

Explaining the Threat Assessment Process to the Campus Community

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Summer, 2019

With the recent and horrific mass murders this summer, the message in this feature is as relevant as ever. Campus and workplace threat assessment teams are going to see an increase in reporting of concerns about violence. Explanations of how response protocols actually work will benefit an organization's program.

How can campus threat assessment teams better explain what they actually do in their casework, and why? When the members of an organization feel unsafe, they will often request or demand various security measures and other actions they presume will better assure their safety. This is understandable. However, we know that the work of threat assessment and "protective investigations" can often take time, requiring a thoughtful, deliberate and objective approach. The competing rights and needs of the involved parties must be balanced. There are many nuances in case management strategies and pros and cons to contemplated interventions. A well-intentioned action or intervention can lead to unintended consequences – there is no "one size fits all." We routinely must explain to our clientele why we are doing what we are doing. Just as often, we need to explain why certain actions, that they may think are necessary or desirable, are ill-advised.

In this feature, we offer a **written statement suitable for posting** that describes the *process* of case management decision making. The issues are much the same for workplaces, and the draft can be adapted to other organizational settings. Providing such a written explanation may help to dampen some of the confusion and anxiety commonly encountered while managing cases. Many campus (and workplace) teams that we train state that they only post their violence-prevention policy and how to contact the organization's safety resources, but strive to better explain what they do and why. Although challenging to do so, it is best to keep such explanations as succinct as possible, and to also remember that the targeted audience is consumers of our services, not practitioners.

The *template* that follows may be used by campus threat management teams (TMTs for short, as they are often referred to in academic settings, among other titles), and modified with edits that fit their own campus context, culture and practices. For example, an organization may want to include threats of suicide in its reporting and response protocol, or more specifics about sexual assaults.

Please note that a statement such as this one, posted on an internal website, assumes or implies that a certain high standard of practice is in place at the host institution, reflecting contemporary threat assessment principles, practiced by the organization's trained and

experienced professionals who work collaboratively. Conferring with your program stakeholders and legal representatives before posting such a statement is in order.

The statement starts with an emphasis on a “see something, say something” culture and lists the *redundant and various ways* that people may contact the TMT resources. Research and experience have shown that people will report their concerns when it is easy for them to do so, and that they trust the institution to respond in a competent and even-handed manner.

Keeping our campus safe is our number one priority

How does our response to threats of violence on campus actually work?

- **How to contact our safety resources and what to expect**
- **Addressing common questions and issues**

A good place to learn and to work starts with a safe place to learn and work. Unfortunately, we live in an era where violence and senseless attacks can occur in public places, including campuses, workplaces, retail centers, and houses of worship. Although rare from a statistical standpoint, it is unrealistic to assume that any campus is completely immune from this possibility. The earlier that situations of concern are brought forward, the better for all involved parties.

Best practices in harm prevention have evolved and are widely accepted. Like other institutions of higher learning, we take violence prevention very seriously. Our campus has the resources in place to investigate, evaluate, and respond to threatening behaviors and concerns about violence. Our Threat Management Team – or TMT – and its multi-disciplinary members are trained to identify, screen, evaluate, and respond appropriately to concerning situations brought to its attention. The TMT members are comprised of professionals from different departments, including the campus police, student affairs, human resources, and our counseling center.^[2] The university also retains experts who specialize in assessing and managing violence risk and who are available to the TMT when appropriate.

If you see something, say something. The first step is for *you* and any members of our campus community to contact the TMT when concerning communications or behaviors are observed. These may include communicated threats of violence by any means, whether direct or veiled, unruly or clearly inappropriate frightening behaviors, evidence of firearms on campus, and actual assaults.

Here are the ways to report concerns about harm:

- *List them here according to your organization’s protocol.*

There are various motives and causes of violent acts, perhaps due to rejection, unbearable life stressors, or to bring attention to oneself or an issue. Very frequently these acts are preceded by “leakage” of intent in various ways. Thus, prevention depends on an informed and alert campus

community whose members – when they “see something,” will “say something” – so that the TMT can “do something,” – in a timely, deliberate and appropriate manner.

Responding to Emergencies. The next steps are for the TMT to gather information promptly from various sources. If the initial report appears to be an emergency, our Department of Public Safety will respond immediately. Individuals appearing to pose an imminent or high risk of violence can be detained and any weapons confiscated by our campus police or other law enforcement agencies. Other situations may develop over time, perhaps rising to a crisis point, usually due to the way someone is behaving, or because they have or may be facing a very stressful and difficult loss. Safety concerns may arise in these situations as well. Ongoing security measures may be initiated.

The TMT must make careful judgements about potential actions to take. In many situations, however, it is not clear that an actual risk of harm exists, or what the most prudent action to take may be. Those involved, especially if they are fearful of what could happen, may understandably expect that certain safety measures will be taken; for example, obtaining protective or stay-away orders, served to an individual of concern – whether a student, an employee, faculty member, or an outsider not affiliated with our campus. Other possible actions include hospitalizing someone who may pose a risk of harm due to acute mental symptoms that include violent ideas or behaviors, or suspending or removing someone from campus. These are all possible actions. However, experience has shown that there are important “do’s and don’ts” to consider, and no one can be detained indefinitely without cause. Some actions may have unintended consequences, and further agitate an individual of concern; for example, hastily removing someone from campus without ever hearing the individual’s version of events. As they gather information, the TMT members must make judgments about what actions they should take or recommend to other officials and decision makers.

No “one size fits all” in resolving situations of concern. A wide range of individuals of concern and contexts will come to the attention of the TMT. All reports are taken seriously. Many people who come to attention, however, do not actually pose a danger, as determined by a careful risk assessment that usually includes an in-depth interview with the person of concern. Interventions must be tailored to the individual situation. Some individuals are troubled and can be helped if they are willing to accept professional care. At times a leave of absence from academic studies is appropriate. No one is permitted to engage in behaviors that are intimidating or cause fear in others, and indeed some individuals will be permanently removed from campus. Monitoring for changes, when necessary, is one of the functions of the TMT. The TMT will also provide essential safety-related information to the involved others as to whether the team considers, in a given case, that a risk of harm exists, to whom and of what nature.

The legal rights of the various involved parties must be considered and balanced. Although the university will always consider “safety first” in alleged risk scenarios, the rights of individuals who have come to attention and who are perceived as possibly posing a risk must also be considered. These rights include privacy and protection from discrimination, among others. One implication of this is that concerned or involved others may not be privy to some of the details of an investigation or of an individual risk assessment, or what kind of help someone may be getting.

“Protective investigations” assess for risk of harm and are distinct from misconduct or criminal investigations. The protocols that exist for properly investigating and managing potential risks of harm on campuses have evolved over the past 35-plus years. Through case studies and research, a great deal has been learned about individuals who may pose a risk, as well as the interpersonal contexts that can contribute to or increase the likelihood of harm. This method is referred to as a “protective investigation” or “threat assessment and management,” and is not a judicial or disciplinary process. Although similar in some ways to investigations of misconduct, harassment, or crimes (which also may be ongoing), its goals differ. A protective investigation assesses whether someone who may have *made* a threat or engaged in concerning conduct actually *poses* a threat of violence, or a threat of future violence. Various options are then considered to reduce any potential harm. The steps to assess and respond to threats of harm is a rational and objective process. It is based on the collective knowledge of the risk factors known to be associated with violence, especially the factors relevant in interpersonal and organizational contexts. Circumstances are often unfolding. Many scenarios are resolved in a relatively short time period. Others may take longer as relevant information is further developed. Monitoring and changing strategies are often necessary. There are many instances with positive outcomes, which are often quietly resolved. For example, any actual risk was averted, or the TMT assessed that an individual of concern did not actually pose a risk of harm, in spite of concerning behaviors appropriately brought forward. No risk or very low risk situations are often referred to other appropriate resources.

The TMT is aware of the fear and apprehension that may accompany any situation it addresses. Anxiety and fear among those involved is common-place and can indeed be intense, regardless of how serious a situation appears to be. Appropriate security measures will be taken. At times, involved others may disagree with the TMT’s opinions or the actions being taken by campus officials. Feeling safe, after all, is a very personal matter. The TMT is aware of these issues and is available to address concerns and provide guidance on personal safety measures.

In summary, you are a vital part of keeping our campus safe. “If in doubt, give the TMT a shout.” Most of the violent tragedies we hear and learn about were preceded by “flashing yellow lights.” The TMT is aware of the range of possible situations that must be addressed, in an objective and fair manner. Often it is a matter of getting someone help before it is too late. If you “see something, say something.” We cannot investigate situations of concern unless we know about them, and all of us must remember to treat the fellow members of our campus with respect at all times.

[*] Each institution indicates the specifics of its team’s membership.