

## HANDLING A BOMB THREAT CALL

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**“A BOMB WILL EXPLODE IN THE SCHOOL AT 10 O’CLOCK.”** Unfortunately, words such as these are being heard in schools around the country and threats such as these are increasing at an alarming rate. The reasons for these bomb threats may vary from a student not wanting to take a test to the weather being too nice to attend school. Sometimes the reason is simply to instill fear in school officials and students. Regardless of the reasons, each threat must be taken seriously.

In light of recent incidents of violence in schools and the resulting media attention, schools have become a frequent target for bomb threats and packages suspected of being explosive devices. Due to the increased frequency in this type of incident schools must have a policy in place to properly respond when the threat is received.

A hasty over reaction to a bomb threat may result in panic and could further endanger the safety of students and staff alike. Information contained in this article is meant as a guide and may be adjusted to meet the needs of each educational facility.

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The bombing problem occurs in one of three areas: (1) the bomb threat, (2) the found unexploded bomb, and (3) the exploded bomb. Each area requires a separate plan of attack for the facility and the public safety authorities involved. In the formulation of a plan, six distinctive areas should be examined: (1) planning, (2) the threat, (3) evaluation of the threat, (4) evacuation procedure, (5) search techniques, and (6) locating a suspected device

**PLANNING:** Organizational planning for a bomb threat situation is to insure the continuation or re-establishment of school operations should such an event occur. Coordination, command and control are key elements to be considered in



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this area. These elements are designed to assure mutual planning approaches and objectives.

Coordination should be maintained with local and state law enforcement, fire departments, rescue squads, faculty members and other interested parties. The contacting of the agencies and parties will determine in what manner and to what extent they will assist in the emergency situation. Some public safety agencies will assist in the physical search of the premises, while others will only stand by until a device is located. For this reason, contact should be made in advance to assure cooperation with all parties concerned.

**THE THREAT:** A frequent occurrence throughout the nation is the telephone bomb threat, especially to the public schools. The bomb threat is a fearful problem for the unprepared individual to cope with. If a receptionist is suddenly confronted with a telephone call such as: "A bomb is going to explode in your building in forty-five minutes," what can be done? Personnel most likely to answer incoming calls should make preparations for this call well in advance.

Instruct all personnel to follow established procedures in the event a bomb threat call is received. The individual receiving a bomb threat should stay as calm as possible and attempt to secure as much information as possible from the caller.

The receiver should note the time of the call the tone of the voice, sex, race, speech variations and any background noise that may indicate the location where the call was made. The receiver should ask the caller his name as the last question and possibly he may give it without thinking. Most of the time the recipient of the bomb threat call will not be able to get any information beyond the threat, but a genuine effort should be made to obtain the aforementioned information. Once the threat is received, notification of the designated persons responsible for initiating the bomb threat plan should be accomplished immediately.

**EVALUATION:** Each and every threat must be carefully evaluated for its authenticity - No call or threat should be disregarded. In the evaluation process, management should try to determine from the threat information received if this threat is a hoax or if there may be an explosive device present. Threat information may be reviewed as general or specific. The general threat may only state, "a bomb is going to go off in fifteen minutes." This type of threat may be only a hoax designed to disrupt normal activities. The more specific information given during the threat increases the likelihood an explosive device may be present in the described location.

The greater percentage of bomb threats are made via telephone, however, some are received by mail. A written threat should receive the same priority as one received over the telephone. So as not to destroy available physical evidence,

the fewest people possible should handle the written threat. A written threat usually contains information of a specific nature and should never be ignored.

**EVACUATION:** In the past, upon receipt of a bomb threat, it has been common practice to evacuate the entire facility, regardless of the size. The decision to evacuate or not to evacuate may be made during the planning process of the comprehensive plan. Some plans adopted by school management have been to evacuate immediately. The alternative is to evaluate each threat and make the decision based on common sense, reasoning and merit. The decision to evacuate must be made by the school management and in most cases will not be made solely by the local law enforcement agency.

**THE SEARCH AND LOCATING OF A SUSPECTED DEVICE:** The search of the building for possible devices after a threat should be conducted by persons who are familiar with all portions of the building. If a suspicious package or suspected device is located during the search it must be stressed that in no case should a searcher touch, move, jar, or attach anything to the object. Public safety should then be contacted with a request for bomb technicians to assist. It is possible that local safety officers can conduct the search. Contact should be made with your local public safety agency to determine if their policies allow for use of their agency personnel in the search of the building.

Schools who have evacuated and or cancelled classes as a result of bomb threats most often continue to receive threats. Some of these schools have developed plans to make up instructional time lost due to these types of cancellations. One high school scheduled classes for Saturdays to make up the time lost which more than likely greatly reduced or stopped the threats all together. The website for that school was loaded with letters from students who opposed using their Saturdays for Bomb Threat Make Up Days. Other schools have developed plans to have students evacuate to specific areas where movement of the students can be controlled and to resume classes as soon as the search is conducted.

Bomb threats to schools will not stop but if each school develops a plan to properly and safely respond to these threats, it may assist in reducing the number of repeated threats. This brief overview of bomb threat planning has included only portions of the Bomb Threat Planning Guide compiled by the Oregon State Police. For a copy of the complete Guide contact the Oregon State Police, Arson/Explosives Section at 503-934-0243.