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LESSON LEARNED

Campus Emergency Response: Providing Family Assistance through University Liaisons

SUMMARY

Higher education institutions should ensure that a trained victim service provider is assigned to serve as a liaison to each victim or victim's family after a major incident.

DESCRIPTION

On April 16, 2007, a Virginia Tech student, Seung Hui Cho, killed 32 students and faculty members, wounded 17 more, and then killed himself in two separate incidents on the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, VA. Immediately following the shootings, the Division of Student Affairs organized a group of family liaisons comprised of individuals from its Division as well as from the Graduate School and the Provost's Office. Each liaison served as a link between the university and two or more families of victims and victim survivors. Additionally, the university officials designated The Inn at Virginia Tech as the Family Assistance Center (FAC) to provide support to the families of victims.

The volunteers selected to serve on the liaison staff had not previously received training on supporting victims' families in the aftermath of a major incident. Consequently, the liaisons were unfamiliar with the range of services available to families at the FAC for the first 2 days after the incidents. The volunteer liaisons only became aware of the full range of FAC services once the state's victim assistance team began arriving at the campus. Further, the volunteers grappled with their own emotional responses to the deaths and injuries of the students and faculty members, which impacted their ability to serve as liaisons to the victims' families.

The Virginia Tech Review Panel concluded that victim service professionals should be included in the planning, training, and execution of crisis response plans. The Panel's report determined that the university should have immediately arranged for the state's victim advocates to assist victims and their families. The Panel observed that assistance to families of survivors and the injured could have been more effective if executed from the beginning as a dual function between university-assigned liaisons and professional victim assistance providers. The report recommended that a trained victim service provider be assigned to serve as a liaison to each victim or victim's family as soon as practical. This can help ensure that victims of crime have access to services, receive accurate and timely information, and are made aware of their rights as victims.

Higher education institutions should ensure that a trained victim service provider is assigned to serve as a liaison to each victim or victim's family after a major incident.

CITATION

Virginia Tech Review Panel. *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech, April 16, 2007*. Aug 2007. <https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=26591>

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