

BTAM: THERE ARE NO “TYPICAL” CASES

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In 2014, the US government selected three major cities in which to pilot a local approach to preventing terrorism and targeted violence,¹ predicated on the idea that local community involvement can improve the design of such approaches [2]. Since then, these efforts have become more common as local actors—states, cities, and counties—have passed legislation related to behavioral threat assessment, adopted prevention strategies aimed at terrorism and targeted violence, and implemented programming to address such violence.²

We present this series of papers—informed by a year-long evaluation of the violence prevention efforts underway in Wood County, Ohio³—to shed light on a local effort and assist other actors in building their own networks.

In 2021, Ohio House Bill 123, the *Safety and Violence Education Students (SAVE Students) Act* (H.B. 123), was enacted. It requires that each school district create a behavioral threat assessment plan for every school building serving grades 6–12 to be incorporated into the school’s emergency management plan [3]. The bill also stipulates that each school building have a behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) team, and that members of the multidisciplinary team complete an approved threat assessment training program. One consequence of the legislation was that it created a need for a follow-on plan at the local level. Thus, if

behavioral threat assessment teams were going to identify youths at risk for committing acts of terrorism or targeted violence, there must be a structure in place to assess these individuals and connect them with the resources required to prevent violence from occurring.

When designing and implementing a terrorism or targeted violence prevention program, it can be tempting to outline a single process for identifying and handling relevant cases. CNA’s evaluation of targeted violence prevention efforts in Wood County, Ohio, makes clear that even the processes for identifying the cases can be highly variable, requiring a flexible and adaptive approach to assessment and management.

REFERRALS

To begin, referrals into the system—even two years into the county’s effort to create county-level expertise and collaboration—are not systematic. It is important to note that not all cases reach the Wood County Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services (WCADAMHS) Board, and cases that do reach the WCADAMHS Board are not necessarily critical. For example, an originating organization (e.g., the school, the Juvenile Residential Center) might request assistance with a low-risk case (e.g., expedited access to services), or an originating organization may not

¹ The US Secret Service defines targeted violence as *a premeditated act of violence directed at a specific individual, group, or location, regardless of motivation and generally unrelated to other criminal activity* [1, p. 12].

² For example, a range of activities is underway in states including Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Ohio, New York, and Texas.

³ Our evaluation focused exclusively on Wood County’s efforts serving juveniles.

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request assistance with a high-risk case (e.g., because it was clear that the case was criminal, requiring contact with law enforcement).

An analysis of the cases that did reach the WCADAMHS Board, however, makes clear that there is no typical case (Table 1). First, the source of the warning may not be correlated with the source of the referral to the network. Second, although there are open lines of communication between the various organizations involved, the cases

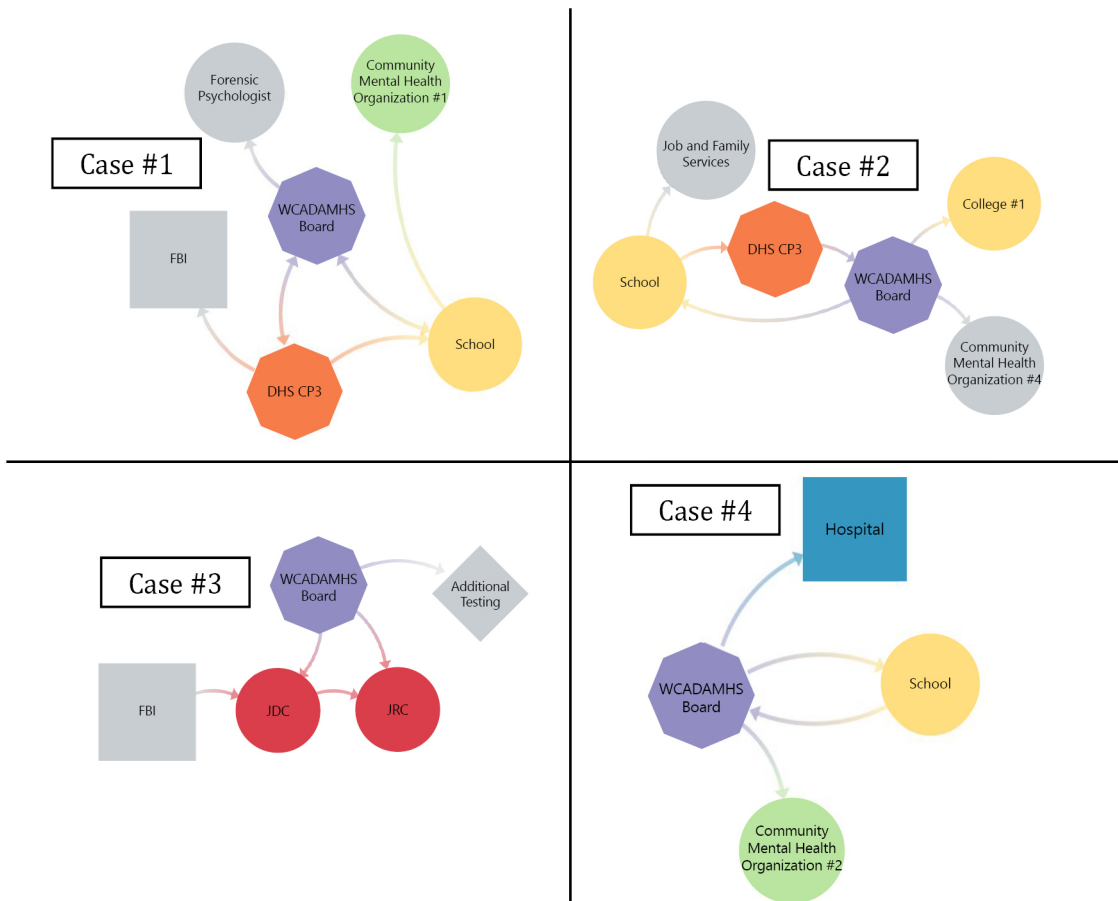
themselves reached the WCADAMHS Board in different ways. In an ideal situation, a threat might occur in a school, and the school itself might reach out to the WCADAMHS Board to access county-level resources if they are required. In the cases offered in this document, however, there were often intermediaries between the original referral and the network itself, and the cases came to the attention of the WCADAMHS Board in ways that were unpredictable.

Table 1. Top organizations in the network

Case	Precipitating concern	Who reported the threat?	How was the threat brought to the network's attention?
1	Observed searching online for content related to mass-casualty events	Residential advisor at an out-of-state school	Federal law enforcement alerted the DHS CP3 Regional Prevention Coordinator
2	Made threats of violence and attempted to obtain a gun	Classmates	School alerted DHS CP3 Regional Prevention Coordinator
3	Made specific online threats of violence	Online bystander	WCADAMHS learned about the case in the news
4	Indicated that they wanted to go on a killing spree	Classmates	WCADAMHS reached out to the school to discuss collaboration in general and the school mentioned an active case

Source: CNA.

Figure 1. Wood County, Ohio, involvement by case



Source: CNA, created using [4]. Legend: octagon = key partner; circle = county-level resource or partner; square = state- or regional-level resource or partner; orange = public safety organization; blue = hospital or medical facility; yellow = school; light green = mental health provider; purple = WCADAMHS Board; grayscale = peripheral network (named by core partners—shown in color—as partners they interact with and rely on).

NETWORK INVOLVEMENT

Similarly, the organizations and resources required to handle each case varied considerably despite the seeming similarities between the cases (i.e., that in each case concerns were raised about the possibility that a minor might commit an act of targeted violence) (Figure 1). This reality, and the fact that each school district in the county has its own approach to BTAM, means that each case was handled differently, requiring nonschool organizations to adapt to a variety

of approaches. It also means that some organizations have had exposure to multiple cases, while others have been involved in just one case. This will likely result in expertise developing unevenly across the county because some organizations will be involved in more cases than others. If central nodes are not identified and involved, this could result in a failure to take advantage of the familiarity and expertise those nodes are able to bring—familiarity and expertise that other county-level entities have not yet developed.



IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL POLICY-MAKERS

1. BUILD A FLEXIBLE PROCESS

Wood County intentionally designed a flexible process, recognizing that Ohio House Bill 123 requires that each school building in the state have a BTAM team, and that members of the team must complete an approved threat assessment training program [3]. Therefore, each school district within Wood County was responsible for standing up its own unique approach to BTAM. Within school districts, there are both structural differences (e.g., using different threat assessment tools) and cultural differences (e.g., convening a BTAM team only for high-risk cases rather than for all cases). The result is that county-level actors are compelled to learn numerous processes and function within a range of cultures. Therefore, a rigid or prescriptive county-level approach is not tenable. The network can flourish only if county-level resources are flexible and adaptive.

2. RECOGNIZE AND LEVERAGE EXPERTISE WHERE IT OCCURS

Because terrorism or targeted violence risk is relatively uncommon, and because it is not likely to occur with predictable geographic distribution, it is very likely that expertise will accrue unevenly across the state or county. Therefore, it is critical that the network recognize and leverage expertise where it occurs. This may take a range of forms—it might mean bringing in county-level resources (recognizing that county-level actors have seen more cases), or it might mean asking a colleague from another county or region to sit in on a BTAM session to offer input. The critical issue is that BTAM practitioners take advantage of expertise even when it resides outside their core team.

REFERENCES

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