

Operational Services

Exhibit - Principles of Threat Assessment

This exhibit is a resource to educate Building-level Threat Assessment Team (TAT) members about the assumptions and principles underlying behavioral threat assessment.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are informed by findings of the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Dept. of Education's *Safe School Initiative*, as well as other research about targeted violence occurring in or related to educational settings. Key assumptions include:

1. Incidents of targeted violence at school/workplaces are rarely sudden, impulsive acts.
2. In addition to students, others also engage in targeted violence in schools, including administrators, teachers, other staff, parent(s)/guardian(s) of students, contractors, people in relationships with staff or students, and even people with no connection with the school.
3. Prior to most incidents of targeted violence, other people knew about the individual's idea and/or plan to attack.
4. Most individuals who perpetrated violence engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, which caused others to have serious concerns about their behavior and/or well-being.
5. Many individuals who perpetrated violence had significant difficulties with losses or failures. Many were suicidal.
6. Many individuals who perpetrated violence felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to engaging in violence.
7. In many cases, others, e.g., staff, students, peers, family members, etc., were involved in some way, such as helping with plans or preparation for violence, encouraging violence, or failing to report (or take other steps) to prevent violence.
8. Most individuals who perpetrated violence did not threaten their targets directly prior to engaging in violence.
9. Violence is a dynamic process. No one is either always dangerous or never dangerous. Rather, the risk for violence is an interaction between the individual, the situation, circumstances, provocations, and inhibitory factors that are present.

The fact that most individuals engaged in pre-incident planning and preparation, and frequently shared their intentions, plans and preparations with others, suggests that the information about targeted violence is likely to be uncovered through a sound threat assessment process.

Targeted violence is the end result of a process of thinking and behavior that begins with an **idea**, e.g., to use violence to address a real or perceived grievance. The process of thinking and behavior progresses to the development of a **plan** and moves on to **preparation** and acquiring the means, e.g., weapons, training, capacity, access, to carry out the plan. The

culmination, regrettably, can be in **violence**. A graphic representation of this process, the *Pathway to Violence*, is shown in Figure 1.

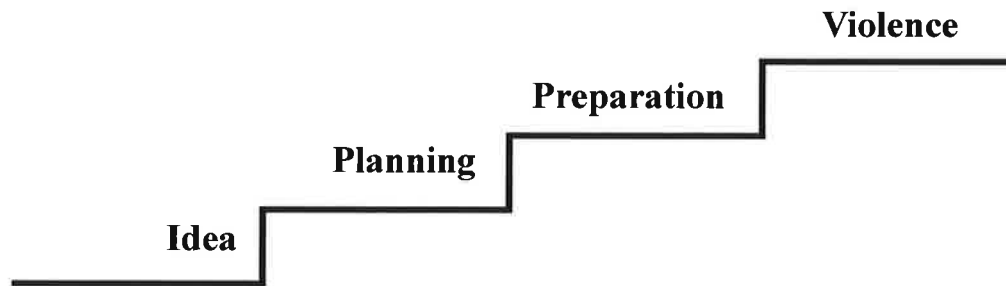


Figure 1: the *Pathway to Violence*

This process indicates opportunities to observe, identify, and intervene with threatening and/or aberrant behaviors that cause concern for violence by, or for the well-being of, the individual. Frequently, information about an individual's ideas, plans, and preparations for violence can be observed before violence occurs. However, information is likely to be scattered and fragmented. For example, a teacher may see a certain set of behaviors of an individual in her class, a coach observes other behaviors or expressed thoughts by the individual, a school resource officer has other concerns, and a school administrator is aware of certain conduct violations. The challenge, and the key, is to act quickly upon initial reports of concern, gather other pieces of the puzzle, and assemble them to determine what picture emerges.

Principles

To determine the risk of a threat, the TAT focuses on actions/behaviors, communications, and specific circumstances that might suggest that an individual intends to engage in violence and is planning or preparing for that event. The threat assessment process is centered upon an analysis of the known (or reasonably knowable) behavior(s) in a given situation.

TATs train to focus on the following core principles of threat assessment:

- 1. The central question in a threat assessment inquiry is whether an individual poses a threat (i.e., is building the capability to cause harm), not just whether the person has made a threat (directly expressed intent to harm).** Research on targeted violence in schools and workplaces has found that fewer than 20 percent of violent perpetrators communicated a direct or conditional threat to their target before the violence. In the majority of incidents, perpetrators did not directly threaten their targets, but they did communicate their intent and/or plans to others before the violence. This indirect expression or third party communication of intent to cause harm is often referred to as *leakage*. The absence of a direct threat should not, by itself, cause a team to conclude that a subject does not pose a threat to others.
- 2. Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and often discernable, process of thinking and behavior, often referred to as the *Pathway to Violence*, noted above in Figure 1.** Individuals who committed targeted violence

did not “just snap,” but engaged in a process of thought and escalation of action over days, weeks, months, and even years.

3. **Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the Subject(s), Target(s), Environment, and Precipitating Events (STEP).** Identifying, preventing, and intervening with acts of violence requires a focus on these four components and their interaction. A focus on the *Subject* of concern should provide insight into how the individual perceives and deals with conditions, often stressful, in his or her life and the intensity of effort they direct toward planning and preparation for violence. A focus on the *Target* examines choices and coping strategies they are using or responding with that may increase or decrease their risk for harm. A focus on the *Environment* examines the school/workplace climate and systemic issues that contribute to the risk of violence, or do not discourage it. A focus on *Precipitating* events examines critical stressors or events such as bullying, personal losses, enforcement actions, or even TAT interventions that may increase or decrease the risk for violence.
4. **An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.** Those who carry out threat assessment must strive to be both accurate and fair, continuing throughout the assessment process both to gather pieces of information and to fit the pieces into a larger picture to gain understanding of the context and situation.
5. **Effective assessment is based upon facts and observations of behavior, rather than on characteristics, traits, or profiles. Perpetrator profiles do not provide a reliable basis for making judgments of the threat posed by a particular individual.**
6. **An integrated systems approach, coordinating between local agencies and service systems within the school and community, should guide the threat assessment and management process.** Relationships with agencies and service systems within the school (e.g., school psychologist, school social worker, school counselor, school-based mental health clinicians, administrators, disciplinary officers, human resources, etc.) and community (e.g., mental health providers, juvenile justice system, child welfare agencies, law enforcement, etc.) are critical to identifying, assessing, and managing individuals who are on the *Pathway to Violence*.

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Operational ServicesExhibit - Threat Assessment Documentation

Imminent threats require immediate containment and action to protect the District's environment and/or identified or identifiable target(s). A Threat Assessment Team (TAT) does not document its activities in response to an imminent threat until after the threat is contained.

The Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety has created a model Threat Assessment Triage and Assessment Form (Form) containing eight parts, on pages 31-41 in a publication entitled *Threat Assessment in Virginia Public Schools: Model Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines, Second Edition (2016)*, Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety, Virginia Dept. of Criminal Justice Services at:

www.dcjs.virginia.gov/sites/dcjs.virginia.gov/files/publications/law-enforcement/threat-assessment-model-policies-procedures-and-guidelinespdf.pdf.

The Form contains investigation questions designed to help a TAT gather information to identify, assess, classify, respond to, and manage threats of targeted violence to the District's environment. Modify the questions on the Form to reflect the District's local conditions and each TAT's specific building needs. Members of the TAT should use the Form to document threat assessment activities and in conjunction with 4:190-AP1, *Targeted School Violence Prevention Program*; 4:190-AP2, *Threat Assessment Team (TAT)*; 4:190-AP2, E1, *Principles of Threat Assessment*; 4:190-AP2, E3, *Threat Assessment Key Areas and Questions; Examples*; 4:190-AP2, E4, *Responding to Types of Threats*; and 4:190-AP2, E5, *Threat Assessment Case Management Strategies*.

Consult the Board Attorney for recordkeeping procedures when or if the information gathered and entered in the Form is placed in a student's temporary record. See also Board policy 7:340, *Student Records*.

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Operational Services

Administrative Procedure - Threat Assessment Key Areas and Questions; Examples

This exhibit provides examples for Building-level Threat Assessment Team (TAT) members to use when assessing reports of threats to the District's environment. TAT members use this exhibit to assess a threat while following 4:190-AP2, *Threat Assessment Team (TAT)*.

Key Areas of Assessment

Review and use the following **key areas** of assessment. This is not intended as an exhaustive or complete list of areas of inquiry. Additional questions may be asked for clarification and/or to probe more deeply to fully understand the circumstances.

Before conducting an interview with a subject of concern (subject): (1) learn the facts that brought the subject to the attention of school administrators and others; and (2) review information about the subject's background, interests, and behaviors.

Key Area: Interview with person(s) who reported the threat, threat

recipient(s)/target(s), and other witness(es): Interview, when possible, all persons who witnessed the reported and/or concerning behavior, including the subject and all recipients/targets. Inform the subject that the primary purpose of the interview is to gather information about a possible situation of concern and, when possible, prevent harm to staff members and/or students.

Ask potential targets of the threat about their relationship to the subject and any recent interactions with him or her. Gather information about grievances and grudges that may exist in these relationships. Conduct interviews of potential targets with special sensitivity and gather information without alarming them. If you believe a risk of violence to a potential target exists, offer him/her any available assistance and support for their safety.

Because the process provides a revised understanding of the situation in real time, always review new incoming information and re-evaluate the threat. Maintain contact with the targets to obtain information about any more concerning behaviors, improvements to the situation, or other developments.

Key Area: Review records and consult with staff who know the subject: Background information may assist with the approach to and questioning of the subject. It may also help determine whether the subject poses a threat to particular targets. Knowing background information before the interview may help determine whether the subject is honest. Areas that may contain helpful background information include:

1. Recent or historical work or school performance history
2. Disciplinary or personnel actions
3. Prior TAT contacts
4. Law enforcement or security contacts at school and/or in the community
5. Any involvement with mental health or social services
6. Presence of problems in the subject's life

7. Current or historical grievances that may be related to the behavior of concern
8. Electronic searches: Internet, social media, email, etc.

Key Area: Interview with the subject: Directly ask a subject who is a staff member or student about his/her reported actions and/or intentions. Many subjects will respond truthfully to direct questions when they are asked in a non-judgmental manner. This interview could elicit important information to understand a subject's situation and identify possible targets, which can assist the assessment of the risk of violence. More leads for further assessment may also arise.

Interviews send the message to the subject that the District noticed his/her behavior, and it caused concern. They also provide the subject an opportunity to: (1) tell his/her perspective, background, and intent; (2) be heard and experience support; and (3) reassess and redirect his/her behavior away from concerning activities. To a subject who has mixed feelings about attacking, an interview may suggest people are interested in his/her welfare, and that there are better, more effective, ways to deal with challenges or with specific people.

While interviewing a subject might provide valuable information, relying solely on that interview to make judgments about whether the subject poses a threat likely presents problems. Information offered during the interview may be incomplete, misleading, or inaccurate; and seeking corroboration and verifying information learned during the interview is very important.

Key Questions to Ask

Thoughtful consideration of the answers to the following key questions will produce a foundation for the TAT's response to the main question in its assessment: Does the subject pose a threat of targeted violence toward the District's environment?

Examine information gathered for evidence of behavior and conditions that suggest the subject is planning and preparing for an act of violence and/or to cause harm to him/herself or others in the District environment. Based on a review of the totality of the information available, try to answer the following questions:

1. What are the subject's motive(s) and goal(s)? What first brought him/her to someone's attention?

- Does the subject have a major grievance or grudge? If so, against whom?
- Does the situation or circumstance that led to these statements or actions still exist?
- What efforts have been made to resolve the problem and what was the result?
- Does the subject feel that any part of the problem is resolved or see any alternatives?
- Has the subject previously come to someone's attention or raised concern in a way that suggested he or she needs intervention or supportive services?

2. Have there been any communications suggesting ideas, intent, planning, or preparation for violence?

- What, if anything, has the subject communicated to someone else (targets, friends, co-workers, others) or written in a diary, journal, email, or website concerning his/her grievances, ideas and/or intentions?
- Do the communications provide insight about ideation, planning, preparation, timing, grievances, etc.?
- Has anyone been alerted or *warned away*?

3. **Has the subject shown any inappropriate interest in, fascination, and/or identification with other perpetrators and/or incidents of mass or targeted violence, e.g., terrorism, school/workplace shootings, mass murderers:**
 - Previous perpetrators of targeted violence?
 - Grievances of perpetrators?
 - Weapons/tactics of perpetrators?
 - Effect or notoriety of perpetrators?
4. **Does the subject have, or is he/she developing, the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?**
 - How organized is the subject's thinking and behavior?
 - Does the subject have the means, e.g., access to a weapon, to carry out an attack?
 - Is he/she trying to get the means to carry out an attack?
 - Has he/she developed the will and ability to cause harm?
 - Has he/she practiced or rehearsed for the violence?
 - What is the *intensity of effort* expended in attempting to develop the capability?
5. **Is the subject experiencing hopelessness and/or desperation?**
 - Is there information to suggest that the subject is feeling hopeless or desperate?
 - Has the subject experienced a recent failure, loss, and/or loss of status?
 - Is the subject having significant difficulty coping with a stressful event?
 - Has the subject engaged in behavior that suggests that he/she has considered suicide?
6. **Does the subject have a positive, trusting, sustained relationship with at least one responsible person?**
 - Does the subject have at least one friend, colleague, family member, or other person that he/she trusts and can rely upon for support, guidance or assistance?
 - Is that trusted person someone that would work collaboratively with the TAT for the well being of the subject?
 - Is the subject emotionally connected to other people or becoming more socially isolated?
7. **Does the subject see violence as an acceptable, desirable – or the only – way to solve a problem?**
 - Does the subject still perceive alternatives to violence to address his/her grievances?
 - Does the setting around the subject (friends, colleagues, family members, others) explicitly or implicitly support or endorse violence as a way of resolving problems or disputes? Has the subject been "dared" by others to engage in an act of violence?
 - Has the subject expressed sentiments of finality or desperation to address grievances?
8. **Are the subject's conversation and story consistent with his/her actions?**
 - Does information from other interviews and the subject's own behavior confirm or dispute what the subject says is happening and how he/she is dealing with it?
 - Is there corroboration across sources or are the subject's statements at odds with his/her actions?
9. **Are other people concerned about the subject's potential for violence?**
 - Are those who know the subject concerned about him/her: (a) taking action based on violent ideas or plans; (b) targeting a specific person; or (c) engaging in protective actions, e.g., distancing, avoiding, minimizing conflict, etc.?

10. What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an escalation to violent behavior?

What events or situations in the subject's life, now or in the near future, may increase or decrease the likelihood that the subject will engage in violent behavior?

Are TAT interventions escalating, de-escalating, or having no effect on movement toward violence?

What is the response of others who know about the subject's ideas or plans? Do others: (a) actively discourage the subject from acting violently; (b) encourage the subject to attack; (c) deny the possibility of violence; or (d) passively collude with an attack, etc.?

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