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FIRST ANNUAL REPORT OF THE BERGEN COUNTY SAFE SCHOOLS TASK FORCE MARCH 14, 2019



A State Accredited and Nationally Recognized Law Enforcement Agency

BERGEN COUNTY SAFE SCHOOLS TASK FORCE

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INTRODUCTION

In our state and across our nation, school safety has been deservedly pushed to the forefront of public debate and concern following the many unspeakable tragedies within several schools around the country in recent years. In our continuing response to combat potential threats to our schools here in Bergen County, in April 2018, the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office ("BCPO") in cooperation with the Bergen County Executive and Bergen County Board of Chosen Freeholders formed the Bergen County Safe Schools Task Force ("SSTF"). The concept of the SSTF is to bring together under one umbrella various groups or stakeholders that have been diligently working toward the goal of making our schools safe. These include law enforcement, county government, mental health professionals, school administrators, and private individuals with an interest in school safety. This umbrella concept is particularly urgent given the recent and continuing mass shootings in schools, houses of worship, at entertainment events, and other gatherings. Not surprisingly, the SSTF, through the critical review of its working committees, has found the issue of school safety to be a complex task that requires the ongoing efforts of all interested stakeholders. No one group or stakeholder alone can eradicate violence in schools, but working together we can minimize the types of risk to our schools that have become inherent to modern society. The SSTF remains committed to this mission of fostering and ensuring school safety and is pleased to issue this first annual report. It is our sincere hope that the SSTF will, in the years to come, offer our school districts the highest level of technical assistance and training in school safety. Initially, the SSTF will focus its energies on public school grades K through 12. Later, it will expand its efforts to private schools. However, the findings and recommendations of this report are applicable to all schools.

A copy of this report may be obtained online at www.bcpo.net and in printed form at the administration office of the Bergen County Prosecutor located at Two Bergen County Plaza, Hackensack, New Jersey.

BACKGROUND

The BCPO, all of Bergen County Law Enforcement, and Bergen County Government place the highest priority on the safety of our children, our schools, and school personnel. The BCPO has been at the forefront of the effort to ensure school safety. In 2013, the BCPO launched a School Security Initiative comprised of officers from various municipal police agencies. As part of the initiative, the BCPO sponsored training by Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service,

which certified 56 police officers and 41 school security professionals in conducting risk and vulnerability school assessments. An additional training is scheduled for April 2019. The BCPO Risk Mitigation Planner and municipal law enforcement partners have to date performed security assessments of 165 public schools and 56 private schools. The BCPO has also partnered with Bergen County municipal law enforcement agencies, the New Jersey Department of Education, and the New Jersey State Police in conducting unannounced lockdown drill visits to monitor and provide technical assistance to schools to enhance their safety procedures.

In 2015, the Bergen County Prosecutor tasked the Bergen County Regional SWAT Team (“RST”) with reviewing and revising Bergen County law enforcement procedures and tactics for responding to active shooter incidents. The RST review included a study of the most recent active shooter response protocols implemented by major police departments, including those of the New York and Los Angeles Police Departments. During its review, the RST contracted with Tomahawk Strategic Solutions (“Tomahawk”) of Nashville, Tennessee, a nationally-recognized security firm whose personnel include current and former United States military tier one Special Forces operators, corporate security experts, and current and retired law enforcement officers. The RST review led to enhanced procedures and tactics for responding to active shooter incidents.

Following the review, the Prosecutor issued a directive mandating that all Bergen County law enforcement officers receive training in the new active shooter policies and protocols. The Prosecutor also ordered annual refresher training. Training all police officers in the new active shooter response protocols ensures a uniform and coordinated response by all police officers to active shooter incidents.

In 2017, the Prosecutor and Sheriff instituted the RST Mobile Patrol Initiative. RST marked police units, which patrol throughout Bergen County, are staffed by specially trained and equipped SWAT personnel who can rapidly respond to any critical incident, such as an active shooter call. One of the lessons learned from recent school shootings is the need to reduce tactical team response times. In Bergen County, having SWAT team members with specialized equipment already on the road accomplishes just that – putting a SWAT response on scene within minutes.

Additionally, these patrols act as a force multiplier to Bergen County’s municipal police agencies. It is Bergen County law enforcement policy to have routine police presence at or near schools throughout the day. The RST mobile patrols supplement these municipal efforts by

conducting routine interior and exterior school security checks. Through these routine but unannounced patrols, the RST and municipal police serve as a deterrent to illegal behavior.

The RST and local police also began active shooter protocol training in our schools. The benefit of this in-school training is twofold; it provides both familiarity with tactics as well as familiarity with the schools. In what at first was a controversial decision, but one which has ultimately proved extremely beneficial, the RST invites some school personnel to observe selected trainings. The concept is to promote overall safety by allowing school personnel to know exactly what the police response will look like and how they should respond. Additionally, it reinforces the training school personnel receive by explaining the reasons underlying the actions they are directed to take during an active shooter emergency. School personnel may now understand how their safety plan works in conjunction with the law enforcement response, thereby emphasizing the importance of following their school safety plan.

Moreover, working directly with school personnel allows the RST to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the police response as it relates to a school's specific safety plan. Such evaluation provides an opportunity to address specific areas of concern directly with school officials to ensure the safest and most effective response.

In 2017, the BCPO established the Bergen County Association of School Security Professionals, comprised of approximately 80 members including school security personnel, district superintendents, business administrators, and buildings and grounds directors. The Association meets regularly to network and share security challenges and best practices, as well as to develop strategies to enhance school security.

In 2018, the BCPO established a Threat Management Unit staffed by Counterterrorism Coordinators and other detectives within its Intelligence and Counterterrorism Unit. Implementing Attorney General Guidelines, the BCPO directed all Bergen County law enforcement agencies to immediately report any threat-based activity indicating a serious potential act of violence to the Threat Management Unit for investigation and response.

The BCPO also issued directives requiring Bergen County law enforcement to immediately notify the Threat Management Unit of all information related to threats of serious physical violence by individuals suffering from mental illness, for investigation and response.

TASK FORCE COMMITTEES

Following the formation of the SSTF in April 2018, the SSTF set up committees to focus on and leverage the members' unique talents, experiences, and perspectives in five core areas: mental health, private sector, legislative and policy, accreditation, and training. The goal of these specialized committees was to not only recommend school security best practices, but also to identify failure points in their specific areas that threaten school safety.

Finally, the SSTF was tasked with educating school professionals through both this report and a series of trainings. We envision the SSTF as an on-going endeavor; one through which the Task Force will continually evaluate the planning and response to the challenges of making Bergen County's schools as safe as they can possibly be. In June 2018, the SSTF committees began work in earnest toward establishing individual goals and the means to achieve them. The committees were encouraged to review the work of other such committees and task forces. The following is a summary of each specialized committee and its recommendations.

Mental Health Committee

Mental illness and emotional and psychological disruption are the background for many active shooter incidents. Identifying and treating students suffering from these conditions promotes school safety. The SSTF formed the Mental Health Committee to recommend ways to promote early intervention for mental health needs in schools in a proactive approach to identify behaviors that threaten school safety.

Mental Health Training

The Mental Health Committee's immediate focus was on training school personnel on the relevant early warning signs and risk factors of emotional and psychological disruption in students. Schools can then identify students at risk in order to provide them with the most clinically appropriate interventions. The Mental Health Committee worked hand-in-hand with the Training Committee to develop the *Mental Health in Schools* Training Module. This training educates school personnel to assess issues of concern in an effort to prevent violent behavior.

Mental Health Assessment Care Team ("ACT")

As part of its efforts, the Mental Health Committee will also instruct school administrators on the importance of establishing an Assessment Care Team ("ACT"). The Mental Health Committee's ACT recommendation is based on work in this area conducted by the FBI and Secret Service, the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, and its own experiences and research. The

Committee suggests that a formal ACT for each school will provide for more efficient intervention and treatment for students experiencing mental health issues.

The Committee recommends that a school's ACT include a Team Leader (e.g., principal, vice principal), a mental health professional (e.g., school social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist) and a trained school safety personnel (e.g., Special Law Enforcement Officer III ("SLEOIII"), School Resource Officer ("SRO"), Security Officer). This will ensure multiple relevant viewpoints and inputs for decision making.

The Mental Health Committee also suggests the use of a School Threat Assessment Decision Tree to aid Mental Health Teams in their assessments of student conduct and mental health and emotional issues, to distinguish student behaviors that do not present the risk of violent behavior from those who do present such risks, and to make proper recommendations and referrals to address students' mental health needs.

The Mental Health Committee's assessment tools and recommendations are fully presented in its *Mental Health in Schools* Training Module, which is highly recommended for all school professionals.

Private Sector Committee

The Private Sector Committee was formed to investigate how private industry can assist schools in their safety planning. Special emphasis was placed on leveraging technology to advance the school safety mission, as well as the private sector's ability to assist schools in policy creation and personnel training.

Private Security Service Providers

The Private Sector Committee immediately recognized that school safety begins with policy and facility-specific security plans and training; but a safety plan is worthless if it is neither well known nor readily implemented by the people who must execute it. It is therefore critical that *all* school personnel be properly trained in both the policy and plan. Moreover, the most effective safety plan is one that integrates with the police response – not in theory but in actual practice.

The SSTF recognizes that one size does not fit all when it comes to security policy, planning, and training. Therefore, it is the responsibility of individual school districts to determine what services, if any, they need from private security service providers. To assist school superintendents and administrators in this area, the BCPO has contracted with Tomahawk Strategic Solutions, which has trained Bergen County law enforcement in policies and tactics for responding

to active shooter events, to provide a comprehensive, one-day training on school security that will cover everything from policy drafting to traumatic casualty care. Each individual district can thereafter decide what training is appropriate for itself. The Tomahawk training will be held on April 26, 2019.

LiveSafe Security Application

Additionally, the ability to easily and effectively communicate is essential to all aspects of school safety and active shooter response. From reporting suspicious behavior to providing real-time actionable intelligence during an event, communication is key. Accordingly, the Private Sector Committee focused on technology that delivered all of the communication essentials in a single, user-friendly platform. After much searching, the Committee chose the *LiveSafe* platform. *LiveSafe* is a cellular-based tip reporting and two-way communication application that functions as a risk mitigation tool.¹

Through *LiveSafe* students, teachers, parents, and all school personnel can report tips and suspicious behaviors, anonymously if desired. The tips are categorized into a number of areas such as facility security, threatening behavior, and suspicious activity. Tips can then be directed to school officials, law enforcement, or both, providing critical information to those who need it most. Moreover, *LiveSafe* reduces barriers to communication that typically prevent the sharing of such vital information. *LiveSafe* is a simple and user friendly platform targeted to our Bergen County student population – those most likely to have crucial information needed to prevent school violence. Unfortunately, history demonstrates that students are often reluctant to share their information for a number of reasons, including lack of anonymity and uncertainty about how to report. *LiveSafe* eliminates student reluctance by providing an effective and anonymous way to share their information. Additionally, information is not limited to threats of serious violence. *LiveSafe* can be an effective tool for reporting acts of bullying, illegal drug use or activity, or students in need of intervention and counselling. *LiveSafe* will be available for implementation in September 2019.

During a lockdown event, *LiveSafe* can also be used as a two-way communication device, allowing school administrators and police officials to provide critical and real-time information to teachers and students inside a school. Conversely, those under lockdown can flow information

¹ More information can be found at <https://www.livesafemobile.com/>.

out to responding emergency personnel. This type of communication is essential to an effective response.

The BCPO has deemed *LiveSafe* so essential to Bergen County's school safety mission that it has directly contracted with *LiveSafe* to provide the application to all Bergen County schools and government offices at no cost to them. The BCPO will pay all start-up costs to provide *LiveSafe* county-wide. However, *LiveSafe* will only be effective if it is widely used. Therefore, we urge all school administrators to ensure that all employees and students download *LiveSafe* and train on its use and functions.

Collaborative Response Graphics

The coordination of emergency personnel to violent school incidents and the identification of target areas are critical to an effective response. Collaborative Response Graphics ("CRGs")² are simple visual communication and collaboration tools – useable under stress – by everyone involved in an incident to coordinate emergency response both outside and inside a structure.

CRG technology creates digital grid-maps of both the exterior and interior of schools (or any structure). These grid maps are accessed by first responders via a cellphone application. This allows first responders using their cellphones to quickly identify specific and important areas of a structure such as entry points, shooter location, and casualty collection points. This quick and effective means of communication focuses all available assets on an effective response. It also reduces delay in determining and finding important locations. CRG saves precious minutes and seconds, which may save lives. This technology is particularly important in Bergen County, where there are 72 police agencies and great reliance on surrounding police departments for mutual aid. These officers may not be familiar with a neighboring school's layout. With CRG, that lack of familiarity will not negatively impact the effectiveness of their response.

Beyond first responders, CRG is also available for use by school administrators and employees. Each school administrator can assign and manage the availability of the system to its employees through a series of permissions it defines and grants. This allows school administrators the ability to track and account for their employees and missing students.

² For more information visit <https://www.crgplans.com/>.

The primary cost for CRG has been borne by the BCPO and federal grant funds.³ This expenditure, including personnel costs, administration of the system, training for law enforcement, and computer server costs, will not be passed on to our schools. The only cost to be covered by a school is the mapping itself – typically around \$2,500 per school. Such mapping can thereafter be integrated into a school’s digital safety plan. Moreover, CRG mapping has been pre-approved by the New Jersey School Insurance Group for purchasing through its annual safety grant program.

CRG maps are being used throughout New Jersey, including by the New Jersey State Police and the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness. Moreover, CRG is the only mapping system that is continuously monitored by the New Jersey Regional Operations Intelligence Center. The SSTF recommends it for schools in Bergen County as it is the only system used by Bergen County law enforcement and our law enforcement partners throughout New Jersey.

Monitoring Social Media

Going forward, the Private Sector Committee will also continue to explore the overall effectiveness of monitoring social media as part of a school safety policy and plan. There are various service providers and web-based platforms through which schools can monitor publicly available social media for potential threats to their schools.

The overall effectiveness and value of such monitoring is the subject of controversy. Most social media monitoring services only search or “scrub” publicly available media and posts for potential threats and concerning behavior. Private accounts and pages, which typically have privacy settings, are not scanned for such comments; therefore, posts made on private accounts will not be discovered. However, there is some value in the ability to monitor certain phrases or terms appearing on social media. Therefore, school districts should be aware of this service and its potential value to their overall school security plan.

Legislative & Policy Committee

The legislative and policy area potentially related to safe schools is so vast, that the Legislative & Policy Committee had to quickly determine where to focus its initial energy and resources. It decided to focus on initiatives that would enhance the mental and emotional health

³ The Prosecutor and Sheriff have paid to digitally map all county government buildings and schools. Other public facilities will be mapped as part of their joint effort.

of students, for their own well-being and because such enhancements support the SSTF's objective of promoting mental health, in order to help prevent school violence. The Committee therefore examined the intersection of mental health and education in our current legislation.

Mental Health Curricula

In 1987, our legislature enacted P.L.1987, c. 389 (N.J.S.A. 18A:40A-1 et seq.) to address the need for prevention and intervention of student alcohol and drug use. The bill was amended in 1989 to include tobacco and steroid use. Under N.J.S.A. 18A:40A-1, public schools are required to instruct students on the nature and effects of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use beginning in kindergarten through grade 12. As a result, an extensive model curriculum on these subjects has been established for New Jersey schools.

Mental illness and mental health, on the other hand, have not yet received the same legislative attention, despite the apparent need. The model health curricula for grades 3 through 12 in New Jersey include limited learning objectives related to mental health, and the curricula for kindergarten through grade 2 do not address mental health at all.

The Legislative & Policy Committee recommends that mental illness and mental health education be legislatively mandated, similar to alcohol, tobacco, and drug education. To that end, the Committee recommends legislation requiring that instructional programs on the nature of mental illness and mental health be taught in schools to students from kindergarten to grade 12, and that curriculum guidelines for these education programs be developed by the appropriate agencies. In the interim, the Committee strongly recommends that Bergen County school districts examine their curricula for mental health education and appropriately bolster their mental health instruction.

School Psychologists

In addition to requiring instructional courses regarding alcohol, tobacco, and drug use, our state statutes mandate that local boards of education establish substance abuse intervention, prevention, and treatment referral programs in public schools. The purpose of N.J.S.A. 18A:40A-10 is to identify students who are substance abusers and assess those students' needs. Additionally, boards of education are required to provide basic child study team services, which must include the services of a school psychologist, for special education assessments and student support. Unfortunately, there is no analogous mandate for mental health treatment, and outside of special education, there is no legislation mandating school psychologists or mental health counseling for

students. The Mental Health Committee therefore recommends legislation mandating that a psychologist be available for every school and for mental health counselling.

Mental Health Assessments

The Legislative & Policy Committee recognizes the significant privacy concerns involved in mental health assessments. It therefore recommends appropriate legislation that makes voluntary student mental health assessments, as well as treatment referral programs, available in public schools.

Mental Health Financing

On December 18, 2018, the Federal Commission on School Safety issued its final report and recommendations. Included within the report was mention of various states' efforts to finance school-based mental health initiatives with Medicaid funds. The need for reimbursements or Medicaid-funded partnerships will undoubtedly vary from school district to school district in New Jersey, but, going forward, the Legislative & Policy Committee will continue to assess the most effective ways to fund the SSTF's recommendations by beginning to examine our Medicaid State Plan for potential funding options.

Fire Alarm Evacuation

The SSTF also asked the Legislative & Policy Committee to explore the feasibility of amending our fire codes to permit delayed evacuation of schools upon the sounding of a fire alarm. This suggestion was based on the circumstances of the tragic shooting deaths on February 14, 2018, at Florida's Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, where the gunman shot students as they left the protection of their classrooms and flooded the hallways upon hearing a fire alarm. The immediate evacuation of a school on the sounding of a fire alarm is meant to save lives, but now may, in some circumstances, cost lives.

Most schools are now by code and construction virtually fireproof. The Committee therefore suggests a legislative study and potential action in this area. As an example, Indiana state law⁴ now permits school administrators, teachers, and students to barricade or block a door for up to three minutes during an unplanned fire alarm. Once three minutes has elapsed, evacuation is mandatory, unless an active shooter has been verified. In that case, doors should remain barricaded and evacuation is no longer required.

⁴ Ind. Code § 22-11-17-2(d).

As a result of this legislation, the Indiana State Fire Marshal issued guidance to schools about appropriate responses to unplanned fire alarms. This guidance included the option of a fire alarm panel equipped with “Positive Fire Alarm Sequence” which delays audible and visual fire alarms up to three minutes in order to provide trained staff time to investigate the alarms.

Whether such legislation and guidelines are appropriate for New Jersey schools is an important issue that should be decided with input from all interested parties, including school and fire officials. But it is an issue which should be addressed now, before an active shooter event is presented.

Accreditation Committee

The SSTF formed the Accreditation Committee to formulate safety standards and recognize those Bergen County schools that attain a high level of safety and preparedness. The Task Force anticipates that a *Bergen County Safe School* accreditation will act as an incentive program to our schools to continually evaluate and improve their safety and security.

Accreditation Standards

Establishing safe school accreditation requires standards by which to measure school safety *and* a means by which to vet school compliance with each metric. Some standards have universal application while others are dependent upon the structural design and unique circumstances of the school facility itself. Moreover, the SSTF recognizes that the standards must strike a balance between measures that are reasonably attainable without being unaffordable, but are nonetheless effective. Additionally, these standards must not create a false sense of security that could cause administrators to believe that they have done all they need to do to ensure school safety.

The New Jersey Administrative Code requires that each school district have a written school safety and security plan that meets minimum requirements set by the New Jersey Department of Education’s Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning.⁵ The SSTF does not intend to supplant those minimum requirements with its own; rather, the SSTF suggests additional measures to improve overall safety. However, any school seeking accreditation as a Bergen County Safe School must comply with code-mandated standards.

At this point, the SSTF has agreed upon several broad-based categories that will be used to measure a school’s safety. Within those categories, will be the specific security features or

⁵ N.J.A.C. 6A:16-5.1 further requires that the chief school administrator consult with law enforcement and other agencies when developing this plan.

policies that will serve as the minimum standards for accreditation as a Safe School. As the Accreditation Program and best practices evolve, so will these standards. However, at this point, the SSTF has agreed upon the following evaluation categories and their respective minimum standards for accreditation as a Bergen County Safe School:

Emergency Response and Communications:

- CRG mapping;
- School safety plan in electronic format;
- LiveSafe application use;
- Lockdown calls, written and verbal, made using “plain language.”

Strategic Staffing and Partnerships

- Creation of Assessment Care Team and plan;
- Lockdown drills conducted with and monitored by local police departments;
- Schedule and complete a Facility Security and Vulnerability assessment through the Bergen County Risk Mitigation Planner’s office.

Professional Development and Training

- 80% attendance by every school employee with all 3 SSTF trainings;
- Employees trained in the use of tourniquets, bleeding control, and other emergency first aid medical techniques;
- School safety plan and policy training;
- All armed security personnel (SLEO III or private security) trained in Bergen County’s active shooter tactics.

Building Management and Access Control

- All doors, rooms (interior and exterior), and windows numbered with numbers visible from hallways, and from the safe corner within the room;
- All doors must be lockable with room doors lockable without keys from the interior;
- A staffed and monitored single entry point;
- Tourniquets, bleeding control equipment, and first aid kits in every classroom;
- “Stay bags” in every classroom. Each classroom should be equipped with “stay/shelter kits” for periods of prolonged lockdown or shelter in place;
- All school visitors screened, vetted, and always escorted;

- No visitors during times of student movement;
- Door windows equipped with shades, laminates, or other means to prevent visual access during a lockdown;
- Lockdown drills conducted at various times during the school day.

SLEO III/Armed Security Personnel

In 2016, New Jersey law was amended to create a Class 3 Special Law Enforcement Officer, known as SLEO IIIs. These are retired police officers who are armed and authorized to provide security in New Jersey's schools. They are also cross-trained to serve as SROs. In creating this new category, New Jersey recognized the potential importance of a police presence in a school's safety plan. Such a presence may provide deterrence and an immediate response to violent activity.

Several Bergen County municipal police departments and school districts employ the SLEO IIIs as part of their overall school security plan. The Accreditation Committee suggests that school districts explore the feasibility and potential effectiveness of armed security personnel in their schools. The decision to employ armed security in schools must be made in light of the individual circumstances of each school, including student population, neighborhood, proximity to the police department, etc.

However, before deployment, all armed school security officers must be trained in Bergen County law enforcement's active shooter response tactics.

Accreditation Pilot Program

The Safe Schools Accreditation project will launch as a pilot program in five diverse Bergen County school districts in the fall of 2019 and continue until the end of the year. Before and during the pilot program, the Accreditation Committee will develop interim accreditation requirements with a view that accreditation standards will evolve with further experience and study. SSTF will also develop a cellular-based, self-assessment application. This application will allow each school district's School Safety Professional, in cooperation with the facility head and local police department, to evaluate the school's security and compliance with the program. Further, by using an application as the evaluation tool, the Accreditation Committee can ensure that its safety standards are current and ever-evolving with best practices.

The SSTF plans a full implementation of the Accreditation process in January 2020.

Training Committee

The SSTF determined that it is critical to train school personnel in the Task Force’s findings and recommendations in order to solidify and embed safety concepts within our schools. The Training Committee therefore designed three separate training modules that cover the core concepts of school safety, prevention of school violence, and proper responses to violent school situations.

The SSTF tasked the Training Committee with identifying topics with “real world” value. The SSTF recognized that active shooter trainings are often more about a historical and statistical review of active shooter events than instructing on practical responses to an actual violent school situation. Such trainings are of limited value to school personnel as they typically do not correlate analysis directly to actual skills that improve safety and survival. Accordingly, the Training Committee focused on topics which, if understood at a basic level, have the ability to directly improve school safety. Moreover, the topics needed to be of universal application to Bergen County schools. Many trainings are tailored to meet the needs of administrators or teachers; leaving out key players in school security such as the custodial and lunch service staffs.

The Training Committee settled on three separate topics and trainings: *Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Students & Preventing Issues of Concern*; *Facility Security: Risk Assessment & Physical Security*; and *School Personnel Response to an Active Shooter Event*. Each training is designed as a stand-alone training not reliant on the others for context. However, school districts are encouraged to mandate that all their personnel attend all three trainings, to cover the full spectrum of school safety issues. The SSTF considers these trainings so essential to its mission that it has arranged with the New Jersey Department of Education that attendance at the training modules will satisfy teacher monthly professional development hour requirements.

Mental Health in Schools: Engaging Students and Preventing Issues of Concern

A key finding from a recent FBI study of school shootings is that shooters often communicated their intentions to peers days or weeks in advance of the violent incidents. The FBI also reported that there were shootings that were prevented because students reported their peers’ threats to proper authorities. This indicates that there were pre-attack behaviors of concern that should have triggered reporting and intervention. Often, school personnel and others in the community did not recognize these behaviors for what they were. The Mental Health Training educates school personnel on warning signs and at-risk behaviors that may require intervention. It

also directly addresses the general issue of the mental and emotional health of our students and how to monitor and appropriately intervene to meet the students' needs.

Facility Security: Risk Assessment and Physical Security

Similarly, the Facility Security Training educates school personnel on common and typical facility vulnerabilities; some of which are obvious while others are less so. The training encourages administrators to empower their employees to report security vulnerabilities. The training also offers realistic suggestions to remedy the vulnerabilities. Finally, this training strongly emphasizes the need for a comprehensive security policy and strict adherence by school personnel.

School Personnel Response to an Active Shooter Event

Each school must have a security plan and all school personnel must be trained on their school's security plan. Those with a clear understanding of their security plan, and who strictly adhere to it increase the chances of surviving an active shooter event.

School personnel generally understand what they are supposed to do during an active shooter event. However, they are less well educated as to "why" they should do so. This lack of understanding can cause bad decisions; particularly if an employee encounters an unanticipated situation – for example, being outside of a classroom when a lock-down alert is given. Therefore, lock-down drills must be conducted at all times and phases of the school day. Too often, such drills are activated at a "convenient" time, when students are all in class, the cafeteria is empty, and no one is outside of the school building. Such drills have very little security benefit.

A lack of understanding of what to do in an unanticipated situation inevitably creates doubt in the effectiveness of the recommended action and security plan. In turn, doubt causes deviation from the plan at a time when strict adherence is critical. This leads to poor decision making and may create a vicious cycle of worsening situations. Ultimately, an individual may find him or herself in a position where deviation from the security plan causes the chances of survival to drop exponentially with each bad decision.

The School Personnel Response to Active Shooter Events training educates school personnel on formulating a proper security plan and adhering strictly to it. The training emphasizes concepts that can be translated into a number of different scenarios. It also focuses on common, often neglected questions, such as effective window and door shades, fire alarms, etc., which are almost always absent from broad-based trainings.

The SSTF considers these training modules essential for implementing Task Force recommendations. It has arranged for these trainings to be given at any school which requests them. Requests for training may be made at www.bcpo.net and clicking on Education Presentations. The SSTF recommends that all school districts mandate attendance at all three modules by all school personnel.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section summarizes the SSTF's current recommendations on improving school safety. These recommendations are listed in identified categories. Most are self-explanatory and stand alone. Some require further explanation, which is included either in this section itself or elsewhere in this report.

These recommendations must be judged in light of a school's overall safety plan. Further, these are not mandates; they are recommendations. The SSTF encourages you to view these recommendations within the context of each school's safety plan and physical layout. Moreover, these recommendations are not intended as an exhaustive safety plan. Schools and law enforcement should incorporate these recommendations into existing policy where appropriate.

All recommendations, policy, protocols, and trainings should emphasize the critical importance of the ***ability to quickly and effectively put the school in lockdown and hide out of sight behind locked or barricaded doors in a violent threat situation***. Teachers' ability to quickly lock themselves and their students in a classroom, and to hide from sight of the hallway, goes a long way toward safety in an active shooter situation.

Advance Notice of Drills

Additionally, school *employees* should be advised in advance of planned lockdown drills. ***Students should never be advised of planned drills***. The reason schools do not ordinarily advise employees in advance of scheduled lockdown drills is because they want them to respond as they would during a real emergency. However, school employees rarely respond during an unannounced drill as they would during an actual emergency. Most simply assume that unannounced drills are drills.

The SSTF suggests that the better procedure is to advise school employees in advance of lockdown drills, with the requirement that employees follow prescribed lockdown procedures during the drills, and strict sanctions for not following those procedures.

Policy

- I. All employees must be fully aware of and trained in the school and district's safety plan and policies. Further, adherence to the plan must be monitored and strictly enforced. Failure to do so is tantamount to not having a safety policy and plan.
 - Every school district employee must receive a copy of the policy;
 - Every school district employee must be trained on the policy;
 - School safety plans must be in a user-friendly digital format and be incorporated into union contracts, employee handbooks and distributed to students;
 - There must be specific and substantial consequences for failure to follow safety policy and protocol. This must apply to all school employees, volunteers, contractors, and students.

- II. Policy and safety plan should be centered on denying unauthorized access to the school building.
 - Students and staff should not be permitted to open doors and allow access to anyone. Only authorized staff may permit entry;
 - There must be a single-point or limited number of entry points for students and staff; ideally, monitored by designated staff;
 - There should be a separate entrance for visitors. Ideally, the visitor entrance should lead into a secure area such as a retention vestibule or the front office; not into the hallways of the school thereby providing access to the entire building;
 - Clear signs should direct visitors to enter at a single designated location where they will be greeted and vetted by school personnel;
 - Except in rare circumstances, exterior doors should not be propped open. They must never be propped open and unattended;
 - School employees should be routinely designated throughout the day to check and ensure that doors are locked throughout the school;
 - *LiveSafe* and reporting suspicious behavior should be mandatory for employees and strongly encouraged for all students and parents;
 - Schools should not be used as voting locations if students are present.

- III. Policy and safety plan should promote quick and effective communication between and among staff, students, and first responders. Again, the ability to quickly and effectively put the school in lockdown is critical.
- School policy and training must emphasize the difference in **lockdown** (in school threat, students barricaded in classrooms) versus **shelter in place** (outside threat, school continues in classrooms);
 - All employees should have the authority to activate a lockdown or shelter in place;
 - Schools should use plain language to announce alerts and drills. Coded language, such as CODE RED, is strongly discouraged;
 - Through *LiveSafe* or other means, there must be the ability to have two-way communication between school personnel and law enforcement.
- IV. Policy and safety plan should promote communication between the school and parents during the emergency event and have separate areas for parents and press to report for on-going updates. This area should be sufficiently remote from the school so as to not cause traffic delays for first responders and needed apparatus.
- The security plan should include pre-designated reunification area for parents and caregivers. If not provided in advance, during a real emergency parents will inevitably arrive at the school, which has the potential to interfere with first responder efforts.
 - *LiveSafe* should be used to communicate all known and shareable information to parents and caregivers as soon as possible during a real event.

Training

- I. Lockdown drills are of critical importance and mandated by the Administrative Code. The most important lessons learned during these drills often come from trained observers invited into the school to evaluate the lockdown procedure. Local police should attend all lockdown drills. In addition to local officers, other first responders or officials from other schools may also attend.
- Lockdown drills must be scrupulously reviewed. Failure points must be determined and remedied;

- Outside observers should monitor lockdown drill performance.
- II. Consistency and integration in training and response is critical. For example, police officers, including SLEO IIIs, are mandated by Prosecutor Directive to attend annual active shooter response training. Officers are taught to carry and provide extra tourniquets to injured victims as they move toward a shooter's location. However, the effectiveness of such a practice is directly dependent upon the ability of the non-officer to appropriately apply the tourniquet. Therefore the SSTF recommends that school personnel be provided tourniquets and trained in their use.
- All SLEO III and armed school security personnel must be trained in Bergen County law enforcement's active shooter response tactics;
 - All school employees should be trained in the use of tourniquets and other means of bleeding control;
 - All three SSTF trainings should be mandatory for all school employees;
 - Trainings in all aspects of school safety should be consistent and work together;
 - Parents and students should receive training on the importance of their role in and compliance with the school's safety plan;
 - Students should be routinely engaged with age-appropriate training throughout their student careers;
 - Keep training simple and direct.

Facility Security

- I. Facility security is directly dependent upon the actual physical layout of the building itself. Retention vestibules are an extremely effective security measure; however, some schools, particularly older ones, do not allow for retention vestibules. Given the specific nature of each building and its needs, schools districts should form committees to review their specific physical security needs. Ideally, these needs should be delineated into categories of Critical, Necessary, and Ideal. They should also be further categorized by cost and time necessary to implement. Doing so will allow for a more specific priority to enhance facility security.

- Private sector service providers may be consulted in determining physical security;
- CRG mapping should be done as soon as practical;
- Where feasible, schools should be equipped with retention vestibules;
- All doors and room windows should be alphanumerically labeled; both exterior and interior;
- Exterior doors that lead into classrooms should be labeled with both the exterior door number (clockwise around the building beginning with the main entrance as door number one) and the classroom number, indicating to first responders that the door leads into a classroom not a common area;
- Installation of CCTV/Surveillance camera systems with:
 - Facial recognition and tracking capabilities.
 - Direct/real-time feed to and remotely accessible to local police.
 - Use of a *standardized* MOU governing camera use and monitoring.
- Installation of “panic alarms” which can be easily activated and directly alert local police – the recently enacted *Alyssa’s Law requires at least one such alarm*;
- Exterior strobe lights to be activated upon lock-down;
- Installation of interior strobe lights in places of high volume and where the school’s PA system is difficult to hear: cafeteria, gym, auditorium, etc.;
- Fire and building code officials must play a more active role in school security as it relates to active shooter events. Suggestions include promulgating a list of code-authorized devices, such as door locking mechanisms. Too often schools will not invest in security upgrades without prior approval of the fire and building code officials. Paradoxically, fire and building code officials have no mechanism in place to review and approve devices in advance of their purchase. The stalemate created is dangerous and unnecessary;

- Each classroom should be equipped with “stay/shelter kits” for periods of prolonged lockdown or shelter in place. Among recommended items, snacks, water, battery chargers, etc.;
- Smart technology fire alarms that require several indicators before being activated should be installed.

II. Lockdown procedures must be simple. It is impractical to give teachers a laundry list of items to accomplish during a lockdown. Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect that they can do so under considerable pressure and stress. To save precious time, school personnel may stage their rooms, setting security features in advance.

- All door windows must be equipped with devices or laminates that when activated block visual access to the interior;
- Exterior windows should be equipped with tinted laminates;
- Hard corners or safe zones should be pre-marked, readily accessible, and free from furniture;
- Consider staging classrooms so that furniture (bookcases, filing cabinets, etc.) that can be used to barricade a door in the event of an emergency are positioned near the door for quick and easy barricade placement;
- During the school day, rooms not in use and unoccupied should be left propped open, thereby providing students trapped in hallways with a place of refuge;
- Every classroom door should be closed and locked at the end of the school day;
- During fire evacuations, including drills, classroom doors should be closed behind the last person exiting the room. The door should remain unlocked and available as a place of refuge should a student or employee need to re-enter the room for safety.

III. The most important safety features in a school are locked doors and shaded windows. Doors and windows present a particular challenge but can accomplish a large part of a school safety plan once an attack has begun – denying both physical and visual access to the room.

- Classroom doors should be equipped with simple mortise pushbutton locks:

- Schools should consider technology-based locking and securing systems, such as HavenLock and similar products to enhance their safety plan.
- Classroom doors should be solid core and without windows. To the extent that current code mandates that classroom doors be equipped with windows, those windows should be narrow enough that they do not provide complete visual access to the entirety of the classroom. Further, they should be reinforced so that the interior door lock cannot be disengaged by reaching through the window. Moreover, the narrow window should be on the opposite side of the door's exterior handle;
- Student assembly rooms and other large areas must be equipped with locking doors (cafeteria, gymnasium, auditorium, library, etc.);
- Cipher/keyless locks should be used on doors to utility rooms, teachers' lounge, etc.;
- Access cards, master keys, etc., should be provided to local police;
- Push-bar doors should be equipped with quick-release straps or other "panic-lock" type mechanisms that permit them to be locked without key;
- Push-bar doors should have only one exterior pull handle to prevent chaining or other means of denying egress.

CONCLUSION

The SSTF asks all Bergen County school districts and their schools to carefully consider and implement the recommendations of this report where feasible. Once again, these recommendations are not meant to be exhaustive, and will be refined with further study and experience. The SSTF also once again urges all school districts to mandate attendance at all three of its training modules and future training modules. These modules will flesh out the recommendations made in this report and provide the basis for an ongoing conversation about how together we can make Bergen County schools safe places for students, teachers, and all school personnel.