



# OVC Bulletin

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## SCHOOL CRISIS RESPONSE INITIATIVE

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### Introduction

Recent tragic events have made us painfully aware that our schools have been and may continue to be sites of violence. Episodes of violence at our schools remind us that schools are an integral part of their communities and therefore are vulnerable to the influences and factors that are present in the larger communities.

Fortunately, the actual number of *primary victims*—those killed and injured directly by school violence—has been small. However, high profile episodes of violence have produced a substantial number of witnesses and survivors who are known as *secondary victims*. Extensive media coverage of school violence vicariously traumatizes people exposed to the media in communities across the country, which creates indirect witnesses and survivors who are known as *tertiary victims*.

Experience teaches that schools can support and assist children and staff during and after a crisis. Even when a crisis does not occur on school property, a school can effectively serve as the place where

adolescent and child victims can go for help after the crisis. Given proper training, support, and resources, school staff are well situated to provide children and adolescents with triage, support, services, short-term counseling, and referral to community services during and after a crisis.

Schools can also reach out to parents and other adults in the community after a crisis. In fact, in the aftermath of a crisis, school-based intervention may be the most effective, logical, and practical way to help many primary, secondary, and tertiary victims whose needs may not be addressed as well through conventional public health and traditional medical services. This is particularly true if the school-based efforts are coordinated with those of outside agencies and supplemented by outside resources—creating a school-based crisis response team.

School-based crisis response teams work well for several reasons. Adult and child victims who receive care from a school-based crisis response team composed of people they know will receive a response that is not only effective, but also warm, personal, supportive, and heartening. In addition, school-based response teams can

### Message From THE DIRECTOR

In recent years, our country has experienced many violent and traumatic events, and the young people across our Nation have profoundly felt the impact. From acts of terrorism to school violence, our youth are increasingly exposed to the long-lasting and damaging effects caused by such events. While tragedies continue to occur, measures that can help protect our youth are available. Schools are well-suited to provide support and assistance to children in the aftermath of a crisis, including triage, short-term counseling, and referral to community services. We must develop the necessary infrastructure and train crisis response personnel to protect our youth in the next crisis.

This bulletin describes an organizational model for school preparedness and effective responses to crises. Developed by the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at the Yale Child Study Center, the School Crisis Response Initiative promotes specific training for school personnel as well as interested community members so they may respond more effectively to the needs of our children in the aftermath of a crisis.

John W. Gillis  
Director

meet the emerging needs of students, parents, and staff during and after a crisis, which reinforces the idea held by many that, in a community, schools should be a focal point for the development of young people.

Developing an effective crisis response and building a strong school-based crisis response team is important. Schools nationwide must share all the information, knowledge, skills, experiences, and promising practices that they have learned about crisis response. School crisis response teams should include individuals who work within the school and those from the community who work collaboratively with the schools, such as mental health and juvenile justice professionals. Avoid plans that replace staff members with experts from outside the community. This is important for several reasons. First, staff members have an ongoing relationship with and knowledge of the students, their parents, and the community. This gives school personnel valuable insight and perspective that will be helpful when they screen crisis victims and intervene on their behalf. In addition, school staff will remain in the community throughout the long recovery period that follows many crises. Staff are uniquely suited to monitor the emerging and residual effects of the crisis, which allows them to plan and coordinate a comprehensive response. Further, because parents frequently consult school staff about daily matters, parents already think of the staff as experts on the children in their care and as credible resources for information. Therefore, an effective response to a large-scale crisis when well-trained school crisis response teams are in place should rely on experts from outside the school community to provide short-term consultation but not to assume the primary response role. Communities achieve

the greatest benefit when the supports that are already in place are enhanced and sustained, increasing the contributions by those who will continue to work in the community and with the children.

This bulletin describes the work of the School Crisis Response Initiative of the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at the Yale Child Study Center and provides an overview of the program's organizational model for school crisis preparedness and response. The organizational model presented in this bulletin is intended to guide schools and school districts as they develop their own school-based crisis response plans. Individual schools and districts will need to adapt this general model to their unique needs and strengths.

## Background

The School Crisis Response Initiative of the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at the Yale Child Study Center was funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice. This initiative is a collaboration of the Yale Child Study Center and community mental health professionals, law enforcement representatives, and local and state educational agencies. The program's mission is to empower school staff through planning and training by consulting with schools to develop their capacity to meet students' emotional and mental health needs during and after a crisis and by providing school-based crisis response teams with technical assistance to help them resolve problems that arise in specific crisis situations. Funding from the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), U.S. Department of Justice, supported the publication of this bulletin.<sup>1</sup>

The School Crisis Response Initiative's first goals were to develop and implement an organizational model for school crisis preparedness and response,<sup>2</sup> establish and coordinate training to enable school staff to respond effectively in crisis situations, and enhance community resources to address emerging mental health needs of children and adolescents in crisis settings. Since 1991, the initiative has been presented to many state, national, and international audiences of various educational, health, and juvenile justice professionals, including school administrators, teachers, school nurses, physicians, psychologists, social workers, and bereavement counselors. Approximately 10,000 school staff members and specialists in related services have received training, including more than 500 school- and district-level teams. Program staff have provided technical assistance for approximately 200 school crises, many of which involved the death of a student or school staff member.

## A Model for School-based Crisis Preparedness and Response

Schools are well-organized systems that function with great efficiency under normal conditions. During a crisis, however, schools face unusual demands. While maintaining day-to-day operations, they must adapt to unexpected and unpredictable influences. Both school staff members and students will be personally affected by the crisis. Therefore, at the time of a crisis it is very difficult for a school to organize an effective crisis intervention response and still maintain the required long-range perspective. Schools may underestimate the

full impact of the crisis or feel overwhelmed by the extent and magnitude of it. For schools to effectively address the many issues that typically arise during a crisis, a preplanned, systematic organizational model to direct decisions is essential. To be effective, a school's crisis response model must anticipate the results of a crisis and identify the ways it will affect individuals and the community. This includes identifying and preparing for the typical reactions of young people of all ages. In addition, the model must identify and plan how to use the broad range of skills and knowledge represented by those on the school crisis response team, including those of collaborating professions, such as mental health and juvenile justice. Finally, the crisis response model must anticipate the future needs of the school population and develop plans to meet those needs.

### School Crisis Response Team

School crisis response teams need to determine which crisis events are likely to require or benefit from a team response. In general, the following four crisis categories are included:

- Death of a student, a staff member, or a community member whose death affects a significant portion of the school population.
- Major environmental crisis, such as a flood or fire.
- Situation that involves a threat to the physical safety of students, such as a schoolbus accident, even in the absence of injuries.
- Situation that involves a perceived threat to the emotional well-being of students, such as may be precipitated by hate-crime graffiti or repetitive bomb threats.

Situations that involve only a few students, especially when trying to maintain privacy or confidentiality, are better addressed through means other than a school crisis response team, perhaps by a student assistance team or guidance counselor.

### School Crisis Response Plan

A school crisis response plan should include guidelines for membership on the school crisis response team and the roles of its members; protocols for delivering crisis intervention services; and protocols for notifying team members, school staff, students, parents, and the community of information about a crisis. To respond to unique situations such as large-scale natural disasters or criminal activities, specific guidelines must be established. The plan must address three general areas: safety and security; dissemination of accurate information to school crisis response team members, school staff, students, parents, and, when appropriate, the general public; and the emotional and psychological needs of all parties. Experience shows that all three areas must be addressed concurrently. If they are not, none will be addressed effectively.

No ideal school crisis response plan exists that suits all the needs of all schools and school districts. The organizational model presented within this document intends to guide schools and school districts as they develop their own school crisis response plan. Individual schools and school districts will need to adapt the general model to their own unique needs and strengths.

The school crisis response plan proposed in this bulletin recommends that each community create three organizations to operate the three components needed to fully implement a crisis response plan—a school-based crisis intervention team, a

district-level crisis intervention team, and a regional resource group.

#### School-based Crisis Intervention Team

Usually, the school-based crisis intervention team provides staff and students with the majority of direct services needed during most crisis events. However, the roles and functions of the three teams will vary according to the needs of each community. School systems can adjust the specific functions of these teams and the relationships among them to fit the district's and region's needs. For example, smaller school districts may have the district-level crisis intervention team provide students with more direct services than the school-based crisis intervention team provides.

#### District-level Crisis Intervention Team

The district-level crisis intervention team comprises members of the district office, representatives of school-based teams, and district-level collaborators and consultants such as personnel from the local mental health clinic, local police station, and/or fire department. The district-level crisis intervention team establishes district-wide policies that are relevant to crisis preparedness and response; oversees their implementation at the school level; requires and arranges training of school-based crisis intervention teams; establishes and maintains district-level connections with agencies and consultants; provides school-level teams with support and backup at the time of a crisis; coordinates the sharing of resources among school-level teams, such as assigning counseling staff from other schools to a school responding to a crisis; and oversees the implementation of the school crisis response plan across schools within the district.

#### Regional Resource Group

The regional resource group comprises representatives of the district-level team as well as relevant professionals from the

community, including the mental health and juvenile justice sectors. This group provides a forum for sharing experiences among the participating school systems and collaborating experts; participates as indicated in district-level and school-level trainings; oversees the resource needs for the region; advocates for expansion of services, such as emergent mental health services, as necessary; establishes inter-district agreements for sharing resources across district lines; and facilitates inter-district sharing when a major school crisis puts an individual school system in need of resources.

The National Center for Children Exposed to Violence formed a regional resource group for this program in 1991 with the initial participating school districts of East Haven, New Haven, North Haven, and West Haven, Connecticut. Subsequently, additional school districts joined in the development of the organizational model and establishment of district-level policies. From this process, initial training for school staff, successful advocacy for the expansion of regional urgent mental health services for children in crisis, and creation of the current initiative described in this bulletin were implemented. The regional resource group that was developed for this program continues to meet quarterly.

### Roles and Responsibilities of School-based and District-level Crisis Intervention Teams

The organizational model outlines specific positions and responsibilities for members of the school-level and district-level crisis intervention teams. These positions are crisis team chair, assistant chair, coordinator of counseling, staff notification coordinator, communications coordinator, media coordinator, and crowd management coordinator. Depending on the school or district, an individual team

## Roles of Crisis Team Members

**Crisis team chair**—Convenes scheduled and emergency team meetings, oversees both broad and specific team functions, ensures that the required resources are available to each team member for assigned duties, and communicates with the district-level team. Is often an administrator or designee.

**Assistant chair**—Assists the crisis team chair with all functions and substitutes for the chair in the chair's absence.

**Coordinator of counseling**—Develops mechanisms for ongoing training of crisis team members and other school staff and identifies and establishes liaisons with community resources for staff and student counseling. At the time of a crisis, determines the extent of counseling services needed, mobilizes community resources, and oversees the mental health services provided to students. Must have appropriate counseling and mental health skills and experience.

**Staff notification coordinator**—Establishes, coordinates, and initiates the telephone tree when school is not in session to contact the crisis team and general school staff, including itinerant, part-time, and paraprofessional staff. Also establishes a plan to rapidly disseminate relevant information to all staff during regular school hours.

**Communications coordinator**—Conducts all direct in-house communications, screens incoming calls, and maintains a log of telephone calls related to the crisis event. Helps the staff notification coordinator develop a notification protocol for a crisis event that occurs during the schoolday.

**Media coordinator**—Contacts the media; prepares statements to disseminate to staff, students, parents, and the community; and maintains ongoing contact with police, emergency services, hospital representatives, and the district office to keep information current. Handles all media requests for information and responds after coordinating a response with the media coordinator for the district-level team.

**Crowd management coordinator**—In collaboration with local police and fire departments, develops and implements plans for crowd management and movement during crises, including any required evacuation plans and security measures. Crowd management plans must anticipate many scenarios, including the need to cordon off areas to preserve physical evidence or to manage increased vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Because of the possibility of actual threats to the physical safety of students, crowd management plans must provide for safe and organized movement of students in a way that minimizes the risk of harm to them under various threats, such as sniper fire.

member may assume more than one position, or several team members may share the responsibilities of one position. Team members must receive training for their positions and develop an appreciation of other team members' responsibilities. More detailed information about these positions appears in the sidebar.

The notification protocol in the school crisis response plan outlines specific ways to efficiently notify school crisis response team members, school staff, students, parents, and community members about crisis events that occur both during and outside of school hours. This protocol outlines provisions that may be needed during a crisis—supportive and appropriate classroom interventions;<sup>3</sup> designated rooms within the school that are staffed by counseling personnel who can provide short-term support services to students individually and in groups; and support groups during and after the crisis. The organizational model assigns roles to individuals to address the many communication needs of schools and communities during a crisis. Within this framework, the school crisis response team can manage communications, including rapidly contacting all necessary personnel; developing and circulating written notices for staff, students, parents, the community, and the media; responding to the increased need to evaluate and assemble information as it develops; and managing both local and national media. The school crisis response team can coordinate the efforts of school personnel and parents with those of police officers and mental health and medical professionals to address the emotional responses that evolve from traumatic and critical situations. The school crisis response team can also perform preliminary assessments of liabilities and vulnerabilities associated with each school and district. Factors that affect vulnerabilities include the population served by the school or district,

location and physical layout of the buildings, geographic and socioeconomic makeup of the area, and behavioral trends exhibited within the student population.

Schools are better able to function with minimal disruption in the immediate aftermath of a crisis if they have sufficient structure in place to coordinate services when the crisis occurs. Although adjustments will need to be made to student activities, such as postponing exams or substituting instructional activities with supportive classroom discussions about the crisis event, it is best to continue routine school activities as much as possible. Students who feel unable to maintain their regular school schedule should be permitted to seek counseling or support services in a less structured setting, such as a support room or guidance counselor's office. Some crisis situations necessitate closing a school for periods of time. However, whenever possible, it is best to avoid school closings and early dismissals, particularly during the crisis. Students find comfort in the schoolday routine and in the company of their peers and trusted adults. In addition, canceling school disrupts the family routine and places an additional burden on working parents who must scramble to find alternate childcare. Children who are already traumatized by a crisis may be placed in unfamiliar and unsatisfactory last-minute daycare. Further, temporary removal from school can sometimes increase a student's fears about returning to school and may engender school avoidance behaviors. In the aftermath of a crisis, if student safety is a concern at the school's location, it may be necessary to reconvene school in an alternate location. School crisis response plans should include arrangements for this possibility.

Without having in place a school crisis response plan and an infrastructure to support it, an effective response to a crisis

is unlikely. When developing a school crisis response plan, teams must begin with general protocols to handle elements present in all crises. However, these general protocols must be flexible so they can be modified to address the unique needs of special situations, such as natural disasters or criminal activities.

## Mental Health Triage

In providing care for students in the aftermath of a school crisis, the organizational model and school crisis response plan recommend that the school crisis response team follow the principles of mental health triage.<sup>4</sup> Staff in support rooms should provide mental health triage and make appropriate referrals to other support and counseling services in the school and community.

Schools operate with a zero reject policy. That is, schools were established to serve all students and are mandated to provide all necessary services required by students to facilitate their education. The principles of triage recognize that in certain settings and under certain conditions it is not possible to provide all needed mental health services to everyone. Instead, decisions must be based on the most efficient use of limited resources to prevent the most harm. In this context, mental health triage during a school crisis means that children in need of immediate evaluation and services by a mental health professional should be referred directly to appropriate community resources and should not receive extensive evaluations or counseling services by school personnel. This requires preexisting access to appropriate urgent mental health services for traumatized children and adolescents. Children who are not in need of urgent mental health services may be offered limited interventions, such as counselor-led

discussions in group settings like classrooms and support groups. Evaluations made during the immediate aftermath of a crisis must have specific goals—to identify those in need of urgent services and to expedite their referrals. Until additional resources become available, longer and more in-depth evaluations should be postponed.

## Followup

**R**eactions and responses to a crisis are both immediate and long term and may be observed for months or even years after an event. Both children and adults in a school community will have immediate and long-term reactions and responses to a crisis, including grief. A school-based crisis intervention team is particularly well suited to monitor the adjustment of students and staff members for an extended period of time. Ongoing observation by the school-based crisis intervention team allows team members to identify individuals who are in need of further services so they can be referred to community resources. The team may also recognize common needs of students and staff that can be addressed by establishing support groups in the school.

## Establishing Memorials

**O**ften, the school crisis response team must address the content and timing of memorializing the event. Immediate issues, such as how to formally convey condolences to family survivors on behalf of the school, are appropriately addressed by the school crisis response team after receiving as much input as possible from the school community. Frequently, formal memorialization activities, such as raising funds for a scholarship to honor a murdered teacher, are undertaken

too soon—sometimes within hours of the crisis. Although loving and therapeutic, memorialization activities that are undertaken too soon may divert energy and attention from the acute psychological and emotional needs of the victims. In addition, early memorialization events may be mistakenly interpreted by victims as indicating closure of the crisis. Victims who face closure of a crisis prematurely fail to take the time they need to grieve, adjust, and cope. For optimal recovery, nothing should discourage victims from continuing the grieving and healing process as long as necessary.

Thoughtful responses and ideas about how to memorialize people will often arise over time. Schools that rely on formal, traditional means of memorialization, such as placing a plaque in a hallway or dedicating the yearbook, should keep in mind that their actions may establish a precedent that may be difficult for the school to follow in the future. At the time of subsequent deaths of students or staff, those most directly affected by the loss may question why similar memorial activities are not instituted for their loved ones. Comparison of memorialization efforts is inevitable and likely to cause contention. To avoid painful comparisons, it is best to encourage the development and implementation of meaningful, symbolic, and respectful memorials for each person who died and whose loss affects the school community.<sup>5</sup>

## Enhancing Community Resources

**T**he plan for school crisis preparedness and response cannot and should not be developed by the school system in isolation. Members of a diverse group of disciplines and professions who represent the full range of community resources

should be involved directly in both planning and implementing the school crisis response plan. Through an organized, collaborative, and capacity-building planning process, the community can anticipate the majority of needs that may arise in a school crisis and then draw on the membership of the crisis response team and resource groups to identify available resources. An extensive network of partners from various service sectors, including police, other government agencies, mental health providers, and social services agencies, should be established and maintained. Then the necessary steps can be taken to develop the resources not currently available.

Although a time-consuming task, maintaining this network has benefits far beyond crisis intervention. The network allows the school and community to address a broad array of prevention and intervention services related to the mental health and safety of children and young adults within the region. For example, some school crisis situations will require the services of police and fire rescue teams. Promoting proactive and collegial relations with the local police will help minimize conflicts around organizational responses and allocations of resources by the police during crises. In addition, maintaining proactive and collegial relationships will make the interactions and communications between schools and police more effective in non-crisis incidents, such as in criminal investigations and arrests of students on school grounds or student probation discussions between juvenile justice personnel and school authorities. An effective working relationship with law enforcement is an immediate payoff of crisis preparedness and helps preserve commitment to the process of crisis planning by all of the community. A successful, effective school crisis response plan must benefit

not only the school and its local community, but also the school district and the larger community. Only when all elements of the larger community are involved can a successful school crisis response plan be developed, implemented, and maintained.

## Training Crisis Teams and School Staff

**A**lthough school staff members have a general understanding of child development and possess instructional skills, many are not familiar with children's reactions to trauma and stress and how they relate to a child's development. Also, many educators do not know how to apply their instructional abilities to support children and teach them positive coping skills during a crisis. Most school staff members are not aware of the basic principles of an incident command structure, nor do they know how to maintain an organizational focus during a crisis. Therefore, training conducted according to the School Crisis Response Initiative aims to cover the following areas:

- Crisis theory as applied to children and adults.
- Children's reactions to traumatic events and children's grieving and bereavement.<sup>6</sup>
- Crisis response organizational model with emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of school crisis response team members and implementation protocols of the crisis response.
- Principles of memorialization.
- Classroom interventions.

- Support room interventions.
- Mechanisms that enable staff to provide support for one another during a crisis.

Optimally, full school crisis response teams participate together in training that includes group activities that focus attention on working as a team and achieving balance between leadership and full participation by team members. Team members realize that the group process allows for deliberation from multiple vantage points and permits compromise that respects potentially competing priorities, such as ensuring order and security, providing the school community with accurate information, and promoting emotional recovery and optimal coping.

### Ongoing Consultation

Ongoing consultations with school crisis response teams promote further teamwork and help team members form functioning district teams and regional resource groups and establish and solidify collaborative relationships with local agencies, including mental health and juvenile justice agencies.

### Supporting School Crisis Response Team Members and School Staff

A crisis of any nature often awakens feelings related to a prior crisis that may assume a primary focus for a particular child or staff member. Given an appropriate opportunity during a crisis, these particular children and adults may be inclined to disclose a wide range of personal crises. If this is not anticipated, members of the crisis response team can easily be overwhelmed by the discrepancy between available resources, including skill limitations and available time of team members, and the evolving, seemingly infinite needs of the community.

All members of the crisis teams and school administration need to recognize that this work is difficult and they need to provide adequate support for school staff and other crisis response team members as they work. Crisis response planning for a community must ensure that appropriate supports are available to attend to the mental health needs of members of the crisis response team. An employee assistance plan (EAP) is one way to provide access to discreet, confidential, cost-free, and short-term mental health services. School systems that do not have an EAP may develop a resource list of several practitioners who are experienced in working with traumatized adults and have agreed to be available for offsite staff support. Generally, this approach requires considerable out-of-pocket expense, which may limit access for staff who need this service. Whether a school system uses an EAP or a less structured model based on available clinicians providing intervention with staff on a case-by-case basis, schools should make the names and numbers of support professionals and resources available to school staff at the beginning of a crisis.

## For More Information

**T**o obtain further information about the School Crisis Response Initiative or to request consultation or technical assistance, contact the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at [www.ncccev.org](http://www.ncccev.org) or 1-877-49-NCCEV (1-877-496-2238).

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## Notes

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2. Schonfeld, D., M. Kline, and members of the Crisis Intervention Committee, 1994, "School-based Crisis Intervention: An Organizational Model," *Crisis Intervention and Time-Limited Treatment* 1(2):155-166.

3. Lichtenstein, R., D. Schonfeld, M. Kline, and D. Speese-Linehan, 1995, *How to Prepare for and Respond to a Crisis*, Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development. Portions of this book may be viewed at [www.ascd.org/framebooks.html](http://www.ascd.org/framebooks.html) under the author Lichtenstein.

4. See note 2 above, Schonfeld, "School-based Crisis Intervention: An Organizational Model."

5. Newgass, S., and D. Schonfeld, 2000, "School Crisis Intervention, Crisis Prevention, and Crisis Response." A. Roberts, ed, *Crisis Intervention Handbook: Assessment, Treatment, and Research*, 2d ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 209-228.

6. Schonfeld, D., 1993, "Talking With Children About Death," *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 7(6): 269-274.

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