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LESSON LEARNED

School Emergency Planning: Incorporating Active Shooter Scenarios into Emergency Operations Plans

SUMMARY

Schools' emergency operations plans (EOP) should include procedures for responding to active shooter scenarios, including procedures for canceling classes or closing campus.

DESCRIPTION

On April 16, 2007, a Virginia Tech student, Seung Hui Cho, killed 32 students and faculty members in 2 separate incidents at the Blacksburg, Virginia, campus. At the time of the attack, Virginia Tech's emergency response plan (ERP) outlined prevention and response guidelines for various types of incidents. Under the ERP, the Virginia Tech Policy Group had responsibility for implementing emergency measures and managing the university's incident response. The ERP included specific guidance for extreme weather- and fire-related incidents, but nothing specific to shootings.

A Virginia Tech Police Department (VTPD) officer discovered Cho's first attack, a double murder in the West Ambler Johnston dormitory, at 7:24 a.m. on April 16. Shortly thereafter, the Policy Group convened to plan a response to the incident. However, the Policy Group did not make a prompt decision about how to respond to the incident, due in part to the lack of guidance in the ERP on active shooter situations. Consequently, the Policy Group was forced to work through many aspects of any possible response, including how much information could be released without causing panic, if information should be restricted to Johnston residents, the best method for communicating information to students and faculty, and the most effective way to close campus.

The Policy Group deliberated about these issues for an hour before it decided on a course of action. It did not cancel classes, but instead released an email message at 9:24 a.m. stating that a "shooting incident" had occurred in the Johnston dormitory. The message urged students and staff to be cautious and to contact the VTPD regarding any suspicious activity. This notification came 20 minutes after second period classes had begun. Consequently, students and teachers in Norris Hall were unaware of the earlier incident when Cho began his second attack there at 9:40 a.m. In this attack, Cho killed 30 people and wounded an additional 17 before taking his own life.

The Virginia Tech Review Panel determined that Cho's second attack would have claimed fewer lives had the Policy Group released an emergency message or closed the university before second period classes began. These actions would have put "more people on guard" and could "have resulted in quicker recognition of a problem or suspicious activity, quicker reporting to police, and quicker response of police." The Review Panel labeled the Policy Group's failure to take these proactive measures a "questionable decision" and attributed the poor decision-making to the ERP's lack of guidance regarding active shooter situations.

Schools' EOPs should include procedures for responding to active shooter scenarios, including plans for canceling classes or closing campus.

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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