

MCSO gets GMCS ready for active shooter situations

Written by By Molly Howell Sun Correspondent
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Active shooter situations took center stage at the Gallup McKinley County School District board meeting Oct. 4.

McKinley County Undersheriff James Maiorano III gave a presentation about how the sheriff's office educates GMCS staff about active shootings.

Before COVID-19, the protocol involved three elements: a PowerPoint presentation, takedown drills in which the GMCS staff learns things like how to lock a classroom down, and how to barricade a door, and then the sheriff's department does a full-blown drill with the staff only.

That is followed by an analysis of how the staff performed and how the safety team could have improve their response.

According to Maiorano, a safety team is responsible for securing the building and for the safety of the students and staff in the event of a shelter in place, lockdown, or evacuation situation.

The McKinley County Sheriff's Office has revisited the PowerPoint presentation because of COVID-19.

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The sheriff's department uses a program called A.L.I.C.E, which stands for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, and Evacuate.

According to the ALICE Training website, the first step school staff should take when someone realizes there is an active shooter on the property is to alert everyone of the situation. Then teachers must barricade the room, which is the second step of the process.

Staff must then inform others of the intruder's location. That can be done with a 911 call, a public address announcement, or video surveillance.

The Counter step involves making noise and creating distractions to reduce the shooter's ability to shoot accurately.

Evacuation is the last step. School staff must know their environment well enough to discover the safest way out of a dangerous situation.

Maiorano praised GMCS staff for how they've been doing during the training sessions.

"Your school staff is amazingly receptive to it," Maiorano told the board. "They take it seriously."

He said so far, 20 of the 33 GMCS schools have been scheduled for their training. Five schools have already completed the program for this year.

Maiorano said the sheriff's department has been working with the schools to answer questions such as how to lock the threat outside the building and how to respond to a threat inside. MCSO also focused on ways to lock down individual classrooms.

He said the sheriff's department has learned a lot from previous situations.

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“We used a lot of things we learned from the Aztec school shooting and some of the other shootings and we apply them,” Maiorano said. “So every time we have a new shooting we try and analyze that data and then try to tweak our class accordingly, so that we can give the school staff the best info that we can.”

The Aztec school shooting Maiorano referenced happened on Dec. 7, 2017. William Atchison shot and killed two students before shooting himself.

After Maiorano’s presentation, school board vice president Chris Mortensen asked about the sheriff’s office reaction time to some of the more rural schools .

Maiorano stated that it takes his officers an hour and 25 minutes to get to Tse Yi Gai High School. He added that it took 25 minutes to respond to the Tohatchi incident.

Tohatchi High School was placed under lockdown on Sept. 23, 2019, and police units from multiple jurisdictions responded.

According to a *Sun* article, students from the high school and Tohatchi Middle School were escorted to Tohatchi Elementary School, where they followed release procedures implemented by police and district staff.

“I guess some of it is just luck of the draw; if you have somebody local to [respond to] it,” Mortensen said. “You’re just timing how long it takes to get from here to there, but there’s a chance that there’d be someone – FBI or state [police] – someone running around out there at that time.”

“In working with the schools, especially the rural ones, we teach the importance of knowing their [active shooter] drill very well, because these schools are going to be handling the emergency situation until we arrive,” Maiorano said.

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He explained that the average active shooter situation lasts between 2 to 12 minutes, which doesn't give police enough time to get to the scene.

"So that means that the school staff has to be prepared to handle that situation on their own until we arrive, and that's the importance of the safety team and that's the importance of practicing the drills until they're perfect," Maiorano said.

GMCS superintendent Mike Hyatt informed the board that all of the schools have safety plans that are shared with different departments like the fire and police departments. These plans ensure that those entities have contact with the schools and that they understand evacuation plans.

He also said the district is looking to improve the security cameras that are currently in use.

Mortensen suggested another safety measure that could be put in place.

"It might make sense to have some kind of back door to where the sheriff, or whatever municipality, has like almost immediate access to the security camera footage and can see what's going on out there," Mortensen suggested.

Hyatt explained that the district was looking into the possibility of staff being able to access the security cameras through the cloud so that they could check it on their cellphones or laptops.

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