In Case of Emergency, Open Browser
In 2010, the state of Nevada determined that its emergency preparedness for schools was struggling to comply with mandates and directives from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Presidential Decision Directives and the U.S. Department of Education. Accordingly, the state engaged us to provide it with a web-based preparedness tool and to train local agencies and personnel in its use. The first area in which the tool and plan were implemented was with Nevada’s 17 school districts, following Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program protocols and guidelines. After conducting interviews with first-responder organizations, we developed a plan and a web-based tool — and trained stakeholders in its use — adopted by Nevada as the state standard for K-12 emergency and crisis management.

At 7:00 on the morning of October 21, 2013, a 12-year-old boy entered the Sparks Middle School playground. He was carrying a 9-millimeter semiautomatic pistol he had found in his parents’ home. He opened fire, wounding two classmates and killing a math teacher who had tried to take the gun away from the boy. Then he shot and killed himself.

Sparks Middle School is in Sparks, Nevada, and is part of the Washoe County School District. That morning in October, Aaron Kenneston, Washoe County Emergency Manager, had gone to work early. He received a text message from the Washoe County School District Emergency Manager saying there had been a shooting at Sparks Middle School. As Kenneston was being alerted to the unfolding tragedy, the school already had begun executing the SPARTAN (Schools Prepared And Ready Together Across Nevada) response plan. Teachers directed students to take shelter in pre-identified safe locations. Administrators notified first responders and the media. And the school began its lockdown procedures. Within minutes, police, fire and emergency medical technicians arrived on the scene.

If one ever can say that so painful and shocking an incident was handled well, one could say that of the Sparks Middle School shooting. A few weeks after the incident, Washoe County’s School District Superintendent said, “The more we learn about the case, the more we can see our procedures actually worked and saved the lives of a lot of children.”

The rapid response of all the actors was facilitated by the web-hosted, comprehensive Emergency Management Plan we devised for use by all 17 of Nevada’s county school districts. Not only was the plan available to school staff members on their computer screens — with drop-down menus to guide actions and assure maximum effective responsiveness as events unfolded with brutal rapidity — but the web-based nature of the plan’s platform allowed the school and the first responders to stay...
“Plans are worthless but planning is everything.”

- Dwight Eisenhower

on the same page and operate from an identical script, with uniform policies, procedures and links to every relevant resource for (in this case) shooting incidents. All the actions taken had been pre-loaded into the tool.

This kind of holistic, detailed and dynamic emergency preparedness, today, is an unhappy necessity.

“It used to be unheard of for serious school disasters to occur,” says Kenneston, sadly. “Now, unfortunately, they’re more commonplace.”

HOMELAND CHALLENGES ON THE OPEN RANGE

In 2010, the state of Nevada determined that its emergency readiness, operational recovery and continuity planning were struggling to comply with mandates and directives from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Presidential Decision Directives and the U.S. Department of Education. Given Nevada’s low-population density (41 states have higher densities) and its many underfunded rural areas, it was difficult for the state to disseminate and standardize effective emergency response procedures and processes, as well as Continuity of Operation Plans.

Paper plans, gathering dust in drawers or sitting on shelves, are not easily retrieved, especially in a crisis situation, nor can it be certain that every school, and all the appropriate responders in a specific area, have received plan updates even if they have been devised. (In the aftermath of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, it was revealed that the school’s emergency plan had not been made current since 2006, creating liability issues for the school district.) Nevada’s relatively isolated areas needed a more reliable way of ensuring they all were operating from the same script. Furthermore, the procedures and processes needed to be brought into compliance in the most cost-effective manner possible.

Nevada has two large metropolitan areas — Reno and Las Vegas — that contain 80 percent of the state’s citizens. The rest of the population is dispersed over a vast, often trackless area. Washoe County, for example, even though it includes Reno (231,000 people), has a population of 429,000 spread out over 6,500 square miles. (Boston, by comparison, has more than 600,000 inhabitants crammed into 90 square miles.) The Washoe County School District is the second largest in Nevada, with approximately 63,000 students enrolled in 93 schools. Given that scale, keeping emergency response procedures up to date was almost impossible if the system had to rely on paper-based plans.

Adding to the difficulty of optimizing the county’s crisis response capabilities was a relative lack of communication among local responders and schools. School emergency preparation, in Kenneston’s words, had been limited to conducting fire drills. That level of preparedness did not suit the more dangerous world in which we now live.

Washoe County and Nevada needed to update their systems, protocols and training and to connect the county’s schools to first responders in a more organic and immediate fashion.

“It was pre-planning that made the response piece [to the Sparks shooting] work so smoothly,” says Kenneston, adding that having the Emergency Management Plan on a server within the state Division of Emergency Management gave the response team an added capability to drill down and reach out to a variety of stakeholders.

A comprehensive, effective emergency response, Kenneston says, “depends on the whole community. You have to involve private business and government agencies.
Our Risk Management practice brought all the stakeholders together, engaging them in the planning process.

The approach must include incorporating interactive and community-focused philosophies instead of clinging to outmoded silos and paper plans.”

Our Risk Management practice, brought all the stakeholders together, engaging them in the planning process. The planning began by establishing a state-wide task force that included police, fire, public works, local government and local utilities, among others, to ensure that the school emergency plans did not have too narrow a focus. These events — whether they are water main breaks; fires; or, tragically, acts of sudden, unpredictable violence — are complex and their impact broadly felt.

The tool itself contains a response plan for 40 to 50 hazards, from entrapment to environmental disasters to violent encounters. The emergency response protocols cover everything from health crises to search-and-rescue procedures — all captured in accessible, intuitive drop-down menus. There also are printable policy documents and live links to other Nevada agencies.

We led tabletop exercises that involved individuals who were not first responders and not trained as such — principals, teachers and school nurses, to name a few — testing the plan’s and the people’s readiness during simulated crisis scenarios, helping to make actions intuitive and reflexive. This training included assisting the county in learning how best to reach out to the media and coordinate appropriate responders while using the tool to monitor movements in real time.

Now, with our help, Kenneston is working to deepen the plan’s recovery piece — the post-crisis aftershocks that must be addressed by policymakers, mental health counselors, and other participating parties and caregivers.

“We realized,” says Kenneston, “how much there is to the recovery: taking care of students, offering counseling and dealing with community grievance. We’re using that knowledge to update the plan to increase recovery procedures and share them with all 17 counties in the state. Procedures will be centralized so everyone can share them quickly and easily.”

The plan and the tool are dynamic, and, therefore, we continue to provide training and conduct workshops to keep people’s skills fresh and to maintain an all-hazard plan that is current. The fact that the plan is web based allows updates and enhancements to be rolled out broadly, uniformly and economically on a state-wide basis. These improvements can be implemented expeditiously to deal with ever-changing resources at the local level and to be prepared for emergencies in a continually evolving threat landscape.

FROM LAGGARD TO LEADER

Today, Nevada has the nation’s first web-based, all-hazard emergency management platform capable of accommodating the needs of a diverse set of schools across the state. The platform hosts emergency policies, plans, procedures and practices, along with vital records and security information. For example, with the proper permissions (which include a five-level secure password system), cleared users can access schematics of buildings, aerial photographs and 360-degree images (some with live feeds) of facilities, which can be essential to guiding people to exits and secure locations, as well as helping authorities coordinate actions to capture bad actors.

All the information stored in the planning system can be updated and accessed in real time. This is a “living,” dynamic system that not only serves Nevada’s needs but can provide both a template and an approach for other states to leverage federal and state funding and thereby keep emergency and crisis management plans up to the appropriate standard.

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