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LESSON LEARNED

Campus Safety: Dispatching Timely and Clear Emergency Alert Messages

SUMMARY

In an emergency, campus safety officials should immediately dispatch emergency alert messages that provide clear information on the nature of the emergency and action(s) to be taken.

DESCRIPTION

On April 16, 2007, a Virginia Tech student, Seung Hui Cho, killed 32 students and faculty members in two separate incidents on campus. At the time of the incidents, the university's emergency response plan had not required the development of pre-scripted emergency alert messages for various types of incidents. Instead, the Virginia Tech Policy Group would develop and send emergency alert messages to the university community based upon the unique circumstances of each incident. Thus, the protocol for developing and dispatching an emergency message in use on April 16 was cumbersome, untimely, and problematic.

Virginia Tech administration officials learned of the first incident, a double homicide at the West Ambler Johnston dormitory, at 7:57 a.m. on April 16. The university president convened the emergency Policy Group, but it took them nearly 30 minutes to assemble and begin planning how to notify the university community of the homicides. The Virginia Tech Police Department (VTPD) reported to the Policy Group that the suspect had probably left campus. VTPD did not tell the Policy Group that there was a chance the gunman was loose on campus. Further, VTPD did not advise the university to take any immediate actions, such as cancelling classes or closing the university.

Virginia Tech Policy Group

The Virginia Tech Policy Group is composed of nine university vice presidents and support-staff members and is chaired by the president. The Group deals with procedures to support emergency operations and to determine recovery priorities. At the time of the shootings, the Group did not include a Virginia Tech Police Department member, although a campus police officer was generally assigned to attend Policy Group meetings.

The Policy Group deliberated for an hour and then sent an emergency alert email message at 9:26 a.m. notifying the campus community that a "shooting incident" had occurred at the Johnston dormitory. The message urged students and staff members to be cautious and to contact the VTPD regarding any suspicious activity. The university tempered its messages to avoid panic and to reduce the shock and fright to the campus family. The message did not indicate that a murder had occurred at the Johnston Dormitory. Further, the Policy Group sent the message 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 concluded that the students and faculty members in Norris Hall would have had a greater chance of survival if an emergency message notifying them of the first attack had been sent out before classes began. The Review Panel noted that if the message had been sent earlier, between 8:00 a.m. and 8:30 a.m., more people would have received it before leaving for classes. Further, if an audible alert had been sounded, even more might have tuned in to check for an emergency message.

The Panel recommended that emergency alert messages contain straightforward facts and necessary information. According to the Panel's report, police conveyed the wrong message to the Policy Group about the lead they had and about the likelihood that the suspect was no longer on campus. The Panel noted that an alerting message should include all key facts and that it should be disseminated as quickly as possible. To ensure that a university can respond quickly and effectively to an active shooter incident, the Review Panel suggested that universities appoint a single individual who is "able to make a quick decision without convening a committee." This individual should be a member of the campus police department or senior security official.

For additional information on decision making during a school emergency, please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS.gov)* Lesson Learned, [Campus Safety: Enabling Campus Police to Send Emergency Messages to the Campus Community](#). Additional resources can be found on the *LLIS.gov* [School Emergency Management Planning](#) resource page.

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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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