

PINPOINTING DANGER

Trained Threat Assessment Teams Are the Best Way to Prevent Violent Incidents



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There is no foolproof inoculation that will protect a school environment from a violent outburst. However, out of the tragedies that have occurred, school security has learned many lessons and applied techniques to make schools safer. From training to physical access controls to tighter partnerships with law enforcement, schools are making changes to protect students and staff.

Security Management spoke with ASIS International School Safety & Security Council Co-Vice Chair Rebecca Bolante to discuss how schools can proactively find and respond to threats. Bolante

is a certified threat manager and holds a PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision Research in Behavioral Threat Assessment. Bolante is owner and managing director of Bolante.NET, a network of experts providing training and consultations for organizations and businesses interested in the prevention of violence and suicide as well as recovery from these events. Helping others prevent, react, and respond to natural or instigated disasters is Bolante's long-time dream and passion. Previously, Bolante worked for Chemeketa Community College, creating a new department and serving as the director of the Threat and Disaster

Resource Center. She has recently accepted the position of vice president of Oregon's Willamette Valley Chapter of ASIS.

How has the threat landscape changed for educational institutions, and what do they need to be doing?

The shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007 shocked college communities everywhere, including the college where I was working at the time. Just like that, all the work we were doing related to campus community safety suddenly morphed into something bigger than any of us could have ever imagined. It was



while scrambling to learn how to keep our own campus safe that I encountered notions of “behavioral threat assessment.” My research eventually uncovered what the experts are still recommending to mitigate targeted violence: The practice of behavioral threat assessment.

Now, I am absolutely passionate about behavioral threat assessment. It has literally driven every area of my research and practice. I’m not the only one: ASIS, the Society for Human Resource Management, U.S. Department of Education, the Secret Service, and even the FBI recognize its value and recommend people get some training in it.

We see the threat landscape continuing to evolve. As threats to campus safety increase so does the need for teams to form who will know the protocols to follow during situations of concern. Fortunately, we’re seeing more personnel involved in campus safety teams, but a common pitfall I am seeing is the sole focus on students. A lot of the teams are neglecting to address other issues or individuals that might impact the campus. Visitors, staff, vendors: The campus community encompasses a whole network of people who need to be considered when developing threat assessment plans.

How would you define behavioral threat assessment?

In a nutshell: Behavioral threat assessment is a proactive approach requiring a comprehensive review of the situation, the context, and the subject’s psycho-social and

behavioral dynamics. Multidisciplinary teams are trained to identify, assess, manage, and mitigate situations potentially leading to targeted violence.

What does training in behavioral threat assessment entail?

Training needs to be current and based on best practices and research. Training should also include components of working through mock cases with threat assessment teams. It’s critical for anyone practicing how to assess and manage cases of behavioral threats to do so with seasoned threat assessment professionals. Training in behavioral threat assessment should also include opportunities for the team in training to work through the protocols for assigning, documenting, tracking, and reporting on situations of concern. The training is quite comprehensive, but crucial to support outcomes.

Is it practical or reasonable for all education campuses to have a trained behavioral threat assessment team?

Absolutely! This should be a high priority for campuses. Any newly established team that has had little or no training is opening itself up to issues of liability. Plus, a team without training gives the community a false sense of security. There can also be a lot of confusion about “who-does-what-and-how-we-do-it” for behavioral threat assessment teams who have not had professional training.

What are the types of things you look for when trying to identify threats?

We look for certain warning behaviors, but we also look holistically at contextual factors—at the big

picture. It’s not enough to assess the situation based only on the warning behaviors you see in a person. That’s why having a trained team of professionals analyze the situation in its entirety and then compose the assessment and management plan is fundamental to the process of violence prevention. There are ways to keep individuals off the pathway to violence. We look for ways to provide support for those individuals to prevent them from going down the wrong path. I’m thinking of the example where a student is having a rough time connecting with others at school; they’re having a difficult time coping, obsessing over ways to get back at others who’ve done them wrong. Maybe they’re re-researching past incidents of mass violence at schools. Getting help and support for this student is critical, but it has to be done thoughtfully, very carefully.

What might a thoughtful approach to supporting this student look like?

The approaches to supporting students vary depending on the context of the situation. This is where it is critical that the threat assessment team members have current training and work on these cases in a holistic fashion using a multidisciplinary approach. As the team members find out details about the person’s life, it could be as simple as getting the student connected with a student club or event that’s of interest to them. As the team monitors the situation of concern, they should be reworking the management plan to best support the student as needed. Does the student need a bus pass? Some counseling? Are there any grievances that need addressing? There’s a lot to consider.

Are there other things you're looking for to identify threats?

We look for warning signs: Hopelessness, homicidal ideations, lack of coping skills. We look at their mental health. Are there any upcoming events we need to be aware of? Any indications of leakage about a potential plan of attack? Leakage can be any kind of communication: verbal, through social media, in writing samples, etc., that reveals clues about a planned attack. Leakage can occur in different forms through various outlets.

We are also looking for pre-attack-related behaviors—things like researching or acquiring weapons, mentally rehearsing the attack through art or multimedia, stalking. We look to see if the student has a plan for violence against a specific individual or group. And we look for motives as well because the more plausible and detailed the plan, the greater the risk for this individual to follow through and carry out a targeted act of violence. Of course, sometimes the plan needs to be flexible in that everything is in place except the triggering event: someone teases or rejects the individual or the individual suffers a sudden loss. And that's when the violence occurs.

Are there things you do to proactively identify threats as opposed to encouraging people to report activities?

We encourage marketing and campaigning for campuses and communities. Everyone knows the

phrase “see something, say something,” and the goal is to reinforce that often so it actually happens.

One challenge I've seen is that the campaign materials are successful, but the team isn't completely formed, or the members on the team lack a full understanding and training around threat assessment. It is one thing to have a team or protocol or process in place, but if the team members don't have the training or they aren't following best practices, it gives everyone a false sense of security, as I mentioned earlier.

How do you assess the credibility and severity of threats?

Teams should have the credibility issue factored into their threat assessment protocol when conducting their investigations. As information is being gathered, it's important to look at the credibility of the information and carefully validate the facts.

How do you work with local law enforcement throughout this process?

Law enforcement is an essential piece of the threat assessment process. I encourage teams to find key law enforcement partners who really understand behavioral threat assessment. When working with teams, it is sometimes assumed that all law enforcement officials know how to work a threat assessment case. This is not true as the threat assessment process is a specialty area that requires training and understanding, even for law enforcement. If you have someone helping you with a case who doesn't understand the various aspects of threat assessment, it can actually work against the threat management plan. It can actually trigger or exacerbate a dangerous situation.

As someone leading a behavioral threat assessment team for a campus, what questions can I ask to

determine if the law enforcement partners understand behavioral threat assessment principles?

Forming relationships with local law enforcement liaisons is critical for effective behavioral threat assessment. Just make sure your law enforcement liaison has the training, the understanding, and familiarity with best practices for assessing and managing a situation of concern. It's easy to assume everyone in law enforcement has sufficient knowledge and experience in this field, but this isn't necessarily true. So be sure the team composition includes an active member or liaison from law enforcement who is up-to-date on threat assessment. Even if they are current in best practices, we still encourage teams to invite law enforcement and other partners—mental health, victim advocates, others—to participate in the team trainings. It makes a big difference when it comes to building trust, plus it keeps everyone current with threat assessment procedures and protocols.

How do you continually learn and improve, both in identifying threats and making decisions about what to do about those threats?

We often conduct after-action reviews to see if there were warning signs or supportive practices that were missed. Staying current as a practitioner with research is also very important. Social media is one of the areas we are constantly retooling and keeping pace with the most recent trends, which are constantly shifting. Keeping alert and aware of what's going on out there is the key to our success.

Lastly, I cannot emphasize enough that to prevent targeted acts of violence, every business and institution needs to have on board a team of trained professionals in behavioral threat assessment.

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