

Statement of Derek O'Dell, DVM
Before the Federal School Safety Commission
U.S. Department of Education
Washington, DC

May 17, 2018

Thank you for convening a commission on school safety and undertaking such a vitally important topic to our children's generation. I survived a school shooting at Virginia Tech on April 16th 2007 during my sophomore year in college. My personal experience with school shooting tragedy is why I think you have asked me to speak today. I'm extremely thankful to be here and to be able to share my story personally, as I know many are not able to share their story. My wife is also a high school teacher at Salem High School in Southwest Virginia and our daughter will eventually go to public schools. My wife and I as many other parents of school aged children have a vested interest in the safety of our children as their care is entrusted to school leaders.

To provide some insight on what happens during a school shooting, the following is a testimony of my personal experience on April 16th, 2007. I was in a classroom on the second floor of Norris Hall on Virginia Tech's campus when a loud popping noise disrupted our class. Our professor Jamie Bishop stopped teaching and opened the door to look in the hallway to investigate the noise. He returned shortly thereafter and shut the door behind him. Within seconds the door swung open again and the popping noise began in our classroom. Gunfire began to tear through our class. I froze in my chair for what seemed like an eternity until I slowly saw the handgun turn towards to me and I dove below my desk. The shots continued as I tried to put as much distance between the gunman and myself as I could in the classroom. The gunman reloaded his magazine and proceeded down the hall to next classroom. Many students in the class lay motionless and quiet. The door was still open and I decided that the gunman could easily regain entry and further decimate the class. I tried to make my way to the front of the room to the only entry and exit door to the class. I reached for my cell phone to call 911 and felt a sharp pain in my right arm. I realized I had been shot sometime during the initial gunfire and could see my arm bleeding through my jacket. I applied my belt as a tourniquet as I was on the phone with the emergency responder trying to describe the gunman and relay as much information about the wounded in my class as I could. Then the gunfire temporarily stopped and I could hear footsteps in the hall outside the door. I saw the door handle jiggle that I had barricaded with my body since there was no door lock. The force from the other side of the door tried to gain entry, then bullets began to rain through the solid wooden door narrowly missing me

but hitting a classmate's hand who was barricading the door with me. The barricade held strong though and the gunman proceeded down the hall and continued to fire. We assessed the injured in our classroom trying to apply first aid. The gunfire eventually stopped as we heard the sounds of police officers in the hall. They opened our door and escorted those able to walk out of the building hurriedly. The officers encountered a door that was chained shut from the inside and they shot the padlock off to allow us to exit the building and run for our lives.

The most alarming thing to me looking back on the shooting was the preparation that the shooter did prior to shooting. Beyond practicing marksmanship at a firing range, the shooter assessed police and security response by posting bomb notes at various places around campus in the weeks leading up to the shooting and measuring response times. All of the exterior doors to Norris hall were chained and padlocked shut from the inside with notes on several doors stating a bomb will go off if opened. The shooter went by many of the classrooms on the second floor repeatedly to see how many students were in each class and the seating layout of each classroom. The police responded quickly to Norris hall at the first sounds of gunfire, but unfortunately weren't able to gain entry to the building quickly due to the chains and padlocks. Virginia Tech as well as many colleges and universities around the country have taken steps to prevent further school shooting tragedies. Most campuses utilize some form of an emergency notification system. Virginia Tech changed all of the entry and exit doors so they can no longer be chained shut. Many of these topics have been covered and discussed in previous school safety commissions.

The opportunity for students and teachers to provide better shelter in place by securing classrooms more easily would be advisable. A simple deadbolt lock may have allowed our professor to lock the door at the first sound of gunfire. The gunman would have had more difficulty trying to gain entry to the class and allow for time to more adequately prepare to ambush the gunman should they gain entry to the classroom.

The other part of school safety that I would ask you to consider is that it is very difficult to predict how an individual person is going to respond when faced with an emergency. It's easy to train for crisis response, but when actually faced with a crisis each individual's response varies dramatically. My own response was to freeze, even after hearing gunfire and trying to come to terms that this was a school shooting and what was actually happening. When you're in a classroom setting trying to focus on learning, it's very difficult to switch your mindset over into crisis response in a short period unexpectedly. Whereas when you're faced with a situation that you know an emergency may happen, it's easier to switch over into a crisis response mindset. Our learning environments in schools should not require a mindset of educators or students that a school shooting could happen at any moment. This mentality of constantly being on edge is not conducive to learning.

The notion that arming public school teachers to act as a deterrent may sound like a good idea, but when expecting a briefly trained individual to defend their class with turmoil happening all around them will likely result in a much different outcome than the initial intention. If I were in the same situation in my classroom and was armed and shot a classmate in the crossfire, I think I would have more survivor's guilt than I already have. Putting this same responsibility on our public school educators should not be a priority to providing school safety.

Thank you again for your time and consideration on the safety of our children in our school systems.