## **U.S. Department of Education**



Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center

# **REMS***EXPRESS*



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## **COLLABORATION: KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP**

It is vital that the District establishes [a] partnership with these outside organizations. ... This District invites all first responders and community partners to provide input in developing strategies to enhance emergency response and crisis management programs.

- Tony Donato, School District of Osceola County (Fla.), FY03, FY05 ERCM project director

An effective response to a school or community emergency requires a thoughtful and coordinated interagency plan to preserve and protect life, as those with both experience and expertise can confirm. The U.S. Department of Education's Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS)<sup>1</sup> initiative highlights the importance of collaboration among schools and community partners to ensure that schools are able to prevent and mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from emergency situations. The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) National Incident Management System (NIMS) provides guidance and structure for schools in emergency management planning efforts, even in situations requiring multiagency involvement. Schools, after all, bear primary responsibility for developing applicable emergency management plans and implementation of emergency operations. Schools have the important responsibility of formulating a collaborative plan that creates an appropriate climate, an explicit structure and clear procedures for effective multiagency partnerships.

Involvement of key community stakeholders is central to success in developing and implementing a comprehensive emergency readiness plan. However, creating and maintaining an engaged and productive collaboration is challenging. Identification and selection of members for collaboration is just an initial step. Establishing operational procedures that maximize meaningful member contribution is every bit as important to successful collaboration as having the "right" players at the table.

In June 2007, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) released the report, *Emergency* Management: Most School Districts Have Developed Emergency Management Plans, but Would Benefit from Additional Guidance. The GAO report recommended that the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security work together to identify and share strategies that will help "promote training between school districts and first responders and between school districts and community partners on how to implement district emergency management plans." To ensure responsiveness to this recommendation, ED solicited feedback from its current stakeholders regarding this issue. The lessons and recommendations in this newsletter, and the many quotes that support them, are drawn from 90 former and current grantees and other school and safety personnel who gave generously of their time and expertise in responding to ED's request during the fall of 2007. This strong response reflects the commitment and hard work of these personnel to ensure the safety of students across the nation.

This newsletter highlights challenges and successes in the collaborative experience of current and former REMS grantees. It organizes and reports lessons from their efforts to develop and maintain strong collaborations. This direct grantee experience is augmented by relevant material from other REMS publications and information resources.

To differentiate the evolving challenges in developing and maintaining successful collaboration for emergency preparedness, or response or recovery, this discussion is organized into three distinct phases. The **Initiation Phase** involves identifying potential collaboration members, engaging members appropriate to community and school needs and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Formerly the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-free School's Emergency Response and Crisis Management (ERCM) discretionary grant program.

capabilities, and developing a positive interpersonal network. The **Team Management** phase involves techniques for organizing an efficient and productive planning process, building a strong communications network and developing mutually beneficial working relations and procedures for prevention, response and recovery. Finally, **Strengthening the Partnership** involves ways of continuously improving, adapting to changing need and capacity and sustaining the collaboration.

#### Initiation

#### Getting Started: Identifying Potential Collaborators

The appropriate combination of organizations and individuals at the collaboration table will vary depending on the types of emergency most relevant to the community, the presence and capacity of community partners and the potential collaborators availability to participate. First responders (e.g., law enforcement, emergency medical services [EMS] and fire departments) are critical participants in any setting. However, collaboration stakeholders may come from a broad range of community agencies. A sample range of potential collaborators is represented in the following table.

# Table 1. Sample range of potential collaboratorsin emergency response

#### Potential Collaborators:

- Local city law enforcement
- Local county law enforcement
- State patrol
- Fire department
- Emergency medical services (EMS)/Ambulance
- Public health
- Community mental health
- Hospitals

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- Regional emergency management (FEMA)
- State and regional homeland security
- Governmental agencies:
  - Local Tribal State Federal
  - Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC)
- Community Emergency Response Teams (CERTs)
- Citizen Corps Councils
- Child protective services
- Social services
- Juvenile probation system
- Court system
- Victim's assistance
  Red Cross
- Red Cross
   Local husin
- Local businesses
   Disability communication
- Disability communityArea places of worship

The initial selection of the collaboration team may occur in several steps, with a small core of planners (typically school officials and first responders) identifying priority purposes and needs and potential members to invite. Whatever the details of this invitation process, FEMA has identified helpful guiding questions for identifying relevant stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> Relevant questions include those listed below.

#### FEMA Questions for Identifying Stakeholders

- Who might be responsible for what is intended?
- Who can make the planning process more effective through their participation or less effective by their nonparticipation or outright opposition?
- Who are the "voiceless"' for whom special efforts have been made (e.g., the disability community)?
- Who can contribute financial or technical resources?

FEMA guidance on planning also recognizes that the optimal mix of active coalition decision-makers will change as planning and implementation proceed: "*Stakeholders you involve may change several times* [depending on] *the needs or focus of the team.*"<sup>3</sup> An effective decision-making group must have sufficient focus on purpose and sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge to resolve the issues before them. As noted later in this brief, this may mean that the agency or individual membership will change. Even if some community stakeholders fail to join your planning group initially, it is important to keep them in the loop. Send out notifications of planning meetings and summaries of the meetings. They may be more centrally involved at a later point.

#### Initiating the Team

The collaborating team is initially organized to assess need and guide development of the emergency management plan. Officially recognized teams go by different titles (e.g., joint emergency management group, school safety alliance, joint advisory council or steering committee). If there are existing groups with relevant responsibilities, they can provide a foundation on which to build.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> State and Local Mitigation Planning: A How-To Guide: Getting Started—Building Support for Mitigation Planning. Federal Emergency Management Agency publication 386-1. September 2002. (Available online at: www.fema.gov/library/viewRecord.do?id=1867.)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid.

We have included first responders to be part of our school safety committee, which includes administrators, teachers, classified employees [for example, custodians and bus drivers] and parents. In addition, we have strongly encouraged our schools to invite first responders to spend lunch [in] our schools so that they become familiar with our facilities, faculty and students.

-Chad Carpenter, Ogden City School District (Utah), FY07 REMS project director

Joint leadership within the collaborative group is often effective. It relies upon the need for expertise from different agencies and the need for cooperation. The leaders do not have to be highlevel administrators. Indeed, a designee with more focused relevant experience may be more effective in this role. However, **support from upper-level administrators is key to successful collaboration**. In some circumstances direct involvement of agency leaders may be important to ensuring and building this support, particularly in the initiation phase.

We used personal visits to facilitate this [establishment of a school safety alliance] along with written and electronic communications.

– Pamela Sook, Gratiot-Isabella Regional Educational Service District (Mich.), FY07 REMS project director

Many times, first responders or community partners are unaware that schools are interested in developing or participating in communitywide emergency planning efforts.

Joint activities preceding or early into the collaboration process may facilitate collaboration. School districts can invite first responders to serve on an advisory panel within the school district, allowing for natural sharing of information and identification of problem areas.

Creating liaison roles also can help organize and support the collaborative process. School Resource Officers (SROs) can be important in filling this role. SROs are familiar with community resources, including those relevant to emergency management, and can facilitate the communication process between schools and other community systems.

#### Summary Tips for Initiating the Team

- Identify specific first responder agencies
- Form an alliance, council, or steering committee
- Establish group leaders
- Participate in joint team activities
- Present coordination activities to other stakeholders

#### **Building Team Relationships**

Experience has shown that fostering informal interactions among team partners can be effective in improving understanding of one another. Indeed, veterans of collaboration in community settings often affirm that success is all about relationships and building understanding and supportive interpersonal relations in the team. Emphasizing personal communication is an important tool for building these relationships. In the beginning, it may be best to make personal invitations to prospective members. Opportunities for personal interaction outside formal meetings can be created. For example, partners may be invited to attend lunch at the school. Fire and police departments can participate in a school open house to distribute preparedness brochures to parents and meet the school community. These activities will pay off in increased familiarity among partners as the planning and implementation process proceeds.

#### Making It Work: Team Management

In fall of 2007, prior REMS grantees offered suggestions for effectively managing collaborative planning and implementation processes, including techniques that build on the initiation phase by using more focused activities to increase understanding of the cultures and procedures of other organizations that are on the team. While forming personal relations is important to working together, understanding the constraints and opportunities (e.g., time, funding and personnel) in other organizations is important to developing the authority, decision-making and work procedures that are crucial to specific planning of joint activities. Prior REMS grantees also emphasize the importance of clear purpose and decision processes that bring closure and move the team ahead, effective communication and efficient meetings that respect the time and effort of all collaborators.

#### Develop a Joint Agency Coordination Plan

Emergency management collaboration brings together agencies and organizations that have very different organizational structures and procedures. Lines of authority, procedures for accountability and decision-making organization and style, for example, will be very different among schools, first responder organizations and social and personal support services. Once stakeholders have been identified and a collaborative group is established, joint development of a strategic plan that sets clear guidelines for effective collaboration is important. The plan should have clearly stated goals, objectives and outcomes with specific roles and responsibilities delineated. Often, this is done through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or a letter of agreement, which should include a description of roles and responsibilities in improving and strengthening emergency management plans, as well as ongoing and future coordination and collaboration.

#### Summary Tips for Team Management

- Develop strategic plans, or guidelines, or both
- Develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or letter of agreement
- Develop description of roles and responsibilities
- Incorporate these roles and responsibilities into job description
- Alternate persons designated to attend meetings, *if needed*

#### **Understand One Another's Roles**

As the collaboration moves into the detailed planning stage for the development of explicit working relationships to share responsibility in actual emergency response situations, it is important that school officials, first responders and community partners develop an understanding of one another's organizational missions and roles. This understanding is fundamental to developing shared procedures built on the capacity and constraints in diverse organizations. One technique recommended by grantees is to "shadow" a first responder or school professional to obtain a first-hand understanding of job responsibilities. Joint training and practice events are also valuable. Even simple tabletop exercises have been cited as an effective process in helping people understand respective roles.

#### Summary Tips for Understanding Roles

- Respect confidentiality of team members
- Build rapport with team members
- "Shadow" another professional
- Provide copies of Incident Command System (ICS), contact information, and the school's emergency management plan to all members
- Ask questions

Understanding of procedures also can be furthered through sharing information. Schools can provide first responders with copies of their Incident Command System (ICS) assignments, relevant contact information and school emergency management plans as this helps both in preparing for and responding to an emergency. The Incident Command System (ICS), which is the hierarchical leadership team structure within NIMS, is the structure first responders utilize in implementing incident management teams. When clarification is needed, it is important to directly ask key leaders to not make assumptions and to hold information sessions as necessary. An organizational chart depicting school and community responders can facilitate a better understanding of the other groups' roles. This level of joint activity is important because it goes beyond shared objectives to understanding the work procedures that must be melded in real response situations.

Recognizing the shared opportunities for integrating procedures and the constraints in different organizations will help to build smooth operation response procedures. It is important background for discussing guidelines that can apply across agencies, such as the National Incident Management System (NIMS) offered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

#### Agreeing on a Structure for Collaborative Implementation

In accordance with Homeland Security Presidential Directive/HSPD-5, whose subject is management of domestic incidents, NIMS provides a consistent approach for federal, state and local governments to work effectively and efficiently together to prepare for, prevent, respond to and recover from domestic incidents, regardless of cause, size or complexity. Therefore, it is critical that schools have a similar understanding of this system and how it would be applied in a school emergency.

#### Communicate Continuously and Effectively

*Open and frequent communication and networking opportunities have been useful strategies to implement our programs.* 

-Beverly Baroni-Yeglic, Southgate Community Schools (Mich.), FY06 ERCM project director

Continuous and effective communication requires leadership and an organized communication structure that respects limited time and resources. Emergency management collaboration should include face-to-face meetings, but (as discussed below) meeting time is often scarce, and it cannot be the only source of regular communication. Time constraints or geographical distance may require communication through e-mails, conference calls or other methods. The communication system should be clearly organized to create channels that provide information and documents to the persons that will use them and that provide event announcements (e.g., conference calls, meetings, trainings) to the relevant audience. Communication is most effective when it is organized to get relevant information to stakeholders. Too much information can reduce attentiveness. Flexibility, knowledge and willingness to use alternative communication methods are important. The more consistent the contact between agencies, there is greater likelihood that lasting partnerships will be formed.

#### Meet

One such barrier [to collaboration] is that often school districts are not brought to the table with other community partners (e.g., health departments, Red Cross, FEMA, etc.) when area or regional emergency plans are being discussed. To combat this isolation, representatives of school districts should identify the key community partners, **determine when meetings are held**, and request a seat at the table, even if it is only at an observational level at the onset. Many times these community partners have been unaware that schools are interested in developing collaborative partnerships, and it may be up to school districts to initiate this contact.

> Steven McElroy, Columbus City Schools (Ohio), FY03, FY05, FY06 ERCM project director

Meetings are a critical point of interaction in collaborations, particularly in early stages before the collaboration develops regular communications or creates regular work groups of interagency teams. Since they are a focal point for decision making, it is important that meetings be efficient and productive. Initial priorities must include clear organization of leadership and administrative responsibility (e.g., chairperson(s), secretary, communications support) and initiation of meeting schedules and collective responsibilities.

Meetings need to be well planned and executed with a specific start and end time, a clear agenda and a meeting facilitator assigned to ensure the agenda is followed and time usage is maximized. Minutes of the meeting also should be taken and distributed for those who could not attend and to serve as a historical record.

The number of goals and objectives to be accomplished can seem overwhelming. It is important to identify and prioritize two or three initial goals for each meeting and to ensure that resolution is reached at the designated time. It is also important to be sure that assigned tasks are equally divided among agencies. If specific information is to be gathered before the next meeting, this task should be clearly assigned.

#### Summary Tips for Successful Meetings

- *Have a specific start and end time*
- Start with a clear agenda
- Assign meeting facilitator
- Take and distribute meeting minutes
- Prioritize two to three goals or objectives
- Form subcommittees if needed
- Identify agenda items for subsequent meetings
- Follow through on unfinished business

As a focal point of collaboration activity, meetings should be seen as an opportunity to build relationships. When scheduling face-to-face meetings, school personnel can offer to host the meeting at their school site. This allows first responders to become familiar with a school's layout and visitor screening procedures while getting the chance to meet the school incident management team and school staff. It also provides them an understanding of school routines and helps schools to minimize the impact of turf issues among team members as collaboration is being done on-site with specific details regarding the unique school structure being discussed. Similarly, it can be just as important to rotate meeting sites to those of the first responders' primary offices. Meetings should be regularly scheduled or scheduled well in advance to allow ample time to place on calendars and avoid competing obligations.

School districts need to be open to suggestions [from the collaborative members] that sometimes are not what they would choose, but they need to rely on the expertise in the community. Change is always hard but the outcome will be better for everyone.

-Tudy Wicks, Aurora Public Schools (Colo.), FY07 REMS project director

Before a meeting ends, agenda items for the next meeting should be identified. Follow-through on unfinished business is critical to ensure all stakeholders feel as if their time is worthwhile and progress is being made. Overall, one of the most important rules for continued buy-in and sustainability of collaboration is having productive meetings where all members are engaged. For progress to occur, or the long-term adjustment of roles, relationships and processes takes time, so patience is needed.

#### Summary Tips for Meeting Locations

- Hold face-to-face meetings
- Rotate meeting sites
- Schedule regular meeting times
- Rotate meeting schedules to accommodate members' schedules if necessary
- Schedule in advance

#### **Organize Work Groups**

Organization of team activities can be very important to creating a context of support for collaboration. In some situations, it may aid collaboration to divide the larger planning group into smaller, more focused committees at the individual school level, by specific problems or by other specialized topics. If there is a large group, forming subcommittees or subgroups to focus on completing specific collaborative goals maximizes efficiency. At the building level, schools can include local first responders on a school safety committee, which allows first responders to become familiar with the school facility, faculty and students. The collaborative group also can present their coordination activities to the city council or school board or at a town hall meeting. These assignments build the cross-agency work groups that are important to cementing the collaborative process. Work groups provide the opportunity for hands-on work in teams that involve members of different organizations in the collaboration. They can be an excellent way to involve staff and build the working relationships that will be critical to a smooth response in an actual emergency.

#### Strengthening the Partnership

Many prior REMS grantees suggest activities to strengthen the collaborative partnership and to institutionalize working relationships in a way that can be sustained. These ideas focus on promoting shared opportunities for learning to work together (e.g., trainings, exercises or drills) and for creating working relationships that are recognized and supported in the collaborating organizations.

We have tried to honor the expertise of our partners in our training plans, and directly involve our first responders as trainers whenever possible. We have also tried to join rather than reinvent (for example, participating in the local emergency planning council) and be helpers at their trainings and activities as well as [get] their input when we are trying to plan something of our own.

> - Tudy Wicks, Aurora Public Schools (Colo.), FY07 REMS project director

#### Institutionalizing Roles and Work Groups

Research on sustaining innovative collaborations emphasizes the importance of institutionalizing roles and procedures and creating work groups that are invested in the value of the collaboration in supporting their ability to do their jobs. For future sustainability, adding these expectations to formal job descriptions is crucial. This formalization occurs at two levels: agency and individual. Having both job and agency descriptions mitigates the negative impact and disruption often felt with high staff turnover, as it is embedded within the roles and responsibilities of a particular position or agency. Another positive outcome of writing collaborative duties into a job or agency description is that it often will become part of the overall performance evaluation, which adds a higher level of responsibility and accountability to carry out the collaborative duties.

Throughout this brief, the benefits of creating concrete opportunities for collaborators to work together have been emphasized. In addition to the importance of these opportunities for learning, developing shared procedures and creating shared understanding and expectations about how to work together effectively, they are an essential contributor to strengthening and maintaining the collaboration. When first responders and school staff come to understand how the collaborative roles they learn and practice will help them protect children and work effectively together to maintain safety, the fruits of the planning procedure will be sustained.

# Shared Interests: Training, Drills and Exercises

Holding cross-trainings in which first responders train school personnel, and vice versa, is an effective and efficient collaborative activity. It is a good use of limited time that avoids "reinventing the wheel." Cross-training builds and reinforces respect, rapport and responsibility as participants learn about each other's roles, perspectives, training backgrounds, organizational structure and skills. It is important to select effective trainers who are open to new ideas, model collaboration and are able to elicit shared orientations while avoiding "turf" issues. Selecting training sites with the proper equipment and venue to meet training and practice needs is also important to the training's success. When appropriate, tabletop exercises, simulations or drills can be a helpful learning tool, especially when school personnel and first responders are participating in the exercise together and learning as the experience unfolds. Allowing first responders to use schools for drills and training activities on Saturdays or when school is not in session can be a powerful learning tool. Trainings should always be evaluated to ensure responsiveness, relevance and a positive experience across diverse audiences.

Developing a shared training agenda is central to developing a common vision and direction. For example, schools need to become familiar with NIMS, utilized by all first responder agencies. First responders can help conduct NIMS training for school staff. Many NIMS courses are also available online, free of charge through the FEMA's Emergency Management Institute (http://training. fema.gov). One course in particular, IS-100, Introduction to the Incident Command System for Schools, is intended to familiarize school staff with how ICS principles can be applied in a school setting. Once trained on NIMS and ICS, school personnel are better prepared to communicate with first responders during their initial collaborative conversations, and time does not need to be spent in meetings learning the basic concepts. In return, schools can provide training to the first responders on the specific cultural needs of their school community and how to work with students with special needs.

#### Summary Tips for Training, Drills and Exercises

- Collaborative and effective trainers are chosen from each group
- Group members are to be open to new ideas
- Careful selection of training sites
- Exercises or drills are practiced
- Shared training objectives

One of the ninety former and current grantees and other school and safety personnel who gave generously of their time and expertise during the fall of 2007 to describe experiences collaborating with community partners, Michael Thomas of Jackson Public Schools (Miss.), sums up procedures to facilitate collaborative planning:

- · Create flexible meeting schedules;
- Focus training on shared interests;
- Secure buy-in on training needs;
- Deliver content effectively; and
- Evaluate completed training sessions.

[Pairing a] first responder with a teacher provides the best combination. One knows how to train, the other knows the details needed for the training.

– Michael Thomas, Jackson Public Schools (Miss.), FY07 REMS project director

#### Summary

Taking the time to identify key responder agencies, build strong personal networks and develop understanding of each other's roles are important first steps to effective collaboration. Developing a joint agency coordination plan, organizing productive and efficient meetings, implementing continuous and effective communication and being actively involved in shared activities are important to building on collective understanding and developing concrete work procedures. Successful implementation of these strategies through rapport, mutual respect and the completion of assigned tasks will help to secure the physical and psychological safety of schools and ensure quality emergency management collaboration for both schools and first responders.

Educators cannot conduct emergency management tasks alone. The willingness of first responder agencies to collaborate with schools and all groups being open to learning about one another's perspectives, operational structures and expertise is critical. However, true collaboration is incomplete until it moves to the operational level within collaborating agencies and organizations. When roles are institutionalized to bring together the complementary capabilities and expertise of agencies that typically work separately and work groups understand how working together helps them to achieve their mutual objectives for student safety and well-being, collaborations will succeed and last.

#### Resources

- State and Local Mitigation Planning: *A How-To Guide: Getting Started—Building Support for Mitigation Planning.* Federal Emergency Management Agency publication 386-1. September 2002. (Available online at: www.fema.gov/library/ viewRecord.do?id=1867.)
- Adleman, H. and L. Taylor. Effective Strategies Series for Creating Safer Schools and Communities. *"Fostering School Family and Community Involvement."* U.S. Department of Justice. Published by the Hamilton Fish Institute for School and Community Violence and Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. September 2007. (Available online at: http://www.hamfish.org.)
- "Tapping into Nontraditional Community Partners for Emergency Management." *ERCM Express.* U.S. Department of Education. Volume 3, Issue 1. 2007.
- "Engaging Administrators in School Emergency Management." *Helpful Hints.* U.S. Department of Education. Volume 2, Issue 5. 2007.
- *Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide for Schools and Communities.* U.S. Department of Education. January 2007. (Available online at: www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/crisisplanning.html.)

**Citizen Corps** was created in 2002 to help coordinate volunteer activities that intend to make communities safer, stronger and better prepared to respond to any emergency situation. It provides opportunities for people to participate in a range of measures to make their families, their homes, and their communities safer from the threats of crime, terrorism and disasters of all kinds. Citizen Corps is coordinated nationally by the Department of Homeland Security and is accessible at: www.citizencorps.gov.

**Ready.gov** was launched In February 2003 by the Department of Homeland Security. The Ready Campaign is a national public service advertising campaign to inform and empower citizens to prepare for and respond to terrorist attacks, disasters and other emergencies. The Ready Campaign offers community-based information, guides and strategies for staying safe and secure at home and in the community.

**FEMA's Emergency Management Institute** offers free online courses to train school officials to prepare for and manage emergencies. These courses include: Multi-Hazard Emergency Planning for Schools, accessible at: http:// training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is362.asp. Introduction to the Incident Command System for Schools, accessible at: http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/IS100sc.asp.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools' (OSDFS) REMS TA Center authored this publication. The TA Center supports schools and school districts in developing and implementing comprehensive emergency management plans by providing technical assistance via trainings, publications and individualized responses to requests. REMS Newsletters provides a quick overview of school emergency management topics that are frequently the subject of inquiries.

For information about the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools grant program, contact Elizabeth Argeris (elizabeth. argeris@ed.gov), Tara Hill (tara.hill@ed.gov), Michelle Sinkgraven (michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov) or Sara Strizzi (sara.strizzi@ed.gov).

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