



## BTAM: BUILDING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING



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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,<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>*

*We present this series of papers—informed by a year-long evaluation of the violence prevention efforts underway in Wood County, Ohio<sup>3</sup>—to shed light on a local effort and assist other actors in building their own networks.*

In an after-action review of the mass shooting at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, the Virginia Tech Review Panel found that although various individuals knew about numerous concerning incidents involving the eventual perpetrator of the shooting, “no one knew all the information and no one connected all the dots” [3, p. 2]. The report further notes that the causes of such an inadequate exchange of information were inconsistent interpretations of various privacy laws and university policies [3].

Nearly twenty years later, ensuring that professionals involved in targeted violence prevention and behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) can all speak the same language remains a critical challenge. During the evaluation, CNA interviewed 34 professionals involved in Wood County’s prevention efforts. These individuals come from various disciplines, which we broadly categorized into mental health/social services, school administration, law enforcement/public safety, and criminal justice (Figure 1). Similar to other multidisciplinary groups, Wood County faces the challenge of getting the entire group to speak the same language. We identified two critical barriers to effective interdisciplinary communication: (1) differing terminology and (2) varying threat assessment models.

**Terminology.** Schools, mental health service providers, and law enforcement agencies can misunderstand or disagree on terminology. For example, in several cases, school administrators incorrectly referred to a clinical forensic psychological evaluation obtained for a student as a “behavioral threat assessment.” Similarly, the term *assessment* can mean different things to different practitioners—for clinicians, it can be interpreted as a clinical evaluation of someone’s psychological state, whereas for law enforcement, it may mean assessing

<sup>1</sup> 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].

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

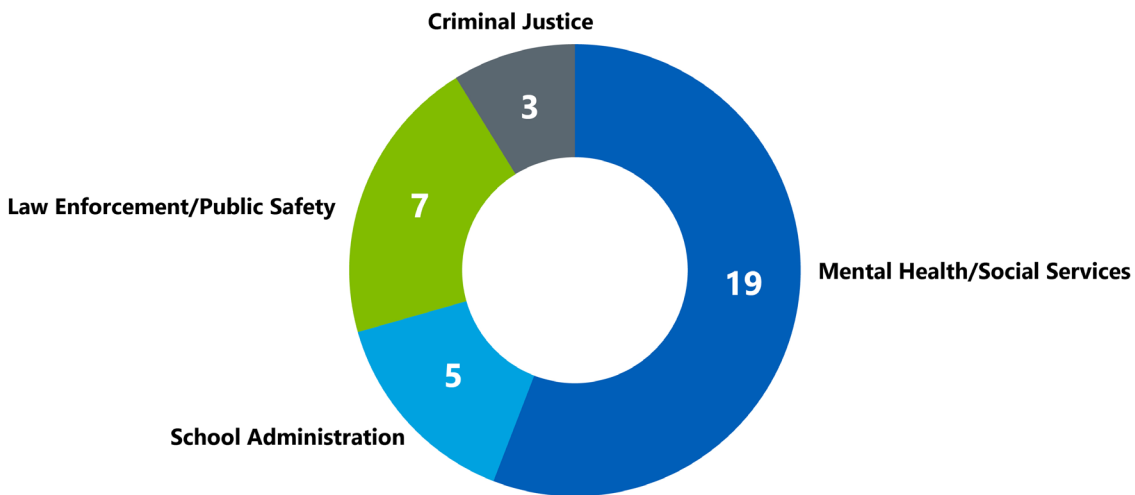
<sup>3</sup> Our evaluation focused exclusively on Wood County’s efforts serving juveniles.

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Figure 1. Breakdown of interviewees by discipline



Source: CNA.


the risk that someone will commit an act of violence. Stakeholders can also understand *safety* differently, with law enforcement having a more securitized view than social workers or counselors [4]. Schools might require a student be deemed “safe” or require a specific safety plan for the student before they can come back to school, whereas therapists or clinicians might feel they can never guarantee safety [5].

**"You need to speak the same language and do the same training."**

**Threat assessment models.** Within Wood County, not all schools use the same threat assessment model, nor do their administrators and educators all have the same training. Although many schools use the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG), others use the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) model or an informal self-developed approach [6]. Although some providers reported being knowledgeable on both models, most received training

on only one model or the other [7]. This discrepancy creates a “language barrier” between schools and practitioners using NTAC and those using CSTAG. Practitioners may have challenges communicating with one another, understanding reports or assessments based on a model that is unfamiliar to them, or effectively sharing information as students move between schools and providers. In some cases, schools using one model were reluctant to work with entities using a different model, limiting the resources available to educators and students. This language barrier also means that the mental health service providers, law enforcement, and criminal justice stakeholders who engage with schools must either become familiar with the different threat assessment models or risk being unable to effectively communicate with all county educators. The use of different models complicates the county’s efforts to develop a technological solution to the challenges posed by information sharing. The issue exists at the state level as well; various state-level agencies use different threat assessment models, so state-level guidance issued to schools may be unfamiliar to schools using a different model [6].

The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that although Ohio state law mandates that educators receive



threat assessment trainings, there are 22 approved trainings school administrators can choose from. The content and quality across these training programs vary; some use CSTAG, others NTAC, and some are just a series of videos explaining threat assessment, with no instruction on how to *conduct* a threat assessment.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL POLICY-MAKERS

### 1. COORDINATE DELIBERATELY

With multiple threat assessment models and trainings to choose from, some confusion is inevitable, but it is manageable with deliberate coordination. Stakeholders should first identify all the BTAM models currently in use within the community and compare the models to identify what they have in common, where they differ, and whether they conflict with one another. Stakeholders should also consider producing a quick reference guide for practitioners with this information. Ensuring that everyone understands all models in use and can interpret reports based on each model is more important than choosing one model over another. If possible, all practitioners should receive training on each of the models in use.

### 2. DO NOT ASSUME A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Individuals participating in the threat assessment process must be cognizant that terminology differs across disciplines. Multidisciplinary teams must prioritize open communication, which involves creating space for participants to explain how they define key terms and ask questions when something is unclear. Hosting regular meetings or workshops to

collaboratively establish a shared understanding and working definitions of important terminology can ensure consistency, enhance trust, and foster a more effective process.

## REFERENCES

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- [4] Interview with Wood County stakeholder, Aug. 2024.
- [5] Interview with Wood County stakeholder, July 2024.
- [6] Interview with Wood County stakeholder, Sept. 2024.
- [7] Interview with Wood County stakeholder, Oct. 2024.

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