

Webinar Transcript

Best Practices in School Safety

Hosted by the NGA and NCJA
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Elise Simonsen:

Hello, my name is Elise Simonsen. I'm a policy analyst with the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices in the homeland security and public safety division. On the public safety team, we support two networks of governor staff. First, the criminal justice policy advisors are individuals that may be cabinet secretaries, members of the governor's legal team or policy staff, and every state has a CJPA. Our second network is our public safety consortium, and in about 32 states, a governor appointed cabinet secretary, a commissioner or director or public safety is the central authority overseeing an array of public safety functions within the executive members' lead criminal justice agencies in the state, and are typically appointed by the governor, and work for the governor's policy advisor, or are located in the Department of Public Safety. So today, I will be presenting a webinar on state trends in school safety. And here at NGA, we just wanted to thank the National Criminal Justice Association and the Bureau of Justice Assistance at DOJ for inviting us to present on this webinar. So we'll go ahead and get started here.

So first up, wanting to talk about some recent key takeaways on school safety and homeland security, but before I get into the, not that I'll get into the themes keeping the end trends in states. So on this slide, on the left-hand side, you will see colorful blocks, and they are categories of intervention that states have tried. And then on the right-hand side is the accompanying relationship to different tactical approaches of strategies that states have used, and various states have either promoted or carrying out these themes. So previously, they did not necessarily have an organized theory on how to coordinate and collaborate across agencies to address school safety, and many departments are really working in silos. While these takeaways listed here are not exhaustive, and they're also not uniform from state to state, but many states do incorporate some of these key takeaways into their school safety planning.

So in that first box in the emergency management framework, which ranges from prevention to recovery approaches states might take include measuring and improving school climate, conducting behavioral threat assessments, developing emergency operation plans, and conducting emergency response drills and safety audits. Then in the comprehensive targeted violence prevention plans, some of those same approaches emerge from the emergency management framework as can be seen on this slide. Then in that next key takeaway in that gray box, you'll see the behavioral health threat assessment and early intervention. Tactical approaches may include targeting local behavioral threat assessment or setting up mobile applications or tip lines for anonymous reporting. And then in that final key takeaway, collaboration and coordination. Strategies may include establishing school safety coordinations, or even hiring or training SROs or school resource officers. Each of these approaches identified may roll up into multiple different themes.

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They can be interdisciplinary and cross-cutting approaches that tap into really more than one theme, or one or more themes. For example, threat assessment, which rolls up into multiple themes of improving mental health assessment and identifying threats early, prevent, prepare, respond, and recover as well as comprehensive targeted violence prevention plans. And again, as I mentioned, this is by no means an exhaustive list of approaches or themes, just trends that we have identified. So moving beyond those key takeaways, just wanting to set up some key themes for this webinar today. We'll be going over four key themes which are school safety governance and approaches, prevention efforts, planning a personnel, and preparedness and response. So moving into that, first, school safety governance and multidisciplinary approaches.

So mirroring the approach the NGA has taken on school safety, governors are convening multidisciplinary task forces, subcabinet groups, advisory boards, etc, just to advance an agenda on providing safer schools in their states. States have begun partnerships across disciplines such as public safety, education and health. States have also established taskforces or working groups, and these states may submit reports or recommendations to the governor. These partnerships have led to comprehensive approaches that include physical security, preparedness, planning and response strategies, positive social and emotional development, school-based interventions, and family/school community partnerships. A common way that states are framing all of their holistic approaches is through the lens of emergency management life cycle, which is prevent, prepare, respond, and recover. Here on this slide is one example of a holistic effort in practice. So this is a model out of New Hampshire, and they developed this through the school safety preparedness taskforce, which is assembled under homeland security and emergency management agency, and is spearheaded by the homeland security advisor there in New Hampshire.

The idea of this is to provide programming at every step of the pathway to prevent or reduce the impact of violence. It is essential to put significant effort into school culture and social and emotional learning to improve the lives of youth, and try to prevent violence from occurring at the outset. However, it is essential to recognize that kids may fall through the cracks, and prepare for that contingency, and that's what you'll see here in this stepwise approach, on that yellow line. So at the point where an at risk youth may be toying with violence or mobilization, New Hampshire also puts behavioral health intervention teams in place to create individualized plans for reducing the chance of violence. And ultimately, they recognize the need to reduce the impact of violence, if unfortunately, it does occur through hardening schools and enhancing security, and also through ensuring coordinated practice response efforts with plans for reuniting families.

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So moving to the next key theme. Now that we've reviewed the school safety governance and multidisciplinary approaches, the next key theme is prevention effort. So the first prevention effort I will be stressing is the behavioral health threat assessment, and this can be a key tool for prevention methods to identify, offset, deescalate, or stop violent behavior before it occurs. The United States Secret Service has provided seminal guidance for states on how to conduct them, and what several states have adopted, and many are actually in the process of adopting. In many states, NGA has been seeing the establishment of multidisciplinary behavioral health threat teams that require the following baseline with respect to experience. They're requiring counseling, school administration, instruction, and law enforcement. Actually, on the side here, we have a state-specific example, which is Virginia. Virginia was the first state to have the statutory mandates to create a behavioral health threat assessment team. Virginia collects significant data from its school on its behavioral threat assessment teams.

Most significantly, they're reporting a reduction in suspension, bullying, and has seen that 96 percent of referrals to the behavioral threat assessment team, and the threat was averted and no violence occurred. Another prevention on state trend would be the tip lines or apps. NGA's also seeing an increase in the creation of anonymous tip lines for school safety threats. This is based on data demonstrating that in the vast majority of school violence incidents, the perpetrators often made their peers aware of their intentions. In 81 percent of cases, at least one person knew of a school shooter's intentions, and 59 percent of cases, more than one person knew. So in order to encourage reporting, states have created anonymous tip lines in platforms where they feel students are encouraged to say something if they see something is wrong. On the side here, have two different state-specific examples, both from Michigan and Colorado. Michigan and Colorado have had their anonymous tip line operating for years now, and both programs have seen significant increase in the number of tips that they receive. Now, the third key theme that will be discussed is planning and personnel.

So in planning a personnel, the first topic is school safety plans, or school safety planning. While it's essential to emphasize prevention efforts, homeland security professionals also need to ensure that there are plans in place to minimize the impact of violence if it does occur. In the homeland security discipline, creating emergency operations plan is fundamental. It's fundamental practice of the discipline that is applied to all types of hazards. Taking an all-hazards approach to school safety is important to make sure that programming can benefit a wide range of disasters that may occur in schools. These disasters can be fires, extreme weather events, it doesn't have to be just an active shooter scenario. It's important to note that school safety plans and their

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development maintenance publications and oversight vary greatly among states, and wildly even amongst schools. So NGA has found several common practices or themes within school safety plans, and those are collaborations with first responders requiring submission to a central authority for review, making plans available for school officials and first responders online, and also encouraging MSMOUs with nonpublic schools.

Certain states have begun, begun requiring schools to have school safety plans, and these plans are then provided to local law enforcement, and can be reviewed annually by school boards. Alright, so next in planning and personnel, school resource officers. School resource officers, or SROs, are sworn or certified law enforcements that are assigned to a school. 36 states authorized these SROs, but ultimately, it's decided at the local level. The role of an SRO can vary greatly. They can function as a first responder, a liaison, and in some situations, even function as an informal counselor. But SROs really should participate in the community policing approach to establish a safe environment for students. Some considerations for SROs would be to evaluate existing SRO situations and consider increasing training requiring certification, changing selection protocols, or even developing performance metrics for SROs. Alright, and the final theme for today is preparedness and response. So the first topic in preparedness and response is school hardening. In regards to target hardening for schools, states do have a limited role in requiring security.

School divisions generally determine the design of a building on a school campus. They can provide guidance based on federal practices though, and they can also encourage school assessment as well as provide funding contingency based on adherence to requirements. States that do opt for funding generally provide this through two avenues. They can provide it through a one-time capital funding grant, or through loans permitting localities to raise the levies for the project. Alright. Also within preparedness and response, we have safety audits. Audits can be varied in how they occur. Their frequency and how they should be conducted is something, again, that varies state by state. Many states do use a self-audit model that is conducted by school staff. Additionally, the outcomes of those audits are another area to consider, and how those recommendations will impact changes made to the school safety plans, facilities, and other items being evaluated.

And our final preparedness and response is drills and exercises. So drills and exercises are used to prepare students and staff for various emergencies, and this can include fire, inclement weather, and lockdowns. More recently though, some schools have begun active shooter drills. Just to highlight some states that we've seen, some states are doing no notice drills, and that is where the drill will occur, but only limited school staff and local authorities know that the event is a

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drill. Should be noted though, that this is a bit of a controversial practice. Other states focus on situational awareness due to the variety of ways an active shooter incident could occur. Drills may include staff asking students to find an exit and leaving in an orderly fashion. Alright, so that wraps up preparedness and response as well as this webinar in general, so thank you so much for your time.