

Colorado's Quick Response to School Threat Was Well-Rehearsed

Anonymous tips lines and flow of information between law enforcement agencies developed after Columbine, Arapahoe HS mass shootings.

By Jean Lotus, Patch Staff | Apr 17, 2019 5:35 pm ET

DENVER, CO – It's certainly no secret that Colorado has had a history of mass shootings. The 1999 killing of 18 students and staff at Columbine High School 20 years ago this week thrust school shootings into the national spotlight. Add to that the 2012 Aurora theater Shooting, the 2016 Arapahoe High School and Planned Parenthood shooting incidents (among others). As Gov. Jared Polis said last week while signing Colorado's "Red Flag" bill, "It seems that Colorado has had more than our share of tragedies."

But along with those tragedies have come opportunities to learn and examine how systems could have been made better to prevent them from happening again.

As Denver recovers from the manhunt for an armed woman determined to be a "credible threat," law enforcement agencies on the federal, state and local level worked together in a well-oiled fashion, because they've drilled together for just this type of situation.

It started after Columbine when Colorado's 2001 Columbine Commission, put together by then-Gov. Bill Owens, helped change the way U.S. law enforcement officers react to active shootings. Previously, officers were trained to close off the perimeter of a shooting, but they now make stopping the shooter their first priority. The commission's findings also helped schools and emergency departments across the country streamline communication. The Columbine Commission helped schools all across the country develop emergency crisis plans.

University of Colorado's Center for the Prevention and Study of Violence was allowed to analyze the 2016 Arapahoe High School shooting in detail, interviewing personnel, teachers, administration and law enforcement. Their 2016 report was funded by a grant from the Arapahoe High School Community Fund Honoring Claire Davis, named after the student who was killed in the incident.

The report was written to help schools spot missed hints of potential threats and create a safer school climate to prevent these violent incidents from happening again, the authors said.

Colorado also pioneered the Safe2Tell app, which allows students to report threats to themselves or others. These reports are quickly passed along to law enforcement.

Phone calls and texts are responded to live which lets students communicate in real-time with with trained experts. This lets law enforcement respond immediately.

"When action is warranted, information is immediately forwarded to local school officials, mental health professionals, and law enforcement agencies," the organization said in its annual report. Safe2Tell calls are followed up with check-ins in schools and mental health services, which shows students accountability and "breaks the code of silence," the agency said.

Last school year, from August 1, 2017 to July 31, 2018, Safe2Tell received a total of 16,000 tips. that was an increase by 74 percent from the 2016-17 school year, the Colorado Attorney General's Office said.

After the Feb. 14, 2018 school shooting Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida former Attorney General Cynthia Coffman traveled to Florida to share Safe2Tell with her counterpart Florida Attorney General Pamela Bondi.

The 20th anniversary of Columbine approaches this weekend, and its pull still resonates. Sol Pais, 18, who died by suicide near Mt. Evans Tuesday was reported to be "infatuated with Columbine." Law enforcement procedures in the state were put to the test in the reaction to Pais's threat, and seem to have succeeded.

"Federal, state and local partners all came together in an incredible manner," said Denver FBI Chief Dane Phillips. "In the Denver metro area, you should feel confident that your law enforcement community is protecting you and keeping you safe."