



LESSONS LEARNED

From School Crises and Emergencies



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TARGETED VIOLENCE ON A SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUS: EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS

In February 2010 a biology professor at the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) took out a gun and opened fire during a departmental faculty meeting, killing three of her colleagues and critically injuring three others. The same month a fourth-grade teacher at an elementary school in Knoxville, Tenn., was informed by the principal that his contract would not be renewed. He later returned to the school office with a gun and shot both the principal and assistant principal, leaving both injured and the principal partially paralyzed. In each of the school shooting incidents, school or university personnel were directly involved as both victims and perpetrators of targeted violence resulting in injury or loss of life and serious emotional trauma.

Ensuring a safe and supportive work environment for employees is a key function of human resources (HR) professionals. As such, HR departments within schools and institutions of higher education (IHEs) can serve as valuable resources and contributing partners to higher education and school emergency management efforts.

This *Lessons Learned* publication identifies key lessons from the UAH and Knoxville shooting incidents, emphasizing the role of HR managers and the collaboration between HR and other key partners. It discusses how school officials applied lessons from the two tragedies to reshape their emergency management and personnel practices across the four phases of school emergency management (Prevention and Mitigation, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery). The content of this brief draws from the experiences of those directly involved in the incident response

The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) is a public university with approximately 7,700 students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. The university employs more than 330 full-time faculty members.

Inskip Elementary School in Knoxville, Tenn., is one of 86 public schools in the Knox County Schools district in Knoxville, Tenn. The school district supports an enrollment of 56,000 students and employs 8,000 school personnel.

and recovery efforts, including UAH Emergency Management Coordinator Kevin Bennett and Assistant Vice President of Human Resources Laurel Long, and Knox County Schools Executive Director of Human Resources Kathy Sims.

LESSONS FOR EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FROM A HUMAN RESOURCES PERSPECTIVE

Prior to the February 2010 school shootings, both UAH and Knox County Schools had emergency management plans that outlined procedures for responding to emergencies on their campuses. As these events unfolded and in the days following the incident at UAH, school officials became aware of the need for improvements to their procedure plans and emergency management structures to ensure the safety and security of their school campuses. In the case of Knox County Schools a complete security review indicated the school system needed to strengthen some areas in the hiring and human resource management processes. From their experiences, the following key lessons emerged that have led to important changes to school and university policies and

procedures for preventing and mitigating risks for violence, preparing for and responding to campus incidents, and promoting long-term school or campus recovery.

PREVENTION-MITIGATION

School officials can better prevent acts of targeted violence involving school personnel when they understand the potential risks and take proactive steps to address them.

There are many factors that present risks for targeted violence among personnel in school settings, including reactions to disciplinary actions or terminations, personal conflicts with supervisors or colleagues, and grudges over real or imagined grievances. Risks can also arise when an employee has difficult personal circumstances, such as family conflicts and financial or legal problems. (Rugala 2004).

For UAH Emergency Management Coordinator Kevin Bennett, one of the biggest lessons from the campus shooting was the realization that “it can happen here.” Bennett recalled some of his initial challenges in garnering support for his emergency management program. He recounted one interaction with a high-ranking college official who had asked him why he should spend time on something that was a statistical improbability. The events at UAH and Knoxville together demonstrate that, while rare, incidents of targeted violence do occur, and that failing to acknowledge this reality can leave schools underprepared.

In both UAH and the Knox County Schools district, a critical strategy for preventing future violence involved establishing a formal threat assessment process for employees. At UAH school officials re-evaluated existing behavioral threat assessment protocols. The end result of this assessment was the expansion of the core group of university officials responsible for evaluating reports of behavior that had raised concerns. This expanded team, the Behavioral Evaluation and Threat Assessment Team (BETA), is a multidisciplinary group of professionals that

represents HR, emergency management, and several other departments within the university. The team now has greater responsibility and more comprehensive guidelines for assessing, identifying, and evaluating potential risk behaviors among school personnel and developing an appropriate response to managing concerns. As a result of BETA's formation, Vice President of Human Resources Laurel Long feels that the university has a much more proactive, planned, and coordinated approach to assessing risk and a more heightened awareness of potential threats to the campus community.

Officials in the Knox County Schools district also came to recognize the importance of prevention and mitigation for managing risk factors among school personnel. According to Executive Director of Human Resources Kathy Sims, “One of the first questions we asked ourselves was: did we overlook something in the hiring process?” Following the shooting incident, the district superintendent commissioned a Safety Review Committee involving working groups from school security and HR to review and analyze the incident and make recommendations. The first step taken by the committee was to examine more closely school hiring procedures and practices. Although prior background checks on the shooting suspect had not uncovered any concerns, the review process did help identify other areas where future pre-hire screening practices could be strengthened. The district since made significant changes to its personnel policies and electronic application system to require more thorough reference checks and screening of potential new hires. The district also developed an employee threat assessment protocol to identify, assess, and manage threats in cases of personnel misconduct and activated it on several occasions in 2011. The Knoxville shooting incident also resulted in increased coordination between HR staff and school security personnel to manage highly sensitive issues, such as job lay-offs, and led to the development of proactive prevention policies outlining expectations for behavior within the school setting.

PREPAREDNESS

All key stakeholders and members of the incident command should have well-defined roles that they clearly understand and practice.

Another major lesson shared by the UAH Emergency Management Coordinator and HR lead was that “there isn’t any substitute for good planning.” Prior to the February 2010 incident, university officials had identified an emergency management operations group, or EMOG, consisting of key incident command personnel, such as the emergency management coordinator and chief of police, and representatives from a cross-section of other campus departments, including HR and facilities and operations. There was also a separate policy group composed of high-ranking university officials, including the university president, which was responsible for advising the EMOG on policy issues. Prior to the shooting incident, there was not a lot of meeting or interaction among group members as a whole, and members did not have a clear understanding of their incident command roles and responsibilities. According to Bennett, “There were a few people who didn’t even realize that they were members of the EMOG.”

HR Vice President Long confirmed that although her HR department had been part of the emergency planning group, there was no clearly articulated role for HR in supporting the group’s efforts. Bennett suggested that although a plan was in place, it was not very thorough and did not clearly identify how different roles fit together or even whether a given role would be assigned under a certain scenario. Bennett also recognized the need for more extensive incident command training and more exercises, acknowledging that “during the event was not the time for everybody to be learning what their roles were, and trying to flesh out how their pieces should go.”

Since the incident, the entire EMOG has begun to meet on a regular basis. The group has now been reorganized and includes representatives from

all areas of campus life, from academic research to facilities management, and it encompasses the policymaking group. According to Bennett, “We have been able to catch everyone up to speed on where we’d like to be and to get their buy-in on initiatives, so that they are directly involved in developing, reviewing, and approving policy.” Bennett believes that bringing these stakeholders together and actively engaging them in the preparedness process have heightened awareness of the emergency management program and been instrumental in clarifying individual roles.

Similarly, the incident in the Knox County School District and the resulting changes to school personnel management practices have also impacted the nature of collaboration among HR, emergency management, and other district departments, and have helped cultivate a stronger working relationship between HR and school security. HR Executive Director Sims noted the value of this collaboration: “In school systems, especially in the central office, they [school administrators] sometimes work in silos and don’t always communicate effectively. This incident has heightened our attention to collaboration and sharing of expertise, knowledge, and experiences to enhance what we do.”

RESPONSE

An effective incident response requires a tested and reliable plan for communications, which HR can support in important ways.

The school shootings at UAH and in Knox County were resolved quickly due, in large part, to a well-executed tactical response. In each event the suspect was apprehended quickly without further violence. However, school officials at both UAH and in Knoxville encountered challenges to communications surrounding the incident response that reflected a need for more thorough preparation and testing of response capabilities. At UAH, both Bennett and Long recalled several challenges affecting communication with members of the emergency management

incident command group, the media, and the broader public. According to Bennett, “When it happened and we needed to start reaching out to the leadership team quickly, we realized that we didn’t have all of the necessary contact information. We were calling each others’ cell phones and leaving messages trying to locate people and phone numbers.” Long remembers receiving several calls from the command center with requests for information from HR. “They were having me pull files and records and locate emergency contact information.”

The university also experienced challenges with its notification system to inform students and faculty on campus of the safety threat. Federal legislation requires institutions of higher education (IHEs) to establish an emergency response plan and to provide immediate notice to the campus as soon as an emergency is confirmed, unless it would compromise response efforts (Drysdale et al 2010). According to Bennett, “One of the challenges we ran into that day was that the two people who were authorized to trigger the UA alert system were involved in the immediate response to the crisis.” Although the immediate threat was short-lived because the suspect was apprehended quickly, there was no back-up plan to send out the UA alerts more quickly. The overall scale of the incident and the media frenzy surrounding the event were also unanticipated, resulting in the failure of the computer server and website. “We were unable to post information to our site because the volume was crashing our server,” recalled Bennett. “We were later told that the university was receiving tens of thousands of hits per hour and the system was just not designed to handle it.”

As an outcome of the experience, the EMOG now maintains an up-to-date list of contact information that is accessible to all its members. The university also improved its emergency communications plan to include a thorough and robust emergency notification process and has made sure that personnel are trained and authorized to issue an alert. In addition, the

university upgraded its online system to expand server capacity.

The Knox County Schools district also made improvements to its communications plan as a result of the shooting incident on its school campus. Kathy Sims, the executive director of HR, recalled some of the challenges of quickly assembling emergency contact information in the immediate aftermath of the crisis. Since the incident, the district has developed a remote database that provides direct access to the district employee information system to facilitate retrieval of information.

RECOVERY

The recovery process is essential to the healing of the school community and requires a plan with clear guidance.

Recovery also became a critical focus for HR professionals at both UAH and the elementary school in Knoxville as they sought to address the emotional needs of students and staff and restore a positive learning environment. In the immediate aftermath, however, each found that there was no clearly articulated plan for their recovery efforts and they would need to craft one as quickly as possible.

According to Sims, following the Knoxville school shooting, the first role for HR was to consult with the superintendent to establish a plan for the return to school. HR consulted with Student Support Services staff, guidance counselors, and other departments within the district to establish a plan for moving forward. “We hired a retired administrator to support the interim principal and brought in additional security. We were just trying to make our school climate as normal as possible.”

At UAH, Assistant Vice President of Human Resources Laurel Long understood that “people were not going to be able to give 100 percent to the institution if they were not able to recover properly.” She also recognized the importance

Strong leadership sets a positive tone for the recovery process.

Reflecting on the university shooting, both Bennett and Long credited the UAH president with providing the necessary leadership for effectively managing the crisis and setting the tone for how the school campus would heal and move forward. Bennett said, “We may have not known exactly what we needed to do, but he [the president] brought all the right people to the table and provided leadership around the end goal, which was to navigate the university safely through the crisis.” The president encouraged staff to use available counseling resources to care for themselves emotionally and then led by example. “He didn’t just remind us, he did it himself,” stated Long. When the incident was over, the president sent written notes to people thanking them for their roles in the response to the crisis. Long concluded, “It let people know that he was aware of what had happened and that he was paying attention. He affirmed people in their roles.”

—Kevin Bennett, emergency management coordinator, UAH

—Laurel Long, assistant vice president of human resources, UAH

of dedicating sufficient “time and the right amount of resources for that healing to take place.” In the days immediately following the incident, however, Long found that there was no clearly defined plan outlining a specific role for HR in the recovery effort. She observed that “in a workplace shooting, people start losing their sense of security in their environment, and it adds to that stress when you have to develop the whole response as you go.”

She explained that her biggest concerns from an HR perspective were making sure that the university was addressing the needs of the victims and their families and providing for the emotional healing of the campus. This was achieved by partnering with the university counseling center to make sure that counseling services were in place. HR also assumed an advisory role in developing new policies to support the immediate

and long-term recovery for school personnel. This included establishing policies to grant leave for faculty members to attend the funerals of their colleagues or to take time off “if they felt too raw to come back to work.”

From the tragedy, Long realized the importance of being prepared for the long haul. “When the police and the emergency responders leave, when everything is cleaned-up and sanitized,” shared Long, “it goes on, it doesn’t stop, and you have to have a plan in place for continuing to deal with the crisis.” Since the Huntsville shooting, HR continues to maintain weekly interaction with the families of the victims who were severely injured and to offer support.

THE LEGACY OF THE UAH AND KNOXVILLE SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

The school and university communities in Huntsville, Ala., and Knoxville, Tenn., continue to feel the impact of the violence that struck their school campuses. In each case, however, the responses to these incidents and lessons learned in their aftermath have served as an important impetus for reshaping school and university policies and practices around HR management and emergency planning.

The incident in Knoxville led to important changes in how the district screens and evaluates new hires and how it identifies and assesses personnel risks. It also prompted far-reaching changes made at the state legislative level that aim to mitigate risks associated with the timing of personnel lay-offs and that expand the rights of school officials to improve detection of potential threats among school employees.

School officials at the UAH made substantial changes to the organization of its emergency management operations group to broaden collaboration, clarify each member’s role, and more actively engage members in planning. In addition, UAH addressed specific elements of its communications plan and infrastructure to strengthen its communications processes.

Like Knoxville, UAH also instituted a new threat assessment procedure to assess, identify, and manage more effectively potential concerns among employees. The university and its emergency management and HR departments remain committed to the long-term recovery and emotional healing of its campus and the continuing support of those severely injured through the trauma.

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RESOURCES

"Key Principles for School Security in Planning For Reductions in Force (RIFs)"
http://rems.ed.gov/docs/ED_KeyPrinciples_RIFs.pdf

Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates
<http://rems.ed.gov/docs/ThreatAssessmentinSchools.pdf>

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