

Comments of  
Mr. William Modzeleski

Federal Commission on School Safety

May 17, 2018

*Opening Comments:*

Shortly, after the shooting at Virginia Tech, (April 16, 2007) a shooting that took the lives of 32 persons and wounding 17, the President (George W. Bush) directed Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Michael Leavitt, Secretary of Education (ED) Margaret Spellings and the Attorney General (Alberto Gonzales) to travel to communities across the country to meet with educators, mental health experts, law enforcement and state and local officials to discuss the broader issues raised by the tragedy.

*Purpose of Report:*

Members of the Commission stated that the purpose of their efforts was to:

- Summarize major recurring themes heard during their visits.
- Identify actions the Federal government could take to support state and local and to ensure the Federal government's actions are not impediments to state and local entities achieving their goal.

Want to stress that the Commission did not seek to investigate specifics of the event. They knew there were several other groups already doing this. Nor was it the aim of the Commission to dictate to Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) what actions they should take to make their institution safer.

*Key Findings:*

The Commission identified five key findings. They were as follows:

- That while Information sharing is critical for the development and operation of prevention programs; current regulations make it difficult to share information.
  - Essentially, they found that various service providers, including law enforcement didn't know what information they could share, when it could be shared or with whom it could be shared.
- Accurate and complete information on individuals prohibited from possessing firearms is essential to keeping guns out of the wrong hands.
  - They found that State laws and practices don't uniformly ensure that persons restricted from possessing firearms is appropriately

captured and available to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS).

- Improved awareness and communication is needed to ensure prevention is effective.
  - They identified “warning signs” of violent behavior as a key to prevention and emphasized that parents, students, and friends, to learn the warning signs.
- Providing persons in need of mental health services with appropriate services is essential and a key part of any prevention strategy.
  - Through out the report there is discussion about the need to coordinate delivery of mental health services with community service providers
- Information regarding what programs, policies and practices are effective needs to be shared if we want to maximize effectiveness. Further, programs need to be implemented with fidelity.
  - The Commission recognized that communities (including schools and IHEs) have already developed numerous violence prevention programs, however not all the programs were not operating in an effective manner.

There was also recognition that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) played a role in assisting states and localities in conducting threat assessments and risk assessments (physical assessments) and need to continue to play that role.

*Observations and Themes:*

The Commission identified three observations/themes. They were:

- There are no “one-size-fits-all” solutions.
- Concern with the increasing number of people with serious mental illness in schools, jails, and prisons.
- The need to ensure there is a balance between individual liberty and privacy, with safety and security. Participants continue to want balance.

*Recommended Federal Actions:*

The Commission made recommendations for each of the Key Findings. Findings were made for State and Local entities and for Federal agencies. There were 17 State and Local recommendations and 17 Federal Recommendations.

Samplings of recommendations are as follows:

- Develop additional guidance on how information can be shared. Review of FERPA and HIPPA recommended.
- ED to ensure all Readiness Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) and Emergency Management Higher Education (EMHE) grantees trained on information sharing.

- ED in collaboration with USSS and DOJ should explore research on targeted violence in IHEs and continue to share existing threat assessment methodology.
- DOJ should continue to encourage state and federal agencies to provide all appropriate information to NICS, so that required background checks are thorough and complete.
- ED, DOJ and HHS should continue to work with states and local communities to improve and expand their collaboration on the “Safe Schools/Healthy Students” program
- HHS should include a focus on college students in its mental health education campaign.
- HHS should examine current strategies for implementing innovative technologies in mental health field.
- ED should review its information regarding emergency management planning to ensure it addresses the needs of IHEs.
- ED, DHS, HHS, DOJ should consider allowing existing grant programs to be used for joint training exercises for law enforcement.

*Closing:*

Over the past 11 years there has been significant progress in our efforts to make Institutions of Higher Education safer. Many of the efforts were related, in one way or another (directly or indirectly) to the Report developed after the shooting. These efforts include:

- Completion of Phase I of Campus Attacks study (ED, USSS, FBI)
- Development of Emergency Management grant program for IHEs. (61 grants awarded between 2008-2010, funding totaled \$23 million.
- Development of Threat Assessment Strategy for K-16 schools. Training of personnel at IHEs on threat assessment protocols.
- Eligibility expanded to include IHEs in Project SERV (School Emergency Response to Violence)
- Revision of FERPA regulations regarding sharing of information (Institution to define when an incident is an emergency, thereby allowing sharing of information)
- The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program linked three agencies together. Resources, training, technical assistance provided to over 350 sites. One stop shopping proves to be not only popular but also effective.
- Safe School Initiative (SSI) which had implications for students in K-12 and higher ed.
- Development of a dedicated Technical Assistance Center that focuses on providing a wide range of information on Emergency Management issues. Information is provided to both K-12 schools as well as IHEs.

While we have made significant inroads into ensuring our schools (IHEs and K-12) remain safe places there are a host of new challenges making this difficult. These

challenges range from a variety of forms of cyber crime to opioid use and from abuse of social media to terrorism and trafficking. Success in overcoming these challenges can only be achieved if school safety remains a priority and that Federal agencies continue to support practices that have proven to be effective, eliminating those for which there isn't evidence of effectiveness.