

# Breaking the code of silence

By Jennifer Kocher Wyoming Business Report

Apr 15, 2019

Last December, authorities were alerted to potential planned attacks at two high schools in Casper.

Students had been sharing a song on social media that depicted a school shooting when one student made a reference to a planned assembly at Natrona High School.

Police received more than 30 tips about the potential attack from students through Wyoming's new Safe2Tell anonymous tip reporting program. And while whether those tips actually helped fend off a planned attack is up for debate, according to Safe2Tell Program Manager Bill Morse, it sure didn't hurt to have advance warning.

As far as he's concerned, the program is incredibly effective, and the numbers speak for themselves.

In the roughly three years since implementing the program, he's watched the numbers continue to tick up. As of March 29, the program had received 2,398 anonymous tips.

"We see an increase every year," he said, "and I have no doubt it's working."

The statewide program is based on Safe2Tell Colorado, which has been instrumental in helping Wyoming get its program off the ground. Colorado's program was implemented in the wake of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, in which 12 students and one teacher died. The Columbine Review Commission, appointed by former Gov. Bill Owens, found an overwhelming number of students had been aware of the shooters' questionable behaviors, but due to the unwritten code of silence among teens, nobody spoke up out of fear of being ostracized for ratting out their peers.

"More than 80 percent knew something but didn't speak up," Morse said.

Colorado began its Safe2Tell program in 2004. It was created as a nonprofit group before being passed into legislation in 2014 and taken over by the Attorney General's Office.

Wyoming was slower to follow, but in the wake of Connecticut's Sandy Hook School shooting in 2012, Gov. Matt Mead established the School Safety and Security Task Force to provide recommendations in the state. Out of this came three recommendations with regard to school safety, including providing funding for a school resource officer program, developing a

framework for school building security, and putting together a crisis management team, with incident command systems for schools.

After a lot of give and take, and a couple of failed bills in the legislative sessions leading up to 2016, Senate File 97 was passed March 3, 2016. The condensed version of earlier initiatives was signed into law by Mead later that month. The bill included requirements for the attorney general to administer a call center and deliver the information in a confidential manner based on a program similar to Colorado's.

As Morse pointed out, Colorado generously shared its framework across state lines, which let Wyoming more cheaply and efficiently get its own program up to speed under the Attorney General's Office of Victim Services.

"We didn't have to reinvent the wheel, and that made it much easier to get it going," Morse said.

The basis for Safe2Tell is to allow tipsters to remain anonymous, and according to Morse, they don't track information for anyone who submits a report unless that person is submitting a tip on their own behalf.

Either by using a form on the website or downloading the Safe2Tell app, tipsters can anonymously submit tips in a variety of ways, including text messages, emails and on the website, and that information is legally protected from being publicly released. Only under specific circumstances is that information allowed to be subpoenaed in legal proceedings.

When submitting a tip, users are asked to select a concern or event type from a drop-down menu of more than 30 options, including alcohol, bullying, depression, fighting, drugs, eating disorders and planned school attack. They are asked to include a date, time, place and the social media application, if relevant. There is also a form to identify and include applicable personal information, such as address, any identifying marks like tattoos and piercings, location and whether a weapon is involved.

The bulk of the reports come from junior high and high school students, and according to Morse, they overwhelmingly fall into the category of mental health, particularly suicide. But so far this year, according to data on the website, tips regarding drugs dominate the list at 28.9 percent, followed by suicide threats (21.4 percent), self harm (20.8 percent), bullying (18.2 percent) and depression (10.7 percent).

Morse said students as young as third grade have submitted tips, though typically they are from parents who are reporting activities their child has overheard. Sometimes tips come from young adults right out of high school and college, but the predominant users are teens still in school.

"Suicide tips are the majority," Morse said, "usually submitted by friends calling to express concern about the behavior of the people around them."

When these tips come in, they are received by the Wyoming Highway Patrol in Cheyenne, and then disbursed to school administrators, city police departments and mental health counselors.

All of the pertinent contact information is stored in their system for every school in the state, so when a tip comes in, it's easy to disburse that information.

So far, according to Morse, they've received tips about planned school attacks and at least 15 gun tips. The number of tips correlate to population size, with the majority coming from larger cities like Cheyenne, Casper and Gillette.

The system also allows for two-way communication between the dispatcher and tipster, so they can share information back and forth with regard to a person or event.

Their operating budget is around \$275,000 per year, which comes from federal funding allotted by the Wyoming Office of Homeland Security.

The percentage of false alarms is relatively low; last year they amounted to about 57 calls (less than 1 percent). And they have a standard response when they receive them, as they did once from a student calling to complain about the quality of the school's lunch.

Despite the relatively small misuse of the system, Morse is confident in Safe2Tell's positive impact.

Morse, who was with the Wyoming Highway Patrol for 25 years prior to taking his current post, feels passionate about his new job.

"I can see a difference that this program is making in a kid's life," he said. "Before, they had nowhere to go."