

Vice President Unveils Guides for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Schools, Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs), and Houses of Worship

Schools, IHEs, and houses of worship need comprehensive guidance on how to effectively plan and prepare for emergencies. Many of the plans in place at these critical centers of our communities have not been developed effectively or coordinated with local community partners. Even those organizations that have good plans in place may not have implemented them well. A 2010 survey found that while 84 percent of public schools had a written response plan in the event of a shooting, only 52 percent had drilled their students on the plan in the past year. Ineffective emergency planning, or unfamiliarity with existing plans, may unnecessarily put lives at risk.

In January, President Obama outlined his plan to reduce gun violence. He called on the Departments of Education (ED); Justice (DOJ), led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); Homeland Security (DHS), led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); and Health and Human Services (HHS) to work together to provide the best possible guidance to these communities on how to plan for and recover from the many emergency situations they may encounter.

Today, the Administration is releasing guides for developing high-quality emergency operations plans for schools, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and houses of worship. These guides align and build upon years of emergency planning work by the Federal government and are the first joint product of DHS, DOJ, ED and HHS on this critical topic. The guides are customized to each type of community, incorporate lessons learned from recent incidents, and respond to the needs and concerns voiced by stakeholders following the recent shootings in Newtown and Oak Creek and the recent tornadoes in Oklahoma. Schools, IHEs and houses of worship can use them to create new plans as well as to revise and update existing plans.

The planning process outlined in the guides will help schools, IHEs, and houses of worship align their emergency planning practices with those at the national, state, and local levels. National preparedness efforts, including emergency planning, are now informed by Presidential Policy Directive (PPD) 8, signed by the President in March 2011, which describes the nation's approach to preparedness. This directive represents an evolution in our collective understanding of national preparedness, based on the lessons learned from terrorism, hurricanes, school incidents, and other emergencies. The new guides translate the planning guidance from these recent developments to the school, IHE, and house of worship contexts, ensuring that they benefit from these advancements. The guides introduce schools, IHEs and houses of worship to a new approach to planning that includes walking through different emergency scenarios to create a course of action for each objective the team is trying to accomplish, whether it be providing fire prevention training to all students and staff that work with combustible materials or evacuating everyone in the building.

The guides also put a new emphasis on who should be included in the planning process. In order to effectively plan, from the outset, organizations must include community partners such as law enforcement, fire officials, emergency medical services personnel, local emergency management staff as well as public and mental health professionals in the planning process. A diverse set of members of the school, IHE or house of worship community should also be on the planning team, including all levels of the organization's staff; representatives of students and parents; and those that represent the interests of persons with disabilities and others with access and functional needs, as well as racial minorities and religious organizations.

Schools, IHEs and houses of worship should use the process outlined in the guides to develop or update their plans, as opposed to adopting a generic plan, because each organization will need to tailor its plan to address its own unique characteristics and vulnerabilities. For example, an urban school in a building with four floors may face very different challenges during an emergency than a rural school that is all on one level. A planning team with diverse membership will be able to draw on a wide range of expertise to identify the unique vulnerabilities a specific school faces and most effectively develop a plan to address them.

In addition, each guide includes *Closer Look* sections that address key topics that support emergency planning including active shooter situations, school climate, psychological first aid, information-sharing, and Clery Act requirements for IHEs to warn and notify students and staff when emergencies and other incidents occur.

Using the process described in the guides will facilitate not only an effective, coordinated response when an emergency occurs, but also help these organizations prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from an emergency.

Closer Look on Information-Sharing

Schools and IHEs want to ensure that they do not violate students' privacy rights and the law by inappropriately sharing student records. This can unfortunately result in schools and IHEs unnecessarily withholding critical information from law enforcement when there is a threat or emergency. The guides explain the relevant provisions of the laws governing student records and describe when and how these laws apply, assisting schools and IHEs in their efforts to both promote safety and protect student privacy.

Closer Look on Psychological First Aid

Psychological first aid (PFA) can be used to assist students, staff, and families in the immediate aftermath of an emergency. Trauma-related distress can have a long-term impact. PFA reduces the initial distress caused by emergencies by using brief, effective interventions that can have a long-lasting positive influence. While PFA is generally administered by mental health and disaster response workers, the guide for schools outlines a version of PFA which staff can be trained to implement effectively.

Close Look on Active Shooter Situations

The recent tragedies in Newtown and Oak Creek have raised the level of concern among Americans about whether schools, IHEs and houses of worship are doing everything they can to keep students, staff and congregants safe from gun violence. The guides provide information on actions these organizations can take to prevent such a shooting as well as increase survival rates and reduce trauma if a shooting does occur.

Preventing an Active Shooter Situation: The guides review the most current research from the FBI, United States Secret Service, and the Department of Education on the warning signs that shooters may display before an incident. The guides recommend that schools, IHEs, and houses of worship establish a threat assessment team (TAT), a central convening body used to identify, evaluate, and address these troubling signs. Once the TAT identifies an individual who may pose a threat, the team identifies a course of action for addressing the situation (e.g., intervention by law enforcement, counseling, or other support).

Exercises: The guides recommend that schools, IHEs and houses of worship practice responding to all prioritized threats and hazards, including active shooter situations. Exercises at schools should be selected through a process that includes parents and considers the appropriateness of the activity for the age of the student population involved.

Responding to an Active Shooter Situation: The guides describe the three basic options for responding to an active shooter situation. First, if it is safe to do so, those in harm's way should run out of the building until they are in a safe location. Second, if running is not a safe option, they should hide in as safe a place as possible, locking all doors if they can. Finally, if neither running nor hiding is a safe option, as a last resort when confronted by the shooter, adults in immediate danger should consider trying to disrupt or incapacitate the shooter by using aggressive force and items in their environment. Making sure adults understand these options will help those in harm's way quickly select their best course of action and save lives.

Planning for Recovery: The guides outline steps planning teams should take to effectively care for those injured or traumatized after an active shooter incident, including family members of victims.

While the new guides are an important part of the Administration's effort to reduce gun violence, their impacts are much broader. The process outlined in the guides will help schools, IHEs, and houses of worship prevent and prepare for a wide range of threats and hazards. These organizations should use the guides to undertake a comprehensive emergency planning process or revise existing plans. Organizations using the guides will be prepared to work with community partners to prevent, protect against, mitigate the impact of, respond to and effectively recover from an emergency.

Download the guides:

- [**Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans**](#)
- [**Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education**](#)
- [**Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship**](#)