

Community orgs partner for school threat assessment

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If addressing potential threats in schools seems daunting, there is now a standardized process for threat assessment that takes a community-oriented approach to helping students.

The Montrose County School District RE1-J, Montrose County Sheriff's Office, The Center for Mental Health and the Montrose Police Department partnered to bring a presentation of the Salem-Keizer System of Assessing Student Threats to the community Thursday at the Montrose County Event Center.

"The program places an emphasis on whole family health," said Laura Byard, regional director for The Center for Mental Health, in a release from Montrose County. "Ongoing assessments will help families and students engage with services, break down barriers and foster a collaborative effort for success."

The program began with the creation of a Student Threat Assessment Team (STAT) consisting of professionals committed to finding a path to success for at-risk students.

The program was presented by John Van Dreal, a school psychologist and director of security, safety, and risk management for the Salem-Keizer School District in Oregon. Van Dreal covered the program background, basic principles and walked attendees through an example threat assessment case with audience questions at the end.

School District Director of Safety and Security James Pavlich opened the presentation saying that it had been a successful week for the participating organizations in Montrose.

“For the last four days we have trained 140 people,” said Pavlich. “They trained on Level I and Level II threat assessment tactics. We are excited about how we can support youth and families in our community.”

The training taught team members how to present an investigation to STAT. It starts from the ground up with team members on the district level alerting the STAT team if any behavioral issues arise. The next step is to gather information for the case and to establish a plan to get at-risk students on track for success.

Van Dreal emphasized that early prevention is at the core of the program. He said that the goal is to stop a students’ trajectory and to turn them around.

“We don’t profile potential [at-risk students],” said Van Dreal. “We look at what level of behavior and activity they are exhibiting and then determine interventions that are designed to address the concern.”

During that assessment process, Van Dreal said that teams will often pull resources from community experts and agencies that serve the youth in the community. He said this provides more perspectives when handling different cases. A diverse skill set and perspective is one of the reasons why the police department is part of the planning process as well.

“Police are natural investigators, and can help share that responsibility,” said Van Dreal. “There is safety in numbers and a balancing of moods and skill sets [when working together]. It’s not just one person making a decision.”

In a release from Montrose County, Cmdr. Matt Smith of the Montrose Police Department said that, “The most exciting aspects of this model for law enforcement are the front-end management of potential risks, and the supervision of those cases subsequent to their discovery. [The system] seeks to foster collaboration between community stakeholders, which is often lacking when addressing threats in our community.”

Another basic principle of the model is the type of language used by professionals and the public surrounding at-risk students.

“We want to use careful language when we refer to youth,” said Van Dreal. “Instead of labeling someone as a ‘violent student’ we need to change that so we are describing the child’s behavior. Instead we could say: he is in a situation that poses a risk for violence.”

To support more careful language, the threat assessment system looks at an aggression continuum by Eric Johnson, Ph.D. The continuum helps professionals determine whether an aggression is reactive or targeted. Threat assessment specifically serves to prevent targeted acts of aggression.

“Most of the interactions happening at a school level are reactive forms of aggression,” said Van Dreal. He explained this as children reacting to being told to do homework or go to detention.

“You have to look at the context of a situation and analyze the facts to determine whether someone plans on attacking,” said Van Dreal. “[Ask yourself] does the behavior meet the threat?”

Van Dreal used an example of a cat being backed into a corner. The cat will claw and hiss and bite because it feels threatened. Similarly, if a youth feels backed into a corner they will react. They will threaten, and they will say aggressive things out of anger. He said that it's the STAS job to ask the question "does this person 'pose' a threat," not "did the person 'make' a threat."

One of the management strategies that Van Dreal presented is to increase the number of inhibitors present in a youth's life. He said inhibitors are aspects of life such as employment, finances, health, or looking to the future.

"Often times these children don't have these inhibitors or those things that make their lives meaningful," said Van Dreal. "Our job is to put those inhibitors back into their life to nudge them on the right path."

Van Dreal said that simply asking kids, "how can I help you with that," makes a huge impact. He said most at-risk youth are missing a pro-social connection in their life that would make all the difference.

Van Dreal ended his presentation by reaffirming the importance of looking at the whole student and not vilifying them.

This approach to risk assessment can have a positive impact on communities because, as Van Dreal said, it helps take away the fear aspect that can interfere with the success of students. This community-approach model helps to increase the physical and psychological sense of safety in a community when it is known that potential risks are being addressed.

"I hope I've conveyed that we are pro-student and pro-safety," said Van Dreal. "We want to provide respect and support [for students] to be able to do the right thing and to become good people."

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