

“Improving the Safety and Security of Schools and Campuses in the United States: What Can Be Done By the Federal Government?”

TESTIMONY OF

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Security on America’s College Campuses

**Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate**

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**Honorable Joseph L. Lieberman
Chairman**

**Honorable Susan M. Collins
Ranking Member**

Senators:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee as part of this expert panel. It is our collective hope to provide you with some insights and perspectives which may help your continuing deliberations and potential legislative strategies designed to make U.S. institutions of higher learning, and schools in general, be as safe and secure as possible.

And I want to say at the onset, and, if time permits, emphasize this again at the end of my remarks: American schools and campuses are by and large safe environments where millions of our children are secure and thriving. The heart-breaking disasters that rock our nation are, fortunately, rare. Still there are things that can be done to significantly reduce the possibility or the consequences of disasters on American campuses. And I realize that is why we are here today. Your leadership through this Committee and that of your colleagues in the Congress is crucial.

A few introductory thoughts:

#1 First, it should be pointed out that the recent tragedy in Virginia had a deeply unsettling impact on all Americans, and our hearts have gone out to the victims and their families for whom this event is virtually unbearable. Like the families who lost children in Columbine, Nickel Creek and the other sites of random and deadly violence, it is almost impossible for loved ones to imagine how and why an experience meant to be filled with learning, social and emotional growth and hopefulness about the future turns into an unspeakable nightmare.

And, having heard and read the news from Blacksburg while on a trip to Africa, I can also attest to the fact that the tragedy was inexplicable and heartbreaking to people well beyond American shores.

#2 Secondly, while all of us have ideas and proposals, none of us can, sadly enough, offer strategies that could unfailingly prevent tragedies such as the shootings at Virginia Tech. There are several reasons why absolute safety is virtually impossible. The first is that the spectrum and prevalence of severe emotional and psychiatric disorders is such that infallible screening and fail-safe interventions are not possible. And, secondly, the nature of schools, particularly colleges and universities is such that imposing air-tight security on a campus is profoundly antithetical to the nature, philosophy and reality of what is expected in the environment of higher education.

#3 My third introductory observation is that the concerns about campus security and safety, as we have heard today, range widely from the very rare mass murder committed by a highly deranged individual to campus fires and natural events such as hurricanes, earthquakes and tornados. Institutions need to have broad plans in place to respond to a variety of scenarios, under a preparedness doctrine we know as "all hazard".

#4 Unfortunately, there is also the potential for tragedies on campus or in schools that we have not yet seen in the United States. I am referring here to the possibility that terrorists bent on causing overwhelming grief might deliberately target children in a school or on a college campus. These places are known as “soft targets” where access is relatively simple, absolute security virtually impossible and the potential for terror-induced, high degrees of societal-wide grief and reaction are assured.

In fact, the question of “children as targets of terrorism” was addressed at a national conference held at Columbia in the fall of 2005. Our concerns were driven by:

- A well-established history of terror organizations explicitly attacking children throughout history and in many parts of the world. In particular, we were painfully aware of the unspeakable 2004 attack on a school in Beslan, Russia where more than 150 children were slain before the perpetrators could be neutralized by authorities. Although this attack was clearly the work of Chechen rebels, there was a continuing suspicion that al Qaeda was somehow involved in the planning, if not the execution, of the assault. Our concern is, of course, that a Beslan-style attack on a U.S. school or campus cannot be dismissed as a potential future calamity, even though the potential is admittedly small.
- In late 2001, a planned attack on an American school in Singapore was thwarted by counter-terrorism officials.
- In the fall of 2004, an Iraqi insurgent captured in Bagdad was discovered to have had detailed plans and layouts of schools in five U.S. states.
- Many writings by al Qaeda leaders have spoken to the mandate to attack U.S. citizens in general and children in particular. Among the more notable – and chilling – examples of these threats was written by Sulieman Abu Gheith, a Bin Laden lieutenant, subsequently captured by coalition forces says the following: “We have not reached parity with [America]. We have the right to kill 4 million Americans, 2 million of them children...”

All of this suggests that the United States cannot afford to be sanguine about the dangers facing our children and young people. And we need to be sure that efforts to prevent, mitigate and respond to tragedies encompass a wide range of potential hazards. While there is much to be done, appropriate and effective strategies in terms of response, security and notification of student and staff can be applicable no matter what specific situation or event is unfolding. This is the concept of dual or multiple use protocols and procedures.

#5 My fifth observation is that improving the security of soft targets, including schools and college campuses, is a shared responsibility. In addition to important steps that should be considered by the federal government, local and state governments, school authorities, faculty and staff all have major responsibilities, as do students themselves as well as their families. The responsibility matrix is indeed complex, but necessary to understand if progress is to be made. The approach recommended by my colleagues and I at the

National Center for Disaster Preparedness is based on organizing our thinking in three distinct functional categories of strategic proposals:

- Prevention
- Mitigation and response
- Recovery

In each of these categories it is useful to think about what would be the purview of the federal government, versus other levels of government, the institution itself or other sectors that might be essential such as law enforcement and emergency medical response capacity. For the purpose of this Hearing, I will focus on the potential strategies that might be considered by the federal government.

Prevention

The concept of prevention is the *sine qua non* of public health practice and the first priority in thinking about securing the safety of schools and campuses. Mitigation and response follows the failure or inability to prevent disasters. In some instances, prevention of hazards associated with disasters is, for all practical purposes, not possible. Major weather related events and earthquakes will fall into this category. Such instances aside, other disasters – such as campus fire emergencies - are generally preventable.

In terms of the availability of timely and appropriate mental health services, serious concerns are ubiquitous in the United States. The quantity and quality of evaluative services are spotty at best. And few schools or colleges have the consistent ability to intervene effectively, even if highly dangerous individuals are identified.

In terms of what might be considered *relatively* preventable, there are steps that can reduce, though not eliminate, the chance of shooting or terror-related disasters. And for these issues, the federal government has a number of important opportunities. Some examples:

- While the responsibility for responding to emotional and psychiatric concerns of students rests predominantly with campus staff and, to a certain extent, parents of affected students, there are serious and pervasive gaps in our knowledge about best practices to most effectively screen for disorders that can result in the most egregious consequences in terms of violence against oneself or others. Even if suspicions are appropriately aroused, access to reliable data supporting the most effective interventions remains a major challenge.
- Major discrepancies with respect to state, local and federal regulation of gun purchases have created serious gaps in the ability to interdict purchase of weapons by individuals with serious psychiatric problems, including those at higher risk of committing violent crimes. These legal and legislative loopholes in existing gun purchase regulations represent a significant threat to soft-target populations in

schools, college campuses, hospitals, workplace environments and other public spaces.

- Substantial constraints prohibit institutions from contacting parents, regardless of great concerns about the welfare of “adult-age” students. These policies, as extended to extreme cases of psychiatric disturbance can be exceedingly dangerous to the individual, as well as the community at large.

Federal strategies to address these issues could potentially include:

- **Calling for a federally sponsored national conference on the state of knowledge regarding identification and intervention strategies likely to most effective in the prevention of campus violence.**
- **A new research fund created explicitly for studying ways of improving the effectiveness of protocols to identify (a) potential perpetrators of deadly violence and (b) optimal intervention strategies.**
- **Ensuring that multi-agency, coordinated counter-intelligence strategies are in place to early identify evidence of potential threats against schools or universities by terrorist organizations.**
- **The Department of Education, working with national organizations, such as the American Council on Education, should be mandated to establish national standards of fire and disaster safety for potential hazards including fires and natural events. These can be regionally customized in terms of explicitly recognizing local or regional threats such as coastal storms, earthquakes and so forth.**
- **Introducing legislation to close critical loopholes in federal, state and local regulations with respect to gun purchase.**
- **Federal legislation to eliminate constraints regarding informing and engaging parents of young adults who pose a major threat to themselves or others. Two existing laws that should be revisited in the light of recent events are: (1) the Federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) – which currently allows parental reporting under certain circumstances is still seen as leaving institutions legally liable - and (2) the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), which bans parental reporting in the absence of a signed waiver by the student.**

Mitigation and Response

Once a major, non-preventable disaster begins to unfold, the priority is clearly mitigation of harm to individuals to the extent possible. The effectiveness of such efforts is dependent upon optimal means of communication to students, faculty and staff, coordination among responders, appropriate interventions and availability of necessary medical response. All of this is predominantly the responsibility of the individual institutions and local responder organizations.

That said, it needs to be acknowledged that the quality of disaster preparedness across the nation’s schools and campuses is variable in the extreme. Furthermore, data establishing

evidence-based best practices is generally lacking. Communities are essentially “on their own”, re-inventing (or not) protocols and doctrines for a range of hazards. Even when recommendations are made by national organizations or governmental agencies, it is unclear how much these guidelines are based on solid data. It is also challenging for many schools and universities to identify sufficient resources to ensure that such programs, even if effective, are actually implemented. Specific issues that require attention by campus safety officials include:

- Multi-agency, multi-sector disaster preparedness planning, including table-top and field exercises.
- Alarm and alert systems, including the utilization of new technologies to ensure rapid dissemination of critical information and communication with relevant agencies. Emergency cell phone text messaging systems and campus-wide public address systems are examples of potentially effective alert technologies deployed at some institutions already.
- Protocols for campus lock-downs and efficient coordination protocols among campus-based and local law enforcement and response agencies.
- Pre-existing and well-rehearsed plans for deployment of large-scale medical response that might be required in the event of a high casualty event.
- Education around identification and response to “new threats” such as chemical, biological or radiological threats whether from natural, accidental or intentionally induced sources.
- Disaster awareness programs for faculty, staff and students.

The federal government can support these efforts as follows:

- **Create a federal grants program to establish six to ten diverse model university and public school programs to identify and manage instances of potentially extreme violence. These models would be based on solid research methodologies and available for replication throughout the nation, covering all essential areas of disaster response, communications and mitigation strategies.**
- **Urge the Department of Justice to emphasize in the guidance accompanying DOJ grants to local law enforcement agencies the need for establishing explicit mutual aid agreements with university or college police departments in their communities. Restoration of full funding under the Community Oriented Policing Program (COPS) could be a particular benefit to these efforts.**

Recovery

Large-scale disasters involving civilian casualties are inevitably painful to families and local communities. When major disasters are thought to have been preventable or the result of deliberate acts of violence, either at the hand of a deranged loner or, perhaps even more horrifically, as the result of a planned terror attack, national grief is profoundly

exacerbated. In the case of terrorism, the desired effect might well be achieved, i.e., societal-wide anger, fear and demoralization.

The process of recovering from the impact of serious disasters is multi-dimensional. But efforts to reduce the intensity and duration of impact on the general population are well worth considering. In part, this process has to do with the degree to which civilian populations are considered to be resilient, i.e., able to grieve, readjust, re-evaluate prevention or response strategies and, eventually, move on.

In a sense, every disaster should serve as an unanticipated test of prevention and response strategies and an opportunity to improve in all areas. Sometimes, in fact, major tragedies are referred to as “wake-up calls”. But too often, the “wake-up” is short-lived; lessons are not learned, questions not asked and challenges are not met. The events, and the extreme media attention associated with them, more resemble “snooze alarms”, since effective remediation and new, more perfected response or prevention strategies fail to appear. This reality clearly may exacerbate public anxiety, as well as loss of confidence in government. That being said, what can the federal government do to re-normalize citizen populations following a major disaster? Here are some suggestions for strategies that will help sustain confidence in government and improve resilience among the American people:

- **Communicate timely and appropriate concerns during and immediately following disasters.**
- **Ensure that needed federal response assets are available – if and when needed - in a timely and organized way to assist local agencies, officials and victims. These may include, as needed, support from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Education (DOE) for counseling and mental health programs for local communities, including university and community responders in the aftermath of large-scale disasters.**
- **Ensure Congressional oversight and sustained efforts to continually improve prevention, mitigation and response strategies following major disasters.**

Conclusion:

Once again, it is an honor to appear before this Committee. I am sure I speak for the entire panel in expressing the sincere hope that these remarks and suggestions will be helpful to your continuing deliberations. And, finally, as I noted at the beginning of my remarks, parents and family members of our children in schools and colleges across the nation should be reminded that painful and heart-breaking tragedies such as those we have seen in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Colorado and other communities remain exceedingly rare. And, it is our hope that this hearing, others like it in Congress, follow-up legislation, as well as actions taken by the administration, local governments and at schools and universities everywhere will continue to improve our ability to prevent or respond effectively to tragedy, regardless of cause.

Thank you.