district develop strategies that will support students, staff and families. Based on the incident, educators, first responders, mental health agencies and parents engaged in dynamic discussions that explored a wide variety of options to ensure that the schools provide a safe environment that fosters academic learning and social development of the students. The lessons provided herein give other districts suggestions for creating an all-hazards emergency management plan in conjunction with partners.



The ERCM TA Center was established in October 2004 by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS). The center supports schools and school districts in developing and implementing comprehensive emergency and crisis response plans by providing technical assistance via trainings, publications and individualized responses to requests. For additional information about school emergency management topics, visit the ERCM TA Center at <http://ercm.org> or call 1-888-991-3726.

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