

# Fundamentals of Threat Assessment in Schools

NERAC School Safety Seminar 2024

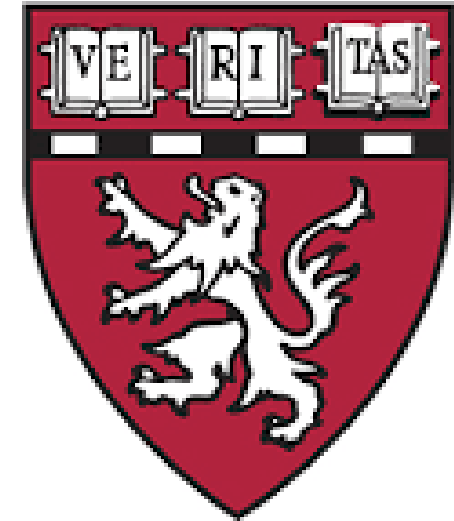
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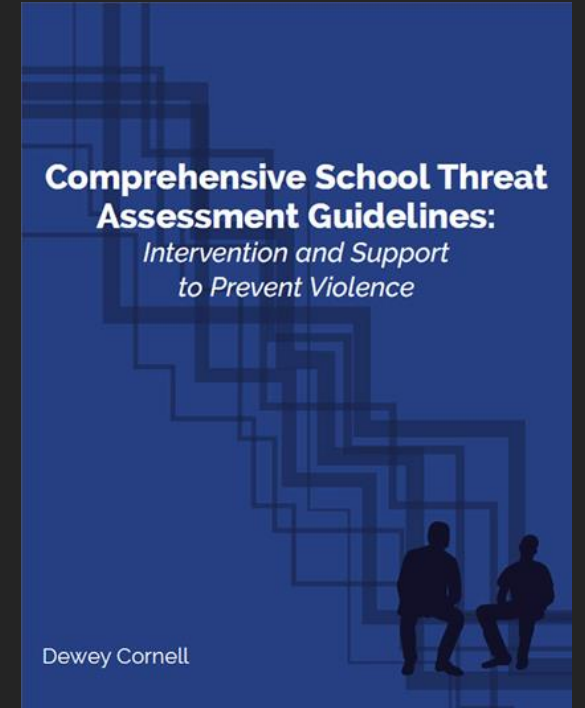
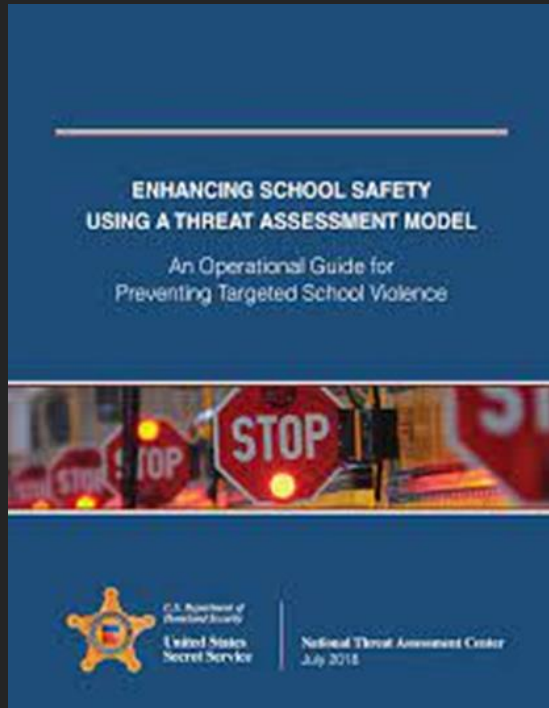


# Risk, Needs and Threat Assessment

Threat assessment: assessment of a behavioral threat, based on empirical indicators with a risk determination typically of transient/substantiative or low, med, high

Risk and needs assessment: assessment of an individual, using a biopsychosocial model with structured professional judgement with recommendations to mitigate risk and enhance protective factors

# School Threat Assessment



# Bad News

- Very difficult to predict school violence accurately
- Even if we accurately identify risk, we can't always prevent violence from occurring
- There is a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety about school violence



# Good News

- There are nationally established guidelines on how schools should address threat assessment
- We will cover these best practices in detail
- In terms of liability, it is not whether you were right or wrong but whether you were negligent or not





# School-Based TAT's

- Assemble a Team
- Train the team
- Have clear policies and procedures
- Communicate the policies and procedures
- Have regular meetings and case reviews



# Investigative Themes

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Student's motives and goals

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Inappropriate or threatening communications

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Inappropriate interests

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Fascination with and/or access to weapons

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Stressful events, challenges or losses

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Emotional/Developmental issues

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Desperation, hopelessness or suicidal ideation

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Opinion that violence is a way to solve problems

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Concern of others who are close to the student

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Capacity to carry out an attack

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Planning

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Consistency between student's statement and actions

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Protective factors



## Transient vs. Substantive Threats (CSTAG)

Transient: threat has no real intent or plan behind it, but can be alarming and concerning

Substantive: threat has a target, plan, means and intent behind it

## Transient threats (CSTAG)

Often rhetorical remarks with no intent

At worst temporary expressions of anger and frustration

Usually can be resolved on scene

Examples of transient threats?

Threat Level  
(FBI BAU)

Low

Moderate

Elevated

High

# Build Your Team

- Who is on it (roles not people)?
- Who is the leader?
- What is the reporting mechanism?
- When do you meet?
- Who does the investigation?
- Who manages the records?
- Who communicates the results and to whom?



# Reporting Mechanisms

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Could be an email or text or phone or online form

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Teachers and all staff need guidance and training on recognizing concerning behaviors and how to report

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Need for teams to respond immediately

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There should be an option for passing on info anonymously

# Reactive vs Proactive Violence



Reactive: Affect  
regulation  
strategies, CBT/DBT

Proactive:  
monitoring,  
consequences,  
specialized  
treatment

# Pathway to Violence (Fein & Vossekuil, 1998)

6. Attack

5. Breach

4. Preparation

3. Research & Planning

2. Ideation

1. Grievance

## Student Interview (CSTAG)

- Do you know why I wanted to talk with you?
- What happened when you were (place of incident)
- What exactly did you say? What exactly did you do?
- What did you mean when you said or did that?
- How do you think he/she feels about what you said/did?
- What was the reason you said/did that?
- What are you going to do now that you have made this threat?



# Witness Interview (CSTAG)

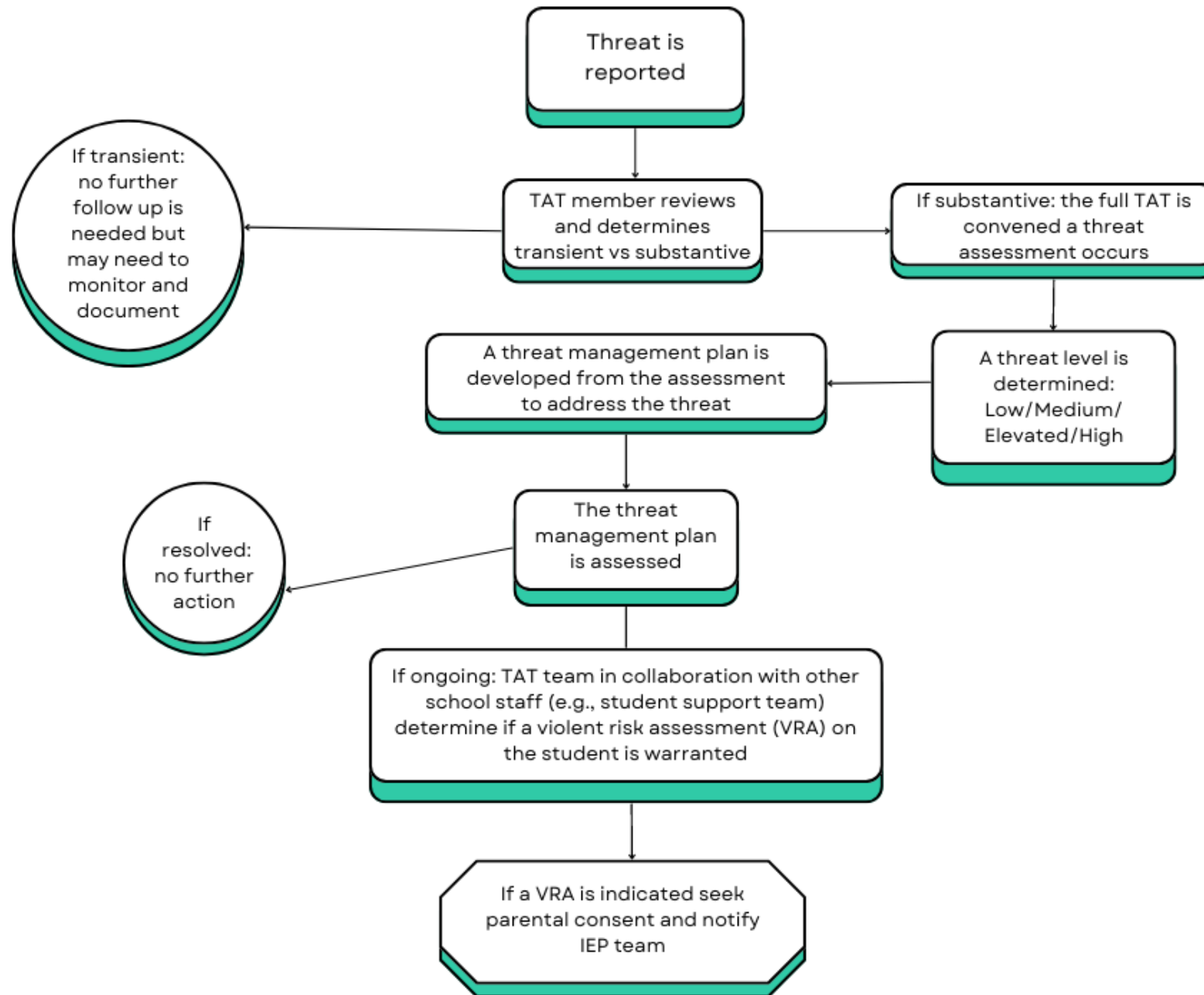
- What exactly happened when you were (place of incident)?
- What exactly did (student) say or do?
- What exactly did you say? What exactly did you do?
- How do you feel about what he/she said/did?
- Why did he/she say/do that?



# Threat management

- Do we need to act now to keep someone safe?
- Is an emergency evaluation needed or police response needed?
- What messages need to be pushed out?
- What are our threat management options
- If there is no safety risk, are there disciplinary issues?

# Threat assessment to VRA Flow Chart





### **Try**

Try as much as possible to avoid “cookie cutter” recommendations and language



### **Address**

Address the specific areas of risk for this particular student



### **Match**

Match recommended skills to specific area of need



### **Remember**

Remember that psychotherapy may not always be a viable option



### **Focus on**

Focus on addressing dynamic risk factors (e.g., peers, substance use, unstructured time, etc.)

# Risk Management

# Creating a Violence Risk Plan

- What type of violence are we worried about?
- What are the major risk areas that were identified and how do we intervene?
- What are the major protective factors we identified and how do we enhance them?
- What are our desired outcomes?
- How do we assess our plan?



# Next Steps

- Increase school capacity for threat assessment teams
- Develop capacity in schools for student risk assessments
- Increase law enforcement collaboration with schools and mental health providers
- Foster specific treatment and assessment clinics and programs for targeted violence in juveniles



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