

MENTAL HEALTH

Focusing on violence - before it occurs

L.A. PROGRAM IS UNIQUE COLLABORATION DESIGNED TO TRACK WORRISOME STUDENTS

By Erica Goode The New York Times

L.A.'s school threat assessment team was developed after the Virginia Tech University mass shooting to identify the potential for school violence and take steps to prevent it.

LOS ANGELES - In the days after the elementary school massacre in Newtown, Conn., Tony Beliz and his staff at the county's mental health department made a series of calls.

They checked in with a 16-year-old boy with a fondness for bomb-making chemicals who, two years before, had told them, "I have to get rid of the bad people in this world," and described a "special plan" he said he would put into action in a few years.

They called the mother of another teenager - they have nicknamed him "Jared Loughner," after the man who shot Rep. Gabrielle Giffords in Tucson, Ariz., in 2011 - who was obsessed with weapons and killing, had access to firearms and had extensively researched school shootings.

They contacted a 20-yearold who in 2010 was fantasizing about killing members of his family and carrying out a shooting at school.

The young men had been brought to the attention of the School Threat Assessment Response Team program overseen by Beliz, one of the most intensive efforts in the nation to identify the potential for school violence and take steps to prevent it. The program, an unusual collaboration involving county mental health professionals, law enforcement agencies and schools, was developed by the Los Angeles Police Department in 2007, after the shooting rampage at Virginia Tech University, and was taken countywide in 2009 by Beliz, a deputy director of the mental health department.

In the national debate that has followed the killings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, much of the focus has been on regulating firearms. But many law enforcement and mental health experts believe that developing comprehensive approaches to prevention is equally important. In many cases, they note, the perpetrators of such violence are troubled young people who have signaled their distress to others and who might have been stopped had they received appropriate help.

"When we looked at kids who had committed attacks, the vast majority had come to the attention of an adult for a behavior that was concerning but would not necessarily

cause someone to conclude they were planning an attack," said Bryan Vossekuil, former executive director of the National Threat Assessment Center, part of the Secret Service, and a co-author of a 2002 guide to threat assessment in schools published by the service and the federal Education Department.

Many secondary schools and universities around the country have protocols for dealing with students who threaten violence, and cities besides Los Angeles have started programs intended to identify students at risk. But criminal justice experts say the program in Los Angeles, financed under California's Mental Health Services Act, is noteworthy for the sharing of information among agencies and for the degree of follow-up in keeping track of worrisome students over time.

"I think L.A. really is a shining star and a standard in relation to how a big city can actually collaborate," said J. Kevin Cameron, an expert on school shootings and executive director of the Canadian Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response, who has consulted with the program.

Each day, several dozen calls come in to the program's dispatch center from principals, counselors, school security officers or parents worried about students who have talked about suicide, exhibited bizarre behavior or made outright threats.

"We'll go to a school, evaluate the individual there, then what we'll also do is go to the kid's home and we'll ask to see the bedroom and we'll do a very data-driven assessment," Beliz said. "We're trying to figure out, what are the triggers here? What are the risk factors? What's really going on and how can we intervene?" He and others involved in the program said that, in more than a few cases, the approach had been successful in heading off violence.

Depending on the situation, a student who has made a serious threat might be put on a 72-hour mental health hold, or arrested, if a crime has been committed. A mental health hold is often preferable, law enforcement officers said, because under California law it allows the seizure of firearms. But even when a student is judged to be expressing frustration or making a bid for adults to take notice, the team works to get the student into counseling and help families link up with appropriate social services.

Detective Charles Dempsey, the officer in charge for the LAPD's part of the program, said that in most cases parents consent to letting field teams of clinicians and trained law enforcement officers look in a student's bedroom or search through backpacks and notebooks.

"We get a lot of cooperation from parents," he said. "After the initial shock, they want to know, too, what did I miss?" If a case is converted to a criminal investigation, the procedures become more regimented.

During a recent week, Beliz's team looked into the case of a high school student who had been overheard talking about a school shooting - in a notebook, he had scribbled, "Kill Everyone Leave None Alive," next to drawings of a bomb hitting a building. They evaluated a 19-year-old who had posted on Facebook photos of himself holding a gun with the words "School - Tomorrow," and a 14-year-old girl who said she respected Adam Lanza, the gunman in Newtown, because by killing 20 children he had saved them from the misery of life.

At a recent morning meeting to discuss current cases, the team members reviewed the students' history, statements, actions and family dynamics and came up with an assessment of the seriousness of the threats, judging whether a student was "on a path to violence," as Beliz puts it, or instead was experiencing emotional difficulties unlikely to erupt into violent behavior.

"If a child's really depressed and has been bullied and is feeling on the fringes and nobody's doing anything, they say, 'I'm going to bring a gun to school and shoot up the school,' and suddenly everybody is paying attention," said Linda Boyd, the program manager for the threat assessment team.

In most cases, the more the team finds out, the less worrisome the case becomes. In the three recent cases, the students, upon further investigation, were judged in need of various kinds of help but not to pose a risk of imminent violence. Boyd said, however, that the team had also dealt with students who had made hit lists or been discovered with caches of weapons - knives and guns, but also crossbows and bombs.

"There are some kids that we end up being really, really, really worried about," Boyd said.