

Tough Talk: Symposium Addresses Violence in Schools



Over 120 in-person and virtual attendees took part in NYSIR's sixth annual symposium,

Fighting School Violence: Hardening the Target, Softening the Environment, July 31-Aug. 1 in Tarrytown.

Experts in security and psychology along with school administrators offered participants best practices for identifying individuals who may pose a threat to members of the school community, and provided tools to aid in violence prevention.

Briefly Speaking:
News from around
NYSIR world

It Could
Happen to You

The symposium was sponsored jointly with Munich RE reinsurance, and given as part of the reciprocal's School Violence Prevention initiative, which also includes NYSIR's new Violence Prevention Manual, a resource center on the NYSIR website and training modules at NYSIR Online University (NYOU).

The symposium began with a presentation by Michael Kapuscinski, U.S. Secret Service Region 1 domestic

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TOUGH TALK... CONTINUED

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security strategist, and Jeffrey McGarry, supervisory social science research



JEFFREY
McGARRY

specialist with the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center. The pair talked about the motivations for school attacks, how perpetrators plan ahead, how and why many of them share their intentions to do harm prior to acting, and the

eight steps of threat assessment.

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JEFFREY McGARRY

“We have to humanize a little,” said McGarry. “The kids who commit these acts, they’re at a place where things are going terribly wrong, and their attack is often a final act for them.”

He added that while most school attackers are males with an average age of 15 or 16, there is no official profile of a school attacker. McGarry also said motivations are often complex, but driven mostly by some kind of grievance against peers, romantic partners or school staff.

“Classmates are in the best position to recognize that something is going on with a student,” McGarry

said. “Nearly two-thirds of plots have been reported by student peers.”

FOLLOW THE EVIDENCE

The next speaker was Peter Langman, Ph.D., a psychologist who's performed

forensic interviews with a number of school shooters and has written multiple books on school violence. In a presentation called “School Attacks:

Stereotypes, Warning Signs

and Barriers to Action,” Langman pushed back against typecasting all school shooters as loners who are victims of bullying, and urged school officials to follow where the evidence leads, which often illuminates a wider array of perpetrators and causes.

He also noted that students planning an attack often leak some information about their plans ahead of time through verbal threats, social media posts and warnings to specific members of the school community to stay away from campus on a particular day or at a specific time.

“We have to educate people to take these warning signs seriously,” he said.

One of the biggest impediments to quickly responding to such signs prior to an attack, according to Langman, is fellow students assuming disturbing remarks are just unserious bragging or joking. Another is fear – either of the perpetrator himself, of overreacting



PETER LANGMAN, PH.D

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TOUGH TALK... CONTINUED

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without sufficient information or of stigmatizing the student.

Langman closed his remarks by reminding that shootings can be, and often are, stopped before they happen, and that proper threat assessment by school officials, peers and family can save lives.

"We're all on duty," he said.

ATTENTION TO PREVENTION

A presentation titled "Behavioral Threat Assessment" came next, delivered by two officials from the Saratoga Springs City School District, Assistant Superintendent David L'Hommedieu and Director

of Facilities John Thuener, who went into detail about a three-tiered prevention model, which begins with actions that cover all students, including security guidelines and a consistent discipline policy. The

next tier covers at-risk students with problem behaviors, and suggests they receive short-term counseling, mentoring and other support. The final tier consists of intensive interventions for students with serious behavior problems, which could include special education

services, ongoing counseling, thorough monitoring and supervision, and alternative school placement.

L'Hommedieu and Thuener then offered advice on which school professionals

should be part of a behavioral threat assessment team. Permanent members should include a counselor, social worker or psychologist, along with a resource officer and another relevant administrator. To ensure flexibility, they advised that a staff member trusted by students, a staff member who can relate to the family, and others should be included.

One of the last topics covered by the pair involved the distinction between transient threats, those that express anger or frustration but that can easily be resolved, and substantive threats, which include a detailed plan, means and serious intent to harm others. Thuener advised symposium attendees to "always trust your gut" when observing a potential threat, and report it to the proper authorities.

THE RECOVERY PROCESS

Next, Superintendent Randy Russell of Freeman School District in Washington state presented "The Road from Difficulty to Determination: Resiliency and Leadership Capacity Lessons Learned." The session took a deep dive into steps taken by the district in the aftermath of a shooting at its high school in 2017 that resulted in one death and three injuries.

"I was going back to a murder scene every day," said Russell.

He led the symposium participants in sharing exercises with phone numbers and photos to demonstrate how parents, students and school officials opened up to each other to facilitate the rebuilding of

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JOHN THUENER
AND DAVID
L'HOMMEDIU

News from around NYSIR World

Briefly Speaking

NYSIR Board Member Receives ASBO Service Award

Victor Manuel, a member of the NYSIR Board of Governors and assistant

York, participating in programs to create spaces for educational discussions,



MANUEL RECEIVES AWARD AS FAMILY AND ASBO MEMBERS LOOK ON. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARK SWEENEY PHOTOGRAPHY.

superintendent for business at Jericho Public Schools, recently earned the Association of School Business Officials (ASBO) New York's Philip B. Fredenburg Memorial Award for Outstanding Service.

The honor is awarded annually to an individual whose service and contributions over their long career have had a positive impact on the association, its members and the entire profession. Recipients' school districts receive a \$1,000 donation in their names to purchase equipment or offer a scholarship to a student.

Manuel has held various leadership roles for ASBO New

to ask tough questions set him apart.

Victor's commitment to the overall

educational program and community involvement are commendable and worthy of celebration."

Manuel said he was humbled by the award, and described ASBO New York as an "amazing network that provides tremendous insight into the inner workings of school districts and helps each of us do our job better. I am thankful to ASBO New York and all my colleagues for their wisdom, and grateful for the lifelong friendships I have made over the years." ■

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NYSIR Staff Members Volunteer at Mary Brennan INN

In late June, NYSIR Executive Director Robert Lulley, Jr., Administrative Assistant Krystel Allen, Office Administrator Lisa Morehouse, Senior Financial Accountant

"The organization does great work to serve those in need in the Hempstead community and surrounding areas," says Morehouse. "It was our first time

volunteering there as a group, and I hope we'll be back soon."



FROM LEFT ARE LISA MOREHOUSE, KRYPEL ALLEN, ROBERT LULLEY, JR., BRENDA SCHMALZLE, DUSHKA PETKOVICH AND JASON TESSLER, DIRECTOR OF WAREHOUSING AND DISTRIBUTION FOR THE INN WAREHOUSE AND BOUTIQUE.

The INN was founded 40 years ago as a single soup kitchen, but has grown to include a free clothing boutique and resource center, two emer-

Brenda Schmalzle and Staff Accountant Dushka Petkovich volunteered at the Mary Brennan INN, a private social service organization in Hempstead, Long Island.

The group worked in the warehouse and boutique, helping to sort through donated clothes and bedding.

gency shelters in Nassau County and a long-term housing program. The INN's soup kitchen is the largest of its kind on Long Island, serving between 300 and 400 guests, five days a week. It's estimated that the INN has served close to 16 million meals since it opened in 1983. ■

Reciprocal Earns AM Best 'A-' Excellent Rating



Credit rating agency AM Best recently gave NYSIR an 'A-' or Excellent rating for 2023-2024 based on the reciprocal's high-quality reinsurance panel, overall balance sheet strength and aggressive expense management.

In its report, AM Best made note of how NYSIR's hands-on management approach by school business managers and

superintendents through its board of governors has benefitted the reciprocal and its members, especially during a period when the state's 2019 Child Victims Act led to increased claims against schools, which in turn created new underwriting challenges.

"We're very pleased to have been affirmed as an AM Best A- insurer," said NYSIR

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Education.

It's a complicated enterprise. Faculty. Staff. Students. Supplies. Transportation. Buildings and grounds. With seemingly a thousand things demanding attention all at once, risk management is bound to slip to the bottom of the list every once in a while, right? Here's why it shouldn't, and why it's important to remember...

It Could Happen to You.



It's no surprise that rebounding is a coveted skill in basketball. Few things are more gratifying for a player than putting points on the board after an initial miss. In the legal system, appeals can serve the same purpose, offering the chance to turn what initially was a negative outcome into something positive. One NYSIR subscriber got that opportunity after a student who was injured playing basketball in the school gym filed suit, forcing the district to play defense against an oncoming charge.

When a shot ricocheted off the basket rim, the student gave chase and corralled the ball a few feet from the gym's retracted bleachers. Another player seeking the ball ran into him, pushing him into the bleachers.

The student was participating in a two-on-two rebounding drill as part of practice with his junior varsity team. When a shot he took ricocheted off the basket rim, he gave chase and corralled the ball a few feet from the gym's retracted bleachers. When the student turned back toward the court, another player seeking the ball ran into him, pushing him into the bleachers.

An MRI revealed a significant dislocation of the shoulder, which required surgery to repair a torn labrum. Post-operation physical therapy also was required, and subsequently the student was

diagnosed with situational depression, tension, anxiety and sleep disturbances, which he alleged were brought on by the bleacher incident.

He sued the district, claiming that supervision was negligent, as was the coach's decision to hold a drill without floor markings, which would have indicated the boundaries of the playing area and likely lessened the chance of any action taking place close to the retracted bleachers. Attorneys for the district estimated the injury value at approximately \$200,000.



A FEW MORE POINTS

The school's athletic director testified pre-trial that the drill should have been conducted within the boundary lines, and that not doing so could be seen by others as the coach's failure to recognize the potential for injury. That idea seemingly was supported by the mother of the plaintiff in her own pre-trial

testimony, when she said that a parent of another student participating in the practice told her he thought the drill was very aggressive and that the students shouldn't have been facing off against each other in that way.

But the athletic director also testified that, despite her earlier statement, she didn't have any concerns about the coach

removing the drill boundaries, adding that the activity was appropriate for the age and skill level of the athletes and that it was conceivable a student still could make contact with the bleachers even if boundaries were in place.

The plaintiff's

mother also said she didn't believe her son was pushed by the other student on purpose, a sentiment echoed by the plaintiff himself, who said in his own pre-trial testimony that he never witnessed the second student intentionally fouling or pushing anyone at any point during the drill. The plaintiff also testified that the coach advised players before the drill that there would be no boundary lines, and that none of the players seemed concerned. The coach, as part of his pre-trial testimony, said

he warned the students prior to the beginning of the drill to stay away from the bleachers.

TAKING A SHOT

The defense asked for a summary judgment, arguing that the lack of a line on the gym floor was not the proximate cause of the injury, that many balls leave the court during a basketball practice or game, and that there is frequent contact between players. Though the facts of the case were not in dispute, the trial-level court called a foul, denying the defense's motion because of differing expert opinions presented by each side.

The decision didn't address the defense's argument that the plaintiff, by participating in the drill, was assuming risk inherent to the activity. Attorneys for the district filed an appeal with an intermediate-level appellate court, which reversed the denial for summary judgment with a 4-1 decision. The ruling held even after the plaintiff's attorneys reargued in front of the court of appeals, and judgment ultimately was rendered for the school district.

THE LESSON?

While there may be no such thing as home-court advantage during trial, taking your shot to a higher level can sometimes lead to a slam-dunk victory.

It could happen to you. ■

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A.M. BEST RATING, CONTINUED

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Executive Director Robert Lulley, Jr., “and in large part credit the experienced and dedicated school superintendents and business officials who serve on our board of governors for that achievement. We look forward to continuing to serve our subscriber districts and BOCES at levels of the highest standard.”

AM Best also cited NYSIR's high subscriber retention rate and outstanding reputation in the school insurance marketplace for its stable pricing, leading-edge risk management services and loss control, calling the reciprocal New York state's leading writer of public-school insurance. ■

TOUGH TALK, CONTINUED



RANDY RUSSELL

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their school community, which ultimately took five years.

“We basically went back and built a school district from the ground up,” he said.

The sharing exercise focused on relationships, the first piece of Russell's “3 Ships” concept, which also includes leadership and partnerships. He said every great relationship has a foundation of communication and trust, and then dove deeper into leadership, saying that great leaders focus on continuous improvement and know how to navigate a changing environment.

Russell closed the loop by talking about partnerships, which he characterized as mutually beneficial relationships.

The symposium wrapped up with NYSIR Senior Vice President and Director of Risk Management Brett Carruthers providing highlights of the reciprocal's School Violence Prevention Initiative. He outlined a few topics from the new Violence Prevention Manual, including the role of security and school resource officers, security self-assessment forms and emergency response and communications. Carruthers also highlighted training modules available on the NYSIR website, including “Emergency Response Planning: Pre-Planning in the Information Age,” as well as two NYOU courses and the Violence Prevention Center, also available on the website. ■

