



Episode 29: School Emergency Success Stories: District of Columbia's Behavioral Threat Assessment

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Katie Barnett: Hello and welcome to #REMSontheAir. My name is Katie Barnett, and I am a research associate for the REMS TA Center. Today's podcast resulted from the REMS TA Center's recent call for school safety success stories. We were delighted to hear from Whytley Jones of the [00:01:00] DC Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, also known as DC HSEMA.

In today's episode, we will hear from Whytley as she shares her knowledge and experience of how key collaborative partnerships helped foster a positive behavioral threat assessment intervention. I'm looking forward to this discussion. In a field where we often, and rightfully so, need to focus on emergencies and after-action reviews, it is inspiring to have an example of advanced preparedness to follow. Let's hear from Whytley now.

Welcome, Whytley. Thank you so much for being on the podcast today. Can you tell us a little more about yourself and your work at the DC Fusion Center?

Whytley Jones: Of course. So hi, my name is Whytley Jones. I'm a program coordinator at the DC Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, where I sit within the DC Fusion Center. Here my primary role is [00:02:00] managing and working in our citywide behavioral threat assessment center. A little about my background is: my interest in behavioral threat assessment and management and prevention efforts began while I was a local sheriff's deputy and detective. I would respond to incidents that either were not criminal or did not require arrest. And I remember leaving those calls wondering how could we do more for the person or provide other support for those individuals who were displaying or expressing some type of concerning behavior.

I began to research behavioral analysis and other prevention methods, and I later received my master's in forensic psychology with a behavioral analysis focus. At that point, I began to look for careers where I could use those new skills I had developed and ultimately found myself here at DC HSEMA. I enjoy helping [00:03:00] others, and in my current role, I come into work every day knowing that I have the opportunity to connect an individual in need with resources that could help them.

Katie Barnett: Thank you so much, and we're so glad that you're here today. Can you describe the important collaboration between the [DHS] DC Fusion Center and schools? So, how do these two partner together to promote safety?

Whytley Jones: So, we have a strong partnership with schools throughout the District of Columbia. This includes our public, private, and charter schools, also colleges and universities. We partner with school administrators to provide support related to campus safety and security, and we also provide them with training. Being in the Fusion Center also allows us to provide analytical support for some of the more specific campus events, like commencement or sporting events.

For training, our Threat Assessment Center provides [00:04:00] a 3-hour certificate training. This training is called the Fundamentals of Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management. Our training focuses on understanding targeted violence and terrorism prevention. Participants who participate in this training are trained on the pathway to violence and how to identify risk factors and warning signs of a person who may be on that pathway.

We include interactive case studies and exercises to aid in understanding different behavioral clusters and opportunities for intervention. At the end of the training, we typically end with an explanation of the behavioral threat assessment and management model and how a multidisciplinary team comes together to build effective management plans for our persons of concern.

Katie Barnett: OK, thank you so much. That training sounds absolutely phenomenal. I would love to sit in on that, and I'm really excited that that is an offering that people are working [00:05:00] through.

So recently the REMS TA Center sent out a call for school and campus safety stories and spotlights, and you, Whytley, responded with a story about a middle school student who was showing signs of concern. We'd love to hear your story today to see what we can learn about collaboration in safety outcomes.

Whytley Jones: Definitely. Last year, our team began working with a local middle school here in the district. Our initial conversations began over consultation about threats. The school was looking for proactive security measures they could take around their campus.

Our team collaborated with some of our Federal partners and the school board to conduct a vulnerability assessment of the campus. That assessment led to more conversations about prevention, which ultimately landed our team the time to provide our 3-hour certificate training to members of the school's operations staff and some of the [00:06:00] teachers and faculty.

During the training, we had very meaningful conversations about some of the case studies. We discussed risk factors and what concerning communication and behavior look like. And then several months later, the school contacted us to submit a referral about a student who was displaying some concerning behaviors.

The school did their own initial investigation, and they learned that there was some concern at home also. So together, my team, the school, and our Threat Assessment and Threat Management team came together with our Department of Behavioral Health to provide resources and services, not only to the person of concern, but also to other members of the family. Our agency does not provide direct services, but in this instance, we were able to work directly with the school and funnel the services in from other agencies.

We kept in contact with them. Part of our threat assessment and threat management team meetings, we [00:07:00] update on past cases and discuss new ones, and being able to have the open lines of communication with the school. Our last update that we received was extremely positive. Our person of concern was still receiving services.

So, the goal here was to keep those lines of communication open. They're able to contact us at any time if additional services are needed or if they need assistance adjusting the person-of-concern's management plan. We like to be sure we let everyone know that no case is a one-off. They require check-ins. Sometimes they require adjustments also.

We're happy that we have built a very good foundation with the school, in particular, starting with a simple consultation from a school who wanted to be proactive about their campus safety for their students, which led to us being able to deliver training to their faculty and staff. And not only did we deliver that training, but the faculty and [00:08:00] staff understood it and they used that training to help them identify anything that was concerning and properly report it to receive services.

Katie Barnett: Whytley, thank you so much for sharing your story. This is such an inspiring example of collaboration and how training comes into play to help us all work together to serve our students.

Can you speak to how schools can go about partnering with the DC Fusion Center or other similar agencies? So, is there anything that schools should do or consider to ensure a smooth partnership and whole-community buy-in to work?

Whytley Jones: Sure. So, many schools in DC have operations or security staff, or just their principal, but they can always contact their local emergency management agency, their fusion center, a law enforcement agency to inquire about liaison programs, to inquire about school safety task force [00:09:00] or school safety councils that would allow them to receive relevant

information related to their campus or just general school safety. Individuals should also be open to the idea of a multidisciplinary approach to school safety. This helps with the community buy-in. It's incorporating community organizations to create more togetherness.

Katie Barnett: Thank you for that emphasis on the multidisciplinary approach. That is so, so important.

So, if a school really would like to make such a partnership, but maybe they have other priorities that are requiring their attention during the school year, would you have some suggestions for best practices or immediate steps that schools could take to improve their behavioral threat assessments and school safety culture?

Whytley Jones: Definitely. Especially for best practices, I'd say the first [00:10:00] step would be a number of Websites like [schoolsafety.gov](https://www.schoolsafety.gov), or CISA [Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency], or the REMS TA Center. There are lots of documents there that provide best practices, whether it's a vulnerability assessment or training videos, case studies—for school leaders to kind of build upon and look for ways to improve their processes.

In addition to that, contacting your local emergency management agency about preparedness or speaking with your SROs [school resource officers] or law enforcement school safety division, they're also able to help provide those services or locate services related to school safety and behavioral threat assessment.

Katie Barnett: That is so true. There are so many state and local and even free resources online and all it takes is seeking them out and asking, so thank you for sharing those recommendations. [00:11:00]

I heard you speak before on this, but I'd love for our listeners to get an insider's view. Can you describe DC Fusion Center's partnership with state agencies and other entities and how that collaboration came to be and helps foster a bigger picture of school safety?

Whytley Jones: Of course. The DC Fusion Center and HSEMA as a whole, we are an agency that loves to collaborate with everyone else. We—in the Fusion Center, we love to connect dots and that—also connect with other agencies. For our third assessment center, we began building Protect DC in 2020. Our team worked with many different district agencies, which included the university consortium, public schools, public charter schools, the Metropolitan Police Department, the Department of Behavioral Health, Department of Human Services, some of our Federal [00:12:00] partners—and together, this collaboration built our core advisory group that informed our policies and our procedures around how our third assessment center will operate with our schools and within the community.

This collaboration with those many agencies helped foster a relationship where we wouldn’t—we’d be able to call upon each other at any given time, and the first time a school partner or another agency would hear from me, wouldn’t be when we had a referral or needed assistance immediately. To build upon that partnership, we hosted and we attended some training together. This further built our collaborative relationship. And some of those trainings included privacy training, to include information sharing, HIPAA and FERPA. And it just, it—we also gave those agencies that were a part of the training time [00:13:00] to discuss their agency and what services they could provide, being a part of this core advisory group and this threat assessment and threat management team.

So, it definitely fostered our relationship and really built rapport between the agencies.

Katie Barnett: Well, I commend all of those agencies for their proactivity to forge relationships in advance. You’re so right that the time to do that is not during an incident. Having those good connections in place from the get-go just ensures that everybody can have a team member. And allows things to run much more smoothly. Thank you so much for sharing that.

And last question for you today, Whytley. In your opinion, what is the most important element in a successful school safety outcome? Is there anything that we’ve not talked about yet that you’d like to share on this topic or think would be important for you—listeners to know?

Whytley Jones: Of course, I know we touched on collaboration, so [00:14:00] collaboration is definitely an important element. But I’d also say education, and when I say education, I mean training on relevant school safety protocols, lessons learned, and best practices. I believe the more we work together and we empower our school administrators and officials with this knowledge, the more they feel equipped in the pursuit of maintaining a safe campus.

One thing about our Website, protect.DC.gov, is that it provides a robust resource center for community members—school and the faith-based community. And there’s also some areas there where you can find those resources that’s needed to educate each other on this topic.

Katie Barnett: Thank you so much. As always, it’s been a delight to have you today. Thank you for sharing your story on the podcast.

Thanks so much for tuning in today. Don’t forget to check the show notes for the mentioned links and [00:15:00] other resources. Remember to follow us on social media and bookmark the *#REMSontheAir* hashtag. You can also mention us on X using the hashtag *#REMSontheAir* if you are addressing similar topics.

If you have any questions related to our discussion today or just want to learn more, send us your questions by email or call us at 1-855-781-REMS, 7367, to pose questions that may be

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