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SC discusses emergency situations, systems and procedures

Chelsea Coli
November 29, 2016

SHERIDAN — It has become a despairing familiarity to see news reports of mass shootings and attacks on campuses across the nation. It's a situation with innumerable variables that no institution wants to find itself in, but nevertheless must prepare for. Sheridan College is no exception.

Northern Wyoming Community College District Chief of Police Jason Vela said Sheridan College stresses a response process called ALICE, which stands for alert, lockdown, inform, counter, evacuate.

Vela said that the school stresses evacuation as a student's first option if it's possible. He said that in most cases an attacker on campus is not trying to escape — they want to stay on campus and harm as many people as possible before dying by suicide or being killed.

If evacuation isn't an option, Vela said next comes lockdown, which has evolved from previous definitions where students merely shut doors and stayed quiet.

"We want kids to pile up as much gnarly equipment and things in the room that they can find against the door," said Vela, explaining that Sheridan College holds drills that requires students to lock down a classroom. "You'd be surprised how creative they can get."

Though he didn't want it to be mistaken as a recommendation to wander the halls looking for an attacker, as a final option, Vela said he encourages students to fight back. This is the counter aspect of ALICE.

"It's a last resort when you're stuck in a classroom," Vela said. "You have nowhere to go, no other options; yes, we want you to fight back."

The other two facets of ALICE, alert and inform, go hand-in-hand. SC uses a mass notification system that allows students to choose how they are informed.

They receive notifications via cellphone through email, SMS text, voice calls or a combination of those.

Vela said relaying information to students, faculty and campus guests in these notifications is imperative. He said in the past there was a belief that knowing what was going on would create panic, so information diffusion was stifled. Now, he said, he wants a bit of panic.

“Panic’s part of the game,” Vela said. “We’re OK with panic because panic will motivate you.”

When alerts go out, Vela and his staff try to include as much information as possible so students can react appropriately.

Senior Director of Professional and Client Services at Alertus emergency mass notification systems, Ben Brewer, said there are two main types of notification systems — personal and a facility-driven. The personal system goes to individual phones with SMS text and emails, like what SC implements. The other, he said, is meant to saturate physical space and can include visual and audible alerts. What most schools overlook is areas where students and staff can become isolated. These areas include tunnels, electrical closets and classrooms where ambient noise is higher. The solution is to have multiple outlets for alerts. This is one reason a combination of the types of alert systems is beneficial.

Vela said through mandated tests SC has worked to pinpoint problem areas on campus and make adjustments depending on what type of notification works best. This included changing an audio alert that was originally only in the buildings to include outdoor locations.

Though the Clery Act, a federal law to improve campus safety, requires schools to test emergency systems once a year, Vela said the system at SC gets unofficially tested more often because of some unusual situations. This included an incident where a bear wandered around campus and students had to be notified. Once a year, he said, SC tests the system with other agencies. And though the school administers drills throughout the year, he said they try not to do too many so if a situation ever occurs, students take it seriously.

SC Director of Marketing and Public Information Wendy Smith said that what’s great about SC’s system; it’s not a one-way communicator. Students can also communicate with the school through the NWCCD Alert app. This app allows students to send photos or video of suspicious activity and contact emergency personnel when in a crisis.

The app then works through GPS to find the student’s location inside a building. Though it’s not exact, Vela said it uses the school’s Wi-Fi to triangulate location and is accurate within about 25 meters. The app also includes maps of campus, emergency numbers and evacuation procedures.

Though she admitted that in campus shooter-type situations it’s impossible to consider all the factors ahead of time, Smith said the college does its best to take every possible step to ensure safety.

“Safety first,” Smith said. “It’s just so important.”

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