



Episode 6: Maine's State School Safety Model

#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.

Alison Curtis: So, Jonathan, as the Maine School Safety Center, what's your primary area of focus in terms of supporting schools with emergency management?

Jonathan Shapiro: Sure. So, the Maine School Safety Center provides training, guidance, and technical support. And we basically go into schools [00:01:00] upon request. We'll work with them to make their schools as safe as possible based upon nationally recognized practices.

And one of our primary services is our School Safety Specialist Training Program, where we train school staff to be able to be a liaison with the School Safety Center and also help their administrators work on their emergency operation plans and other safety concerns.

Alison Curtis: And how do you partner with the Maine Emergency Management Agency to carry out some of those activities?

Jonathan Shapiro: So, we work very closely with MEMA, Maine Emergency Management Agency. We have a—I personally have a long history with working closely with them, and that certainly continued when we created the Maine School Safety Center. We work with them on training. They've trained with us or trained for us in partnership on numerous occasions.

They're working with us to develop a Teen CERT [Community Emergency Response Team] program. They help us interface with our [00:02:00] county and local EMAs [emergency management agencies]. We certainly work with them when we have statewide emergencies. The School Safety Center has a seat, DOE [Department of Education], in the Emergency Operations Communication Center to keep them abreast of what schools are experiencing.

They were pivotal in our primary position in our planning committee for our School Safety Specialist Program. We work with them for that. We work on messaging when we message, again, out to the field when there's weather events or any other statewide events of concern (drought, weather, those types of things), and we—certainly when we make a decision, a policy decision in regard to what we think is a best format for schools to use—we generally consult with them to make sure we're on the same sheet of music, so we send a unified message.

Alison Curtis: That is—sounds like a wonderful partnership. Amy, is there anything you'd like to add about your partnership with the [00:03:00] Maine School Safety Center?

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Amy Carole: Jonathan really nailed everything. I can say, speaking from MEMA's perspective, the relationship that we've formed with Jonathan and his team has been incredible.

Just in the last year, I'm thinking about all the joint messaging initiatives that we've worked on with cold—with the deep freeze cold that we had in the wintertime—and, you know, making sure that DOE had proper wording for their blog to send to school officials, and just knowing that we're really putting out that unified message to everybody has just been such a fantastic collaboration.

I really value their partnership.

Alison Curtis: And, you know, this question is for both of you. How would you say that your partnership together has enhanced overall efforts in the state of Maine to build emergency [00:04:00] preparedness within schools?

Jonathan Shapiro: Well, I think—I think it's critical to have unity of mission and purpose, particularly when we're dealing with our stakeholders.

And we've been, you know, again, very fortunate to do that. The School Safety Center team, again, as Amy said, works very well with our MEMA counterparts and to alleviate any confusion or misunderstanding or missteps. Again, I think the—we like to be in lockstep with all our stakeholders, but particularly MEMA because they—you know, we're at the state level, they're at the state level, and if you have two state agencies saying something different, I don't think that's a good thing.

So, we usually, like I said, collaborate and communicate before we communicate out to the field.

Amy Carole: And from an emergency management standpoint, I think the partnership has really benefited MEMA in terms of—if somebody sees me pushing [00:05:00] out messaging about school safety or, you know, school starting, so let's think about some, you know, updates to our emergency plan for the house and have our children's classrooms changed, so what kind of information should I put out to families to just think about addressing that?

It's not just me telling everybody, "Oh, you should do this." By having that partnership with DOE and with the School Safety Center, it really shows that we're working together, and this is actual, like viable, important information that people should be working on.

And to Jonathan's point, you know, people view Maine as kind of this umbrella. They don't think about all the different entities that are pushing out messaging. And so, if we're all pushing out the same messaging, then you really have that umbrella of unity in that message instead of just [00:06:00] a scattered who do I believe? So, it's really, really been a wonderful partnership

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and really helped us kind of drive home those important preparedness messages that we—that we try to share.

Alison Curtis: And to your point, Amy, about messaging, we know that using common language and joint messaging really is a critical part of strengthening your state's school emergency management posture.

So, could you both talk a little bit about how you work together to share information with those local education agencies and schools and their other key stakeholders?

Amy Carole: I—I'll start with that, Jonathan. When I'm sharing information, I'm sharing it either internally, meaning sending a message to Jonathan and his [00:07:00] team about this is the situation we see, this is something that I'd like to share, and I will vet that—what I've written—and make sure that it meets their language goals and, you know, fits what they need. And then I'm typically sharing it, whether it be in a press release on our Website about, you know, if there's something happening like a storm or an incident or whatnot, or sharing it via a social media post.

I will never share a social media post that has any tie to education without vetting it with them first because I want them to be on that same page and be in lockstep, as Jonathan said.

With the deep freeze, we were reached out by the PIO for, or the public information officer, sorry, from Department of Ed, and they wanted to include some messaging on how [00:08:00] to protect the kids at recess, or is recess even an option in this deep freeze, and so they wanted to make sure that their preparedness language for that incident, you know, fell in step with what emergency management would say for something like that.

So, we really just connect and make sure that that what we're saying meets those needs. I don't directly reach out to the schools; I'll let Jonathan take it from there because they have that direct connection.

Jonathan Shapiro: Yeah, so everything Amy said is spot on. You know, again, I think, the communi—she is the communications person for MEMA.

We have—the DOE has our communications that we always encourage and work with our communications to make sure they're in alignment because a lot—they're dealing with a lot of things. And so, we specifically are making sure that they're having an eye towards what our stakeholders that we interface with regularly. If there's [00:09:00] joint messaging to go out on anything, that they remember to speak with them because again, you know, we were looking at it from a specific lens.

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The other thing I wanted to mention was, you know, we preach and teach and instruct that—you know, that collaboration is a huge attribute for school safety in multidisciplinary work in partnerships. So, we really practice—I try to practice what we preach so that people can see that we're working. And when we present or we go anywhere, if we have the opportunity to bring fellow stakeholders with us or at least talk about how we're working together, we always highlight that because then that just doubles down on the messaging that we send, that we're not only asking schools to do that, but we actually do it ourselves.

Alison Curtis: A really strong partnership between your agencies and lots of information sharing both ways and then down to schools. [00:10:00]

Jonathan, earlier you mentioned the Maine School Safety Specialist Program. Would you mind sharing a little bit more detail on that and the process that you've use to build that program in collaboration with state partners?

Jonathan Shapiro: Yeah, so we—it was always the backbone to fulfilling the deliverables for the GSEM [Grants to States for School Emergency Management] grant, particularly, which is how do you build a—how do you assist schools in their ability to write, update, or improve their EOPs [emergency operations plans]? And also sustainability; what's that sustainability process in there?

We got sidetracked obviously with COVID; we had to go immediately to providing hands-on training on a lot of COVID issues, on related issues. But as soon as we got over that hurdle, we were able to finally operationalize what we conceptualized at the beginning, which was putting together a team, multidisciplinary team; MEMA [00:11:00] was part of that, local and county EMAs, fire, police, schools, obviously.

And we really discussed what the challenges were to implement a training program for schools. And that was essential to rightsize the information and to deliver it in a way that would be accepted as easy as possible and amenable as possible to educators.

So, our School Safety Specialist Program is 25 hours of school emergency management, school safety training. It's asynchronous, that can be taking really at the leisure of the person that's watching it. Modules are fairly short, but short, concise, but impactful. And then we have a hybrid where we interface with the participants, the cohorts. We're putting through about anywhere from 20—it's designed to go to 20 to 50 per month.

And then that person's role is to go back to the school with the knowledge that they have and put together their multidisciplinary teams, review their plans, and then, [00:12:00] most importantly, work with us when they have questions, concerns, or needs or coaching and whatnot, to get their plans up to date or to build a—we do their plan. We build it and prove it.

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And so, again, we'll have a community of practice within the schools. Our goal is to have at least one trained person per SAU [school administrative unit], LEA [local education agency], if not one person per building. And then the sustainability aspect of that is as we train more and more and more, we'll saturate the schools with people that are trained with emergency—school emergency management and speaking the same language as we are and looking through a very similar lens as we are so we can have better communications.

Alison Curtis: It sounds like a really incredible initiative. It's—I know it's been a lot of work for your state, and I can't wait to see all the successes from it. [00:13:00] I—

Jonathan Shapiro: Well again, I can't stress enough how that multidisciplinary team was so important because the feedback we've gotten from the people that have gone through it so far is that we actually did hit our mark, as far as it being accessible, understandable, and operational for them.

And we wouldn't have done that because when we designed it—when we started making educational modules, they were way too advanced, you know, we were doing it from our level and our thought process, not realizing that we really had to back it way down to much more basic terms for people that really aren't emergency managers, which most school folks are not, and meet them where they are to bring them where they need to be.

And that was really essential, both on the content and the way we delivered it.

Alison Curtis: And, Jonathan, it sounds like, you know, information sharing and collaboration is something that you really embrace in a lot [00:14:00] of your different efforts—this School Safety Specialist Program as well as the multidisciplinary advisory committee that you have formed. Can you talk a little bit about that committee and how it supported the development of your state-based behavioral threat assessment program?

Jonathan Shapiro: Yeah, so we have two different committees. We had one for just the training aspect. And then we had one for a behavioral threat assessment, and that one was much more heavy on law enforcement, so we had our Federal partners (FBI, Secret Service, Homeland Security, U.S. Attorney's Office, Sheriffs' Association), state police, and the chiefs of police, as well as mental health providers and educators on that committee.

And, again, we used that committee to vet the program that we decided to go with, which was CSTAG [Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines], Dr. Dewey Cornell. [00:15:00] They recom—after reviewing all the different programs—we thought that was the best fit for Maine. And then the same thing, how do we deliver it? And what does that look like, and how do we create it to be sustainable over time? So, again, that was a multidisciplinary committee,

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and everybody brought their lens to it and really helped us build a program that we trained over 2,000 school staff in that.

And we have waiting lists that are going out months and months for that because as more people learn about it, the more people want to partake in it.

Alison Curtis: There's a lot of excitement for it and well deserved. You know, in your own words, why would you say that multidisciplinary planning is so important when we're talking about building school preparedness capacity?

Jonathan Shapiro: Well, because the short answer is that if you only look through it through your lens, you're only going to see what you [00:16:00] recognize, and the strength is that you need multiple eyes and multiple insights into what school safety is in areas of expertise, whether it be fire, whether it be EMS [emergency medical services], whether it be EMA, structural, fire, police, and whatnot.

And those professionals don't often communicate with each other well, so when you bring a multidisciplinary team together, you have an environment where they are communicating well, and you start understanding how the other person thinks and will respond to an incident. So then, that can inform your plan better, obviously. And, again, it also gets buy-in from everybody that's really an essential stakeholder into that school community. Because they're all parents, and they generally live in that community, so you get much more buy-in and a more holistic approach to making that school safe. [00:17:00]

Alison Curtis: Amazing. I completely agree. We talk about collaboration all the time in emergency preparedness here and across agencies. Federal guidance states that it's a planning principle, and it's a basic, developing a high-quality emergency operations plan. I'm curious, are there any other or any Federal grant programs focused on school safety that have helped your efforts to collaborate with state-level partners and build up that preparedness capacity level?

Overall, I know you mentioned the Grants to States for School Emergency Management from the Department of Education.

Jonathan Shapiro: Well, that's our largest grant. And if it wasn't for that grant, we certainly wouldn't be where we are today. And that's allowed us not only to function very well during the COVID event, because we had that those resources, and we were able to pivot [00:18:00] with the good graces of the—of the—of their Federal grant partners to address that emergency.

But it also, again, allowed us to build our primary program, which is our School Safety Specialist Program, that educational program. We wouldn't have been able to do that for sure without it.

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And this—the good work that we've done has also been able to allow us to show what we can do with the resources and then advocate within the state for more resources from the state, so that we're more independent and be able to provide a certain level of work beyond the grant and not be a 100 percent reliant on grant funding, which again goes to sustainability purposes. So, again, without that grant, Maine School Safety Center for sure would not be here today.

Alison Curtis: Very complimentary, and we're so glad that [00:19:00] you were able to do so much and create the Maine School Safety Center. It's been a pleasure working with you. I leave you with this closing question for both you, Amy and Jonathan, what message do you have or would you like to share on behalf of your state with other education agencies, both schools and state education agencies or state school safety centers across the country on the work that you've done or the lessons that you've learned, in terms of collaboration and emergency preparedness for schools?

Amy Carole: I just think it's so important for people to realize that there's so many overlaps with emergency management and other disciplines, and Jonathan spoke to it about the multidisciplinary planning when you bring these multidisciplinary groups together. It just creates [00:20:00] a stronger system. It's a stronger collaboration.

It, for me, my passion is information sharing and joint messaging, and it, for me, it just helps to know that we are sharing the absolute best information we possibly can with the right people so they can make the right decision. And knowing that I have these relationships that we've built and this collaboration with Jonathan to turn to and they're going to tell me: no, your message is off; this is what it should say. And just knowing that you've got that trust and that respect with each other just really is a game changer and really strengthens the messaging, which then strengthens the preparedness, which then strengthens the resiliency of your state.

And that's what it's really all about.

Jonathan Shapiro: Yeah. So, you know, this mission is too important. Failure is not an option in my opinion [00:21:00] on this. And if we're not working together on this, we will not be meeting our goal to the best of our ability.

So, in Maine, we've been very fortunate that we do work very well together. It's a small state. Everybody, to one degree or another, knows each other to some degree, so it does make it a little bit easier.

But if I'm looking across the country, with much larger populations and much more agencies, really, my comment would be is that it's worth the effort because if you don't collaborate, you don't use that multidisciplinary approach to school safety, what's gonna—what will suffer is the

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mission. And the mission is the protection of our students in our school community. And, again, that is too important not to put the effort into the collaboration.

Alison Curtis: Wonderful closing thoughts from both of you. Thank you so, so much for taking the time to talk with the REMS TA Center, [00:22:00] sharing what you're—you've been doing in the state of Maine, and providing some food for thought for everyone.

Jonathan Shapiro: Thank you. It was a pleasure to be here.

Amy Carole: Yeah. Thank you.