

Is Your Campus Prepared in the Event of an Active Shooter?

By Jamie Underwood, Alertus



The ongoing threat of active shooters on college campuses brings safety and security to the forefront of everyone's minds. Recent events, includ-

ing those at Florida State University and Purdue University, while unfortunate, serve the larger purpose of fueling discussions about how individuals and organizations can proactively prepare for these types of scenarios.

A recent study released by the FBI on active shooter incidents in the U.S. shows that these fears and precautions are well founded. According to the report, 160 active shooter incidents occurred between 2000 and 2013, resulting in 1,043 casualties (including those killed and wounded). In response to the potential threat of an active shooter on campus, many colleges continue to enhance their campus emergency preparedness protocols to include clear instructions for students, faculty, and staff to follow in the event of an active shooter.

Educating the Campus Community

Following the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, Winthrop University immediately began looking for a solution to notify its entire campus in

times of emergency. The university installed a unified facility notification system to ensure comprehensive coverage in the event of an emergency but didn't stop there. "Along with the notification system that we have, it's important to have that educational concept or educational piece," says Frank Zebedis, chief of police at Winthrop University.

A proponent of educating the campus community on how to respond during an active shooter incident, Zebedis has developed and taught critical incident and response courses, including four classes that are now being funded through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and FEMA. In these courses, Zebedis outlines both the university and police's priorities during an incident. Campus police "focus a lot on training; what they're going to have to do in the event of an active shooter on campus," says Zebedis. This includes protecting the lives of students, faculty, and staff by immediately implementing the active shooter protocol for which police have been trained.

Zebedis explains that Winthrop conducts advanced law enforcement

response training. "That is also taught countywide, so everybody in the county is on the same page when it comes to responding. It's very beneficial because when you have an active shooter on your campus, you're not just going to have your public safety or your campus law enforcement. You're going to have law enforcement officers from all over the county, possibly the state, showing up."

Having a well-trained police force, both locally and countywide, is the first step, but Zebedis also stresses the importance of educating individuals to proactively ensure their own safety if they find themselves in a threatening



California State University San Marcos campus officers approach an individual whose visual description matches that of a potential gunman during a campus lockdown.

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situation. “We educate our law enforcement officers on what they need to do in order to respond, but we are also educating those people that are in those rooms waiting for us to get there.” Many colleges and universities, including Winthrop University, have started implementing a simple 3–4 step process on how individuals should respond if they find themselves in an active shooter situation. “We educate first to get out, and if you can get out safely, do it,” says Zebedis. “There’s been a lot of discussion across the country on whether or not we should encourage people to leave a safe environment, but at the time is that environment safe? It might not be, or it may be for a split second, and things can change very quickly. So we encourage our students, faculty, staff, and visitors to get out if they can do so safely.”

Individuals may find themselves in a situation where they cannot safely exit

the building or immediate area. If this is the case, Zebedis encourages students or faculty to hide or shelter in



Police officers across San Diego County respond to the possible gunman threat at California State University San Marcos.

place. This includes closing blinds, turning off all lights, silencing cell phones, lying down away from doors or windows, and locking and/or barri-

cading doors with desks or tables. “We encourage them not to leave once they decide to hide in a room until law enforcement shows up to help get them out,” says Zebedis. Finally, taking out an active shooter should be considered only as a last resort when no other option is available. “We don’t instruct this; we don’t advocate this unless it’s your last chance or your last means of survival,” says Zebedis.

Active vs. Passive Emergency Alerting

Washington University in St. Louis follows a similar protocol on what to do if confronted by an active shooter, drawing from the FBI’s run, hide, fight methodology.

In addition to having a comprehensive process or plan in place for these types of events, proactively identifying gaps in emergency notification is important. “We use a centralized dashboard to activate mul-

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multiple alerting technologies in the event of an emergency,” says Mark Bagby, director of emergency management at Washington University in St. Louis, who teaches emergency management and is an instructor for FEMA. “For an

We encourage our students, faculty, staff, and visitors to get out if they can do so safely.

active shooter or tornado warning, our dispatchers have access to send out preset messages related to that event.”

Washington University in St. Louis includes six campuses and covers 4,635 acres, which means accurate, targeted alerting is very important. “For active shooters we have messages that are specific to the campus that the problem is on,” says Bagby. “It’s important to make sure that we get the right message to the right location if it only involves one campus.” The university’s sprawling campus also dic-

tates its unique passive vs. active alerting method. “We actively alert through multiple channels to the population or the affected campus and then passively alert the rest of the university campus.” In preparation for and in response to recent, violent protests in nearby Ferguson, the university utilized this particular campus-specific functionality to notify students, faculty, and staff that the West Campus would be closed given the unpredictability of events that might unfold in the Clayton area.

Finally, Bagby highlights the importance of crafting a clear, concise emergency message. Following a real-life, non-emergency exercise on February 20, 2013, Bagby explains that students, faculty, and staff found the emergency message sent out was somewhat confusing. This gave the university an opportunity to evaluate the message and consider important changes to sentence structure and wording. Updates to language included a clear explanation of what

the threat was, whether it was designated to a specific area on campus, and specific instructions on what steps to take to ensure safety.

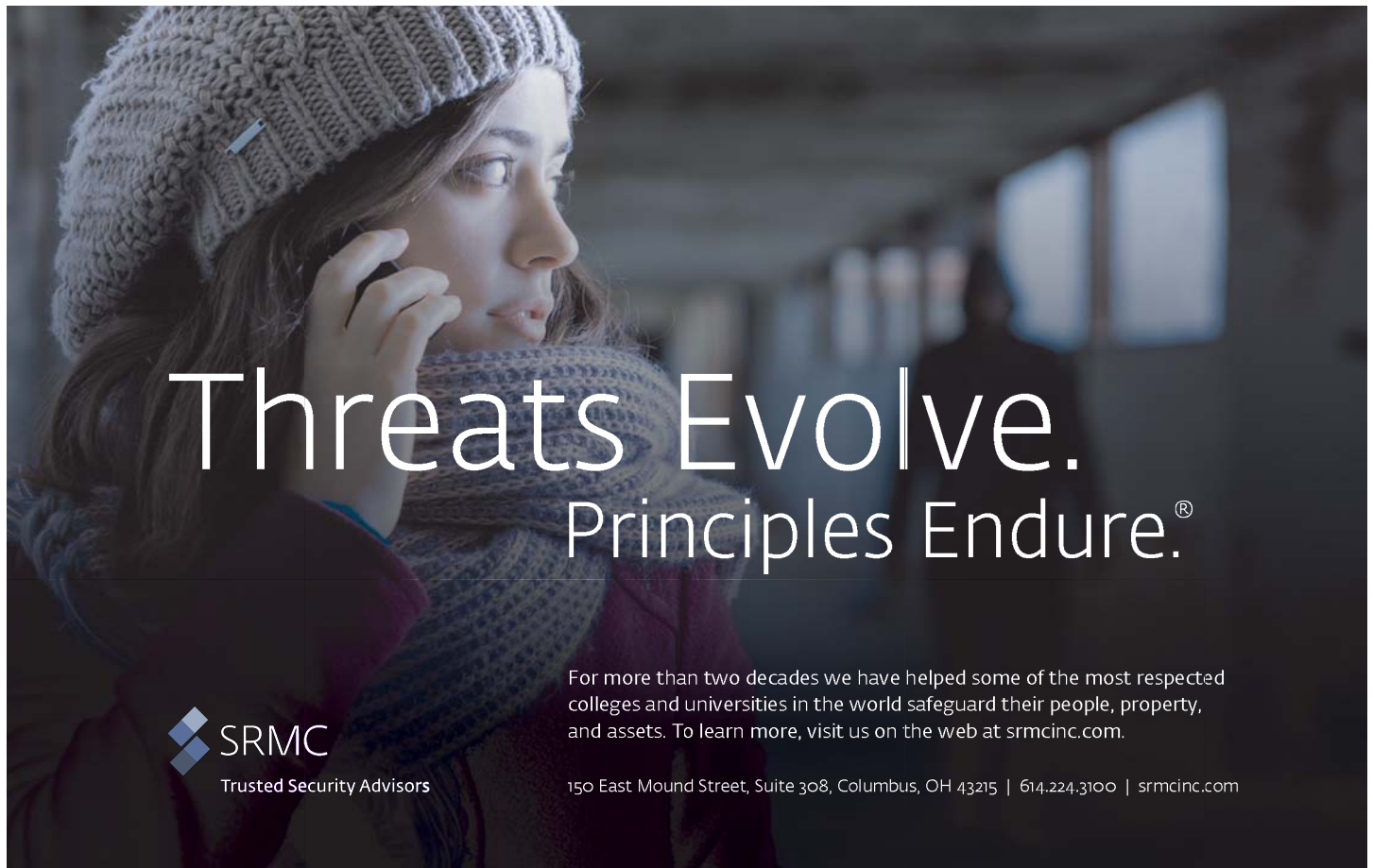
Campus Lockdown Following Possible Gunman Threat

Many emergency events, active shooter incidents in particular, require immediate action and the ability to dispatch an emergency alert to everyone on campus. “In an active shooter situation

It’s important to make sure that we get the right message to the right location if it only involves one campus.


you’re talking about the difference between people getting notified in a matter of 20 seconds or less versus four minutes when, according to statistics, most active shooter incidents are over in 12 minutes,” says Robert Williams, emergency manager at Cali-

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California State University San Marcos (CSUSM). The recent FBI study also emphasizes this point, estimating that 60 percent of active shooter scenarios between 2000 and 2013 ended before police arrived.

CSUSM recently handled a possible gunman threat that led to a campus-wide lockdown. "Our dispatch center received a call that there was a man on campus with a weapon," says Williams. "Officers were dispatched to campus and started searching the last location of where the person was reported." The emergency alert was initiated when an authorized dispatcher at CSUSM pressed the panic button, which in turn simultaneously activated a number of other devices throughout the campus, spoken alerts via public address speakers, computer desktop and phone alerting, digital signage display, text, cell phone, and email messaging, and automatic door lock activation.

A series of alerts were then sent out to the campus community during the search for the potential gunman, each message providing updated information on the situation at hand and instructions for students, faculty, and staff to shelter in place.

- First alert: Lockdown and shelter in place, await further instructions
- Second alert: Remain locked down, law enforcement on campus, subject description
- Third alert: Remain locked down, law enforcement entering last known area where subject was seen
- Fourth alert: All clear, subject located and no weapons found

These messages were broadcast and displayed using multiple emergency notification modalities. "People were saying that while they were locked down, it was nice to continue receiving timely updates," says Williams. "Depending on where they were in

lockdown, some said they had access to digital signage, some desktop alerts, some could hear the phone notifications, and most were getting the infor-



The Alert Beacon, a wall-mounted audible visual notification appliance, is one of several devices that Washington University in St. Louis uses to notify faculty, staff, and students in the event of a threat.

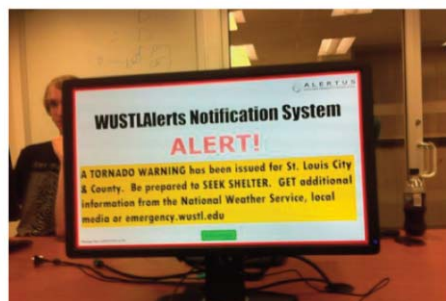
mation via their cell phones (call, text, and email)." Fortunately in the case of CSUSM, the potential gunman was discovered to be an employee of the university who was carrying a long umbrella that someone had mistaken for a rifle.

In discussing CSUSM's emergency notification process, Williams stresses the importance of having a compre-



All the @wustl computer monitors in the engineering department just switched to this. Too cool. pic.twitter.com/i1hTU9pX

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A Washington University in St. Louis engineering student comments on an active tornado alert that is disseminated to all university desktop computers.

hensive emergency notification system. In the case of CSUSM, a number of emergency alerting devices are installed throughout the campus that allow for comprehensive and immediate emergency alert notification across facilities. Comprehensive notification coverage generally requires a variety of alerting methods to overcome obstacles that may prevent individuals from receiving an emergency alert. Where are people located when the emergency occurs? Do they have access to a computer or mobile device (and is it powered on)? Are they in an area where they can see or hear the alert? "It was extremely beneficial to have so many options for getting information out to our campus community," says Williams.

About the Author

Jamie Underwood is director of marketing communications at Alertus Technologies. For information on Alertus Technologies visit www.alertus.com.

