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Police puzzle out violence prevention plans

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There's a lot going on behind closed doors to prevent violence on any scale in these quiet, low-crime Wachusett towns.

Describing the highest quality of police work as prevention and preparedness, Holden Police Chief George R. Sherrill has been working with retired Massachusetts State Police Lt. Col. Bradford G. Hibbard and other Wachusett public safety officials to create an intelligence system for receiving, piecing together and evaluating odd bits of information from ordinary people throughout the Wachusett area.

Viewing intelligence as odd-shaped pieces of a 1,000-piece puzzle, one piece looks like nothing until it is fits together with the others. That scenario, Mr. Hibbard said, is how political terrorist plots are detected and stopped. And that, Chief Sherrill said, is also how violence threatening anyone, whether a member of a family in a private home or the 1,900-plus students at Wachusett Regional High School, could be stopped.

Chief Sherrill and Mr. Hibbard both stress the unlikelihood of terror in these small towns. But, Chief Sherrill said in a recent meeting, if people, including high school students, have a central, secure place where they can send information to be evaluated by professionals, the towns and schools will be even safer.

After all, what is more important?

Interventions in past terror plots prove that reports of odd acts strung together are, in fact, the type intelligence that stops terrorist plots.

At the high school, Chief Sherrill said, concern starts with the well-being of a student who may feel isolated, is acting depressed or says something that makes a classmate feel uncomfortable.

Those bits of information, Chief Sherrill said, could lead to assistance for a student or family — and in the most unlikely of situations, prevent injury or death.

Already, Mr. Hibbard said, police and school administrators take a proactive approach with Holden Police Sgt. David Armstrong's longstanding criminal justice program at the school. As the smiling sergeant strolls through the school, he greets many more students than are in his classes, and gets pulled aside for a word about this or that.


Still, Mr. Hibbard said, a recent poll revealed there are plenty of students who would not turn to police or administrators with a problem or concern — which brings Chief Sherrill and Mr. Hibbard to one of the obstacles they are trying to overcome, in consultation with school administrators and key faculty



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How do you get students, and adults for that matter, to contact police if something odd has caught their attention?

Other obstacles include: What means of communicating would be used (Internet bulletin board, instant messaging, other)? Who would monitor the information center 24-7?, which Chief Sherrill called essential.

And who would pay for it? Mr. Hibbard is working on finding funding.

What Mr. Hibbard and Chief Sherrill know for sure is that indicators have been missed in other places where horrific acts were implausible.

Case in point: Virginia Tech. On April 16, Seung Hui Cho allegedly shot and killed 32 students plus himself and wounded another 17 students.

According to the inquiry ordered by Virginia Gov. Timoth M. Kaine, and reported to him four months after the shootings, Mr. Cho had a documented history of mental health issues. Dating back as far as 1999, after the Columbine shootings, his middle school teachers noted suicidal and homicidal ideas in his writings.

As a junior at Virginia Tech, Mr. Cho was known to be disturbed. The individual pieces of information showing Mr. Cho's violent tendencies were not shared, nor connected, and did not provide a coherent picture for the people who could have intervened.

And while the possibility of anything like that ever happening here is nearly nil, Chief Sherrill said, he is thinking about all the other unlikely acts that could happen. He said he would rather prevent the least likely horrors from happening than be putting the pieces together when it is too late.



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