# LESSONS LEARNED
## From School Crises and Emergencies

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TA CENTER

# RETRAUMATIZATION: HOW ONE COLLEGE CAMPUS RESPONDED TO EMOTIONAL REINJURY

*Social science research has revealed what those who have lived through disasters already know: there are two dimensions to experiencing a disaster, both of which can be traumatic. The first is the disaster itself, which includes danger, destruction, and death. The second dimension is that anyone who survives the disaster event is then left in a changed world, one in which destruction of the physical environment, disruption and even rupture of the social environment of family and neighborhood, and often displacement, destabilize or even destroy one's sense of self, safety, and normalcy.*
–Trauma and Retraumatization resource paper, After the Crisis Initiative (2006)

April 16, 2007 (4/16), is an indelible date in the history of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). On that day, a single student gunman took the lives of 32 individuals on the school's campus in what is the single most deadly shooting incident of its kind in U.S. history. This tragedy affected the university, its small community of Blacksburg, Va., and communities throughout the country and world. The event itself, including response and prevention-mitigation measures, is still being analyzed more than two years later. What continues to endure is the psychological impact and trauma experienced by the individuals working, living and studying at and around Virginia Tech. In the years since the shootings, the psychological and emotional impact of the tragedy continues to be evident as additional events have occurred that have reawakened or amplified the feelings associated with trauma. This *Lessons Learned* document will discuss the experiences of some members of the Virginia Tech community following the events of 4/16 as they work to rebuild their community despite additional trauma. In addition, this document will provide insights regarding how other colleges, universities or local education agencies can prepare for mitigating the impact of retraumatization following painful or disturbing events.

## The Incidents

Ellen Plummer, assistant provost at Virginia Tech, explains that the traumatic events that have impacted the Virginia Tech community over recent years began prior to the violence perpetrated on 4/16. On the first day of classes of the 2006–07 academic year, a young man escaped from a local jail, resulting in an overnight manhunt and the shooting deaths of a security guard and a deputy sheriff.

Later that same academic year the shootings of April 2007 devastated the university community. Being a geographically isolated university in a small town where everyone is connected helped to galvanize an existing strong sense of school spirit. In addition, "The tragedy impacted the community in a way that is unique to Virginia Tech. The shootings occurred close to the geographic heart of the campus, and most of the victims were students murdered in a residence hall or classrooms." Sadly, the Virginia Tech community, while making strong efforts to recover from the enormous 4/16 tragedy, was struck again—and again—by additional, traumatic events.

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- In the winter of 2007, a Virginia Tech graduate student decapitated another graduate student in the Graduate Life Center coffee shop during business hours in front of other students and customers.
- That same winter, an undergraduate student committed suicide in the Blacksburg, Va., Target store parking lot.
- In August 2009, just as the academic year was to begin, two undergraduate students were found murdered 10 miles from campus in a national forest; this crime is still unsolved.
- Later that fall, a young woman—the daughter of a Virginia Tech faculty member—traveled to a concert in a nearby town and never returned; her remains were found four months later, likely the victim of a crime, also still unsolved.

Plummer describes the collective sentiments felt following these events, as she experienced and witnessed them in the community. "Over the last three years, we have had these series of violent, dramatic crimes occur within a few months of each other, one on top of another…. It is hard not to feel that your institution has some sort of curse—how could our luck be this bad?" Following each of these subsequent events, as she describes them, the university and community were shocked, traumatized, and stunned.  The community's sense of safety was violated, she said, and these events triggered a sense of collective dismay. "There are ways in which the cumulative impact of these episodes have marked our psyche," she explains.

## Retraumatization

According to Trauma and Retraumatization, a paper produced by the After the Crisis Initiative, numerous studies indicate that experiencing trauma heightens a person's vulnerability to experiencing trauma from subsequent painful events. The individual may repeat the experience of going through the stages of response and recovery over and over again, even for the initial event. The impact of experiencing traumatic events includes responses such as isolation, hypervigilance, substance abuse, dissociation, self-injury, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, hearing voices, risky sexual behavior, and other psychological, emotional or behavioral reactions that may begin as coping mechanisms and end up as compounding problems, says the report.

## Lessons Learned

Based on the experience of some of the members of the Virginia Tech community in responding to the multiple traumas that have occurred over recent years, there are several lessons learned to be shared with other organizations in their planning and response to similar situations.

- ***Traumas will occur—it is the relationships forged while coping with and recovering from the aftermath that makes it bearable.***

Despite best intentions—or the best laid emergency management plans—emergencies will happen, says Plummer. "We are still stunned when something bad happens; as we feel we've used up our quota. It is easy to get exhausted and resentful, and question why things are happening, and it chisels away at one's confidence in a very insidious way." Maintaining and nurturing relationships across and within the complex organizational structures within the university has been important to Virginia Tech's collective ability to respond to emergencies and tragedies. While having a structured system of response—such as the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command System (ICS)—is needed in an emergency, she said, it is the relationships cultivated between people that help promote long-term recovery, and personal and organizational resilience when something traumatic happens.

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"I was in Richmond when the woman was murdered in the graduate life center's coffee shop," explained Plummer. "I received an alert on my cell phone while conducting a training. I handed things over to my co-facilitator, and I started making phone calls. Because of my relationships and work associated with the university's response to 4/16, I was able to call people and collaborate to mobilize resources for the family of the victim." The best preparation for these situations, then, is to make sure people have the opportunity to work together in advance of any potential emergencies or traumatic events, to get to know each other in various ways, and cherish these relationships, says Plummer.

- ***Feelings and behaviors that arise due to trauma may be subtle.***

When asked, as she often is, whether she is traumatized, Plummer states that she has experienced feelings of trauma in "ways that are not dramatic." At the individual and organizational levels, the feelings and behaviors that might be associated with experiencing trauma may be expressed in subtle ways that are difficult to ascribe to the trauma. Individuals may want to distance themselves from the memory and feelings of the traumatic event and might not recognize their reactions to everyday stressors as being trauma related. Additionally, the converse may be true, when normal, everyday stressors occur. People in this collective who have experienced significant traumatic events may respond to these everyday stressors with dramatic reactions. "I think some people's trauma may be triggered by something as routine as their performance evaluation. It is not just the beheadings in a coffee shop or the violence on and off campus—of course, these are traumatic. It is the routine stuff that I think we aren't as conscious of. We forget there are some of us that are still struggling to cope. We are ascribing reasons for the manifestation of trauma symptoms to other things, but not the traumas….Nonetheless, it is the nondramatic stuff that causes the surprise reactions."

- ***Implement a case management approach for providing services in the educational system framework.***

Since 4/16, Virginia Tech has worked to change its student and employee services systems to implement a case management approach. "If there is anything institutions can do to replicate in their student and employee services areas what nurses and mental health workers have been doing for decades," said Plummer, "it will really help." This involves basic case management that includes conducting assessments, networking services, and communicating across departments to recognize issues that arise for students, employees, or visitors, and providing the needed services to address them. Plummer believes that this case management approach has helped with the early identification of potential problems and convinced people to get the resources they needed.

- ***Implement a behavioral threat assessment process.***

Another organizational change that occurred after 4/16 at Virginia Tech was the implementation of a behavioral threat assessment process. A team of qualified individuals was identified to serve as contacts in a crisis. As a preemptive process, the purpose of a behavioral threat assessment is to bring together individuals who possess the authority, training, and background to evaluate a situation and determine whether an individual poses a threat to the campus community. Plummer explains, "The benefit of threat assessment is getting people the attention and assistance they need before they get to the point that they are going to do something really tragic." In addition to talking people off the ledge, threat assessment teams work to keep people from getting to the ledge in the first place.

At Virginia Tech, there is one team of people designated to deal with students, employees,

and visitors. At other institutions these responsibilities are sometimes divided amongst several teams. Whether it is one team, or a variety of teams, might depend on the size and nature of each institution, but, the critical issue is ensuring that there is a system in place to ensure people are identified and receiving the services they need when they need them.

As Trauma and Retraumatization explains:
Living through traumatic events changes the ways the self and the world are experienced. The impact of trauma is cumulative—the more times a traumatic event is experienced the greater the impact; additive—exposure to different types of trauma is correlated with greater impact; and summative—the combination of event(s) plus impact is what individuals carry forward through time, inscribed in memory, the sense of self, and behavior.

However, the research also states, "Immediate, intermediate and long-term support, including peer support, for trauma survivors, that fosters connection is essential to the healing process." For the community of Virginia Tech, its combined strategies of relationship building,

case management approaches, and behavioral threat assessment processes have the power to help rebuild and repair beyond the effects of retraumatization.

For more information on Behavioral Threat Assessment, the following resources are available:

*Implementing Behavioral Threat Assessment on Campus; A Virginia Tech Demonstration Project*, available at:
http://rems.ed.gov/docs/VT_ThreatAssessment09.pdf.

A presentation by Gene Deisinger, Ph.D., of Virginia Tech on Developing and Implementing Campus-based Threat Assessment Teams can be found at:
http://rems.ed.gov/docs/EMHETraining_SATX08_ThreatAssessmentTeams.pdf.

For more information on retraumatization from the After the Crisis Initiative, visit:
http://www.gainscenter.samhsa.gov/atc/overview.html.