Conducting Threat Assessments

Predicting targeted violence is a daunting challenge. We have seen a shift from "profiling" to viewing this behavior as highly contextual and not subject to a "type." The US Secret Service has extensive experience in preventing targeted violence - namely by protecting national leaders from assassination. They routinely conduct assessments of those who pose a threat to determine risk and take action before violence occurs.

According to the National Threat Assessment Center, three principles underlie threat assessments for targeted violence:

- Targeted violence is planned and follows a discernable process of thinking and behavior.
- Targeted violence is situational and contextual. Interactions between the subject and targets, past stressors, and current events play a significant role.
- Attack-related behaviors are important to identify and analyze. Planning and logistical preparation are typical, and subjects often even discuss their plans.

When conducting threat assessments, it is crucial to gather information from multiple sources such as interviews with the subject, material created or possessed by the subject, and various records involving the subject. An interagency social support team is exactly the sort of tool to put the pieces together in a timely and accurate manner.

Typical information to gather: identifying information, background information, and the subject's current circumstances. Specific things that may be relevant include: stability of living and employment arrangements, quality of relationships and personal support, recent setbacks, substance abuse, criminal activity, history of violence, and educational background.

Also consider attack-related behaviors, such as:

- an unusual interest in instances of targeted violence
- evidence of ideas or plans to attack a specific target
- communicating inappropriate interest or plans to attack a target
- following a target or visiting a possible site of attack
- approaching a target or protected setting

While conducting threat assessments, it is also wise to investigate the subject's motives. Motives vary widely depending on the nature and type of violence but are almost always directly linked to target selection including who is at risk and the degree of risk.

Lastly, target selection itself is also important to threat assessment. Be aware of how a potential attacker's interest may shift, indicating a progression through potential targets, and note why those targets were discounted.


Del Norte School District

The Del Norte School District in the San Luis Valley began working with the SCSS Initiative in August of 2000. Since that time, an SCSS planning team composed of school personnel, parents, and community members has met to determine areas of need and to set goals based on the SCSS survey results of students, staff, parents, and community members' perceptions of safety. The driving force behind the SCSS planning team at large has been a smaller subcommittee composed of Del Norte public school staff who have met informally throughout the school year to further structure this safe schools endeavor.

Both Underwood Elementary and Del Norte Middle School have been active partners in the Initiative. Serving students in the 3rd through 8th grades, school personnel are involved in planning team efforts and various trainings offered through the Initiative. In addition, Underwood Elementary incorporated some of their school accountability personnel into the planning team efforts which prompted the rewriting of their School Crisis Plan to reflect current needs and circumstances.

Central High School

Central High School, located in Pueblo, has approximately 1100 students and over 100 faculty and staff members. The SCSS Planning Team has been active throughout regional trainings, conferences, and meetings. In late 2001, they created a streamlined system for sharing disciplinary reports among administration, faculty, and school resource officers.

Central recently received a Colorado Safe School grant which was used to install additional lighting in the parking lot and hallways, as well as funding for crisis management backpacks. Each teacher receives a backpack with the modified crisis management plan, post-position assignments, and crisis response items. Central is a historic building that poses several structural challenges to safety.
Both Underwood Elementary and Del Norte Middle School received the most benefit from the information collected while surveying the students about their experiences at school. While some of this information confirmed already suspected issues, both schools were enlightened about strengths and challenges that exist in their school communities. Survey data showed that students were struggling with appropriate behaviors; consequently, both schools have joined the group of sites that will implement the Bully Proofing Your School program in the fall semester of 2002.

For more information about Del Norte’s activities and achievements, please contact them at (719) 657-4040.

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They are pleased to complete upgrades as funding becomes available, and the school continues to find ways to improve safety for students and staff.

The school also used funding from SCSS to decorate their new student lounge - the “Hard Rock Cafe” - where students have access to peer mentoring in addition to counseling from school social workers and nurses.

For more details about Central High School and the work they do, please contact them at (719) 549-7300.