



# A Credible Threat: Operationalizing Threat Assessment to Support School Safety and Student Well-Being

Presented by:

Leon Covington, MSW, LICSWA

Threat Assessment Lead

NEWESD 101

[lcovington@esd101.net](mailto:lcovington@esd101.net)

# THIS PRESENTATION WILL:

- Brief overview of the Salem-Keizer/Cascade Student Threat Assessment Model
- Highlight the need for strong consultation and customer service
- Illustrate the value of community partnerships
- Examine risk factors and protective factors
- Review intervention and threat management strategies
- Present a case study including current outcomes
- Explore the increase in risk factors due to online/hybrid learning (COVID)

# WHAT IS THREAT ASSESSMENT?

As defined by the Secret Service (Threat Assessment in Schools pg. 29):

“The primary purpose of a threat assessment is to prevent targeted violence. The threat assessment process is centered upon analysis of the facts and evidence of behavior in a given situation. The appraisal of risk in a threat assessment focuses on actions, communications, and specific circumstances that might suggest that an individual intends to mount an attack and is engaged in planning or preparing for that event.”

## **Threat Assessment Is Not:**

- Predictive Profiling.
- Enhanced Professional Judgment
- Artificial Intuition
- Future Predictions
- Labels

## Definition of a threat

- A threat to harm others is defined as any spoken, written, electronic, or behavioral communication of intent to physically injure or harm someone else. A threat may be communicated directly to the intended victim or communicated to a third party.

# Why the Salem-Keizer/Cascade Model?

- Multi-discipline, multi-agency collaboration
- Designed by educators (with input and support from youth serving agencies) for the application and use in an educational setting
- Shared ownership, shared responsibility and decreased liability
- Increases both physical safety and psychological safety

- Includes equity language; includes trauma informed strategies, includes restorative practice
- Checks and prevents implicit bias and other forms of bias
- Expeditious but methodical
- User friendly—simple and clear language; identification of risk in clear terms; step by step instructions and guidance

- Inexpensive—expertise is within the protocol-driven system
- Identification of intervention and supervision strategies that fit the situation and accurately address risk
- Inclusive, not exclusive—promotes connections, observation, and supervision in the schools
- Prevention and early intervention, not a punitive or gotcha system

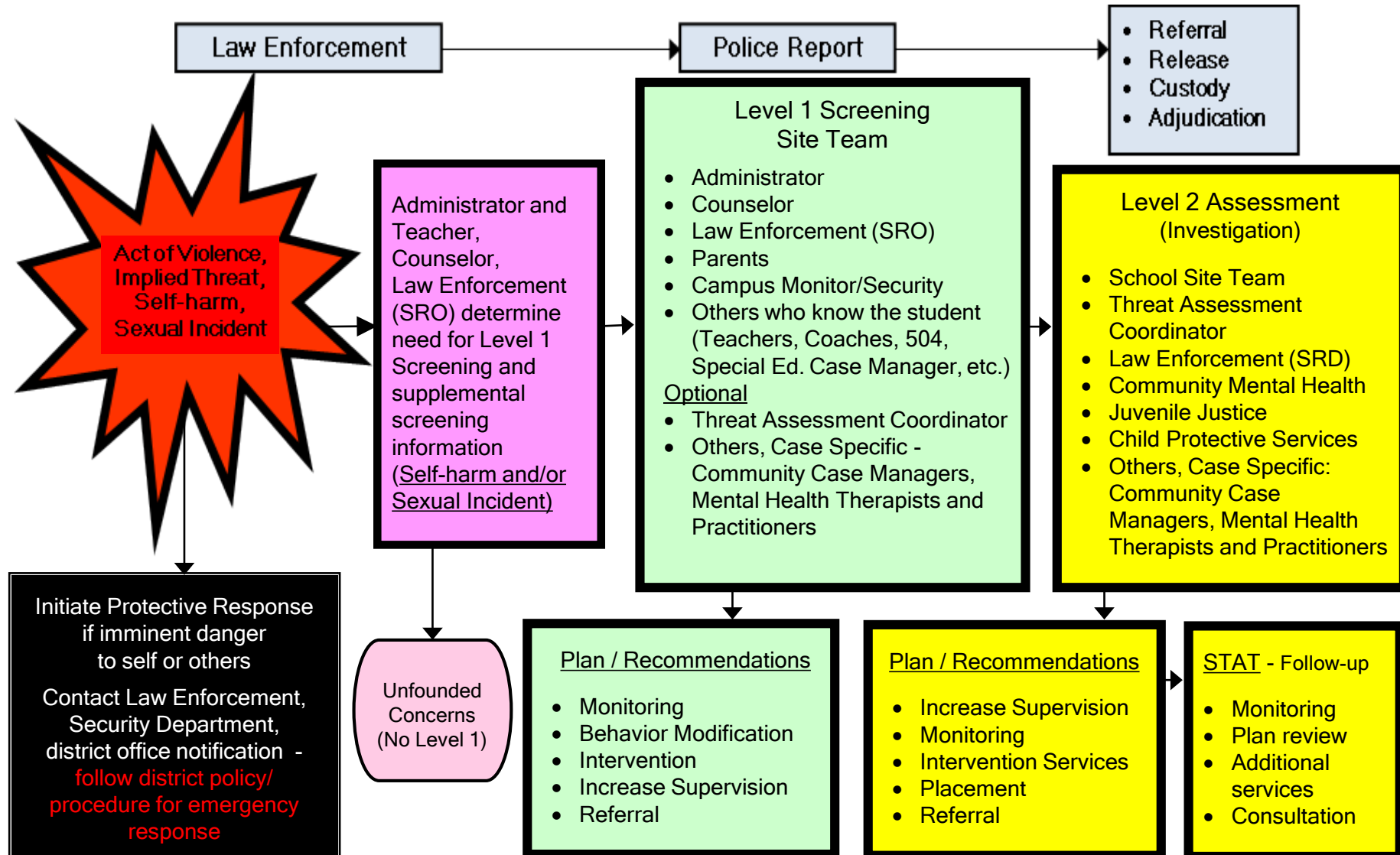
# Goal of Student Threat Assessment

According to the USSS, the goal of threat assessment is to identify students of concern, assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities, and deliver intervention strategies to manage that risk.... Many of these behaviors [of concern] may not involve physical violence or criminal acts, but still require an assessment and appropriate intervention. The threshold for intervention should be low so that schools can identify students in distress **before** their behavior escalates to the level of eliciting concerns about safety



# STUDENT THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAM SYSTEMS FLOW CHART

*Adapted from Salem-Keizer Student Threat Assessment Systems*



# Static vs. Dynamic Factors

Both static and dynamic factors play a role in threat assessment. Because dynamic factors change over time, these may be influenced through intervention.

- Dynamic factors are used for the short-term assessment of violence, including targeted violence.
- Dynamic factors are the main focus of threat assessment and management teams, as behavioral changes can be easily identified by *bystanders* and offer critical insights as to where an individual should be referred.

# Static factors

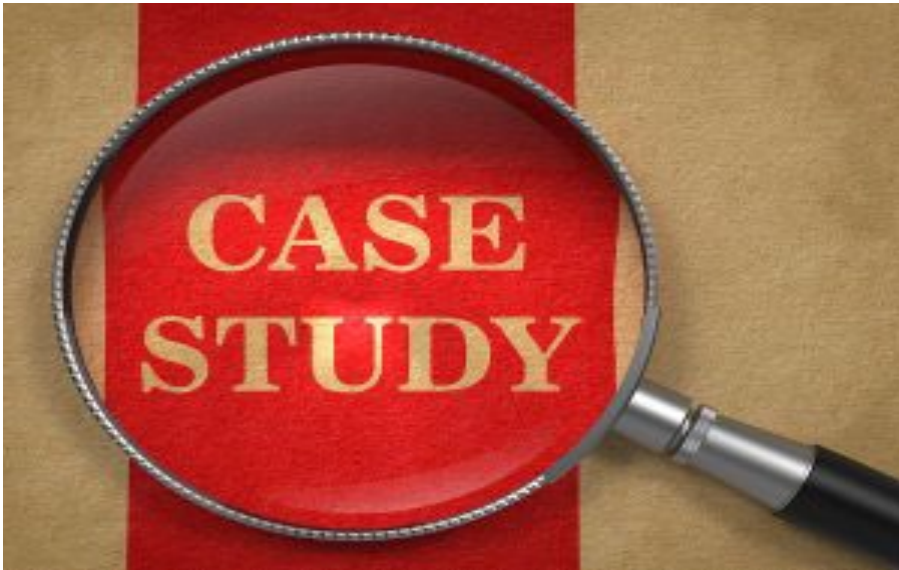
(Historical elements; factors that cannot be changed or change only in one direction) may be more useful in the prediction of long-term risk of general violence.

- History of violence
- Gender
- Age, etc.

# Dynamic factors

- Are changeable and can fluctuate, and can include behavioral (drug abuse, stockpiling weapons, psychotic symptoms, etc.), social (number of close relationships, types of friends, etc.), and attitudinal (antigovernment sentiment, “us versus them,” etc.).
- Behavioral
- Social
- Attitudinal, etc. (student interview, JACA)

# Case Study: TA Operationalized



## Saturday, October 9, 2021 @ 1640

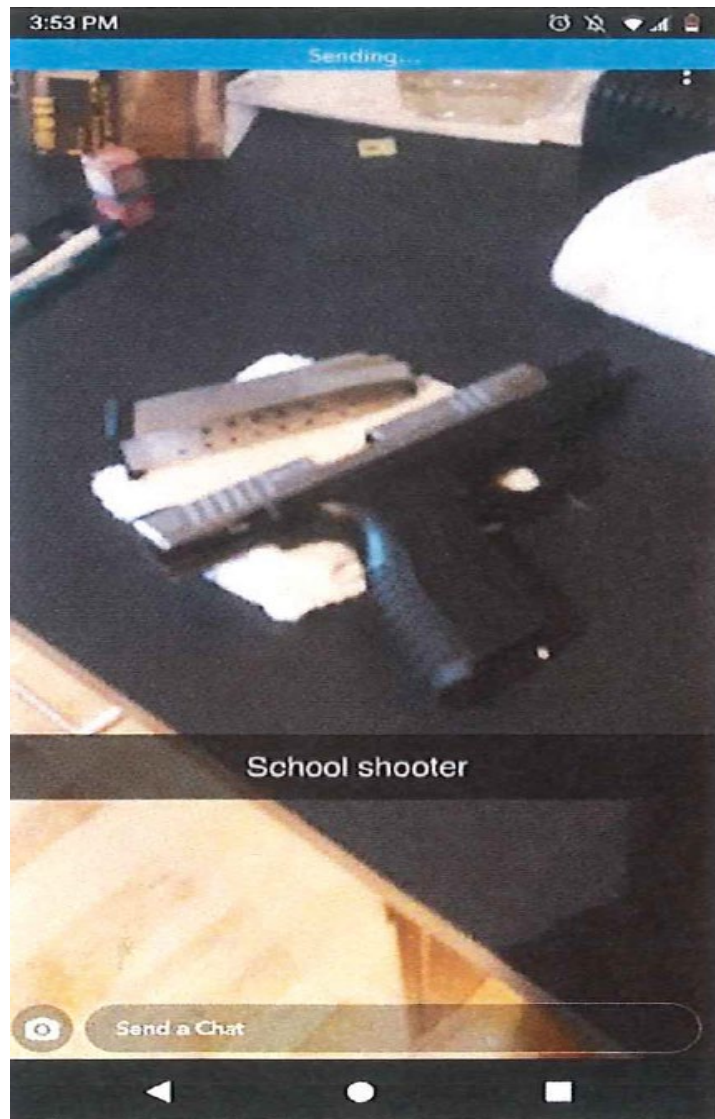
- Safe schools vector alert received by district's Chief Security Officer
- @ 1643 counselor contacts CSO by text regarding a report she had received that a student had posted on Snapchat about a potential threat to a school
- Snapchat post by student suggested consideration of targeted violence with general "school shooter" reference

## Kalen, 16 year-old male

- Rural MS/HS (7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>) with 732 students and 45 teachers. School has a trained level 1 team and armed security officer (L2 team)
- High School Junior and new to the school
- Does not live with biological family, but someone he calls grandpa



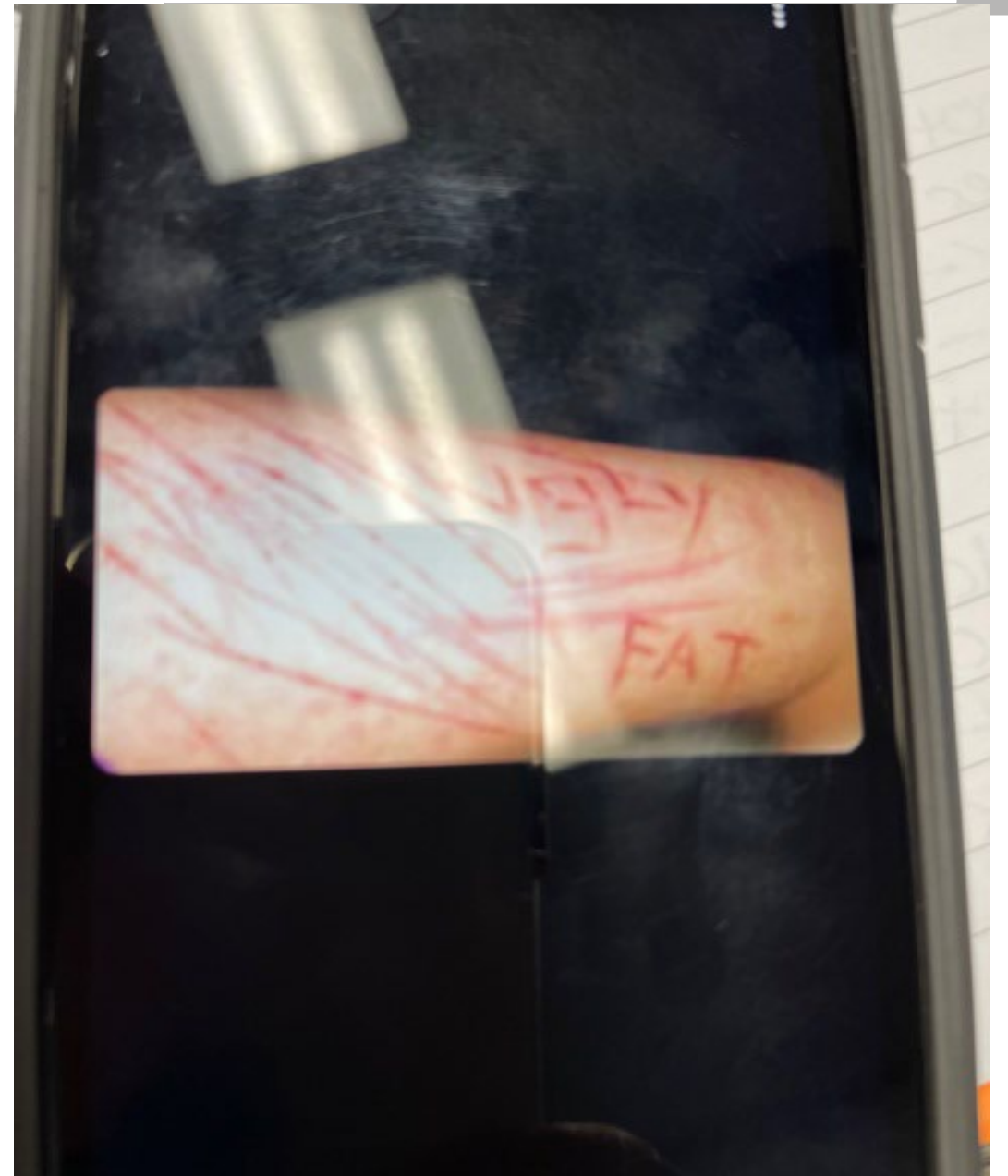
# LEAKAGE





# Risk Factors: Aggravating and Protective Factors

- Significant history of trauma/abandonment. Repeatedly states that all of his adult relationships have failed (other than grandfather)
- Living with “grandfather.” Dropped off by aunt
- Significant history of suicidal ideation/self-harm (photos); Low acuity for inpatient hospitalization
- Poor self-image (“not good enough” “fat/ugly”)
- Rejection by his father. Father choosing fiancé over him & requiring him to move out (grievance); No connection to mother (drugs)
- Access to firearms in the home (unlocked at time of incident)
- Poor coping skills



# Risk Factors: Aggravating and Protective Factors

- Carried pocket knife at school (taken and returned with it)
- Thought his girlfriend was pregnant (feared losing rel. w/ grandfather if so)
- Poor grades. Grades are all D's and F's. Falling further behind in school and struggling to focus
- New to the school; Small group of friends
- Legal history (on probation at time of the incident); Cyber stalking (comm. w/ minor for immoral purposes (charges dropped/held in abeyance due to WA. Youth Academy); Poss. of stolen property
- Concerns about home supervision and limited activities (rural); **grandfather an ally**

# Intervention/Management Strategies (School)

- Extensive re-entry safety plan (isolated learning area upon re-entry); schedule change, check of belongings/self, increased supervision
- Enroll in therapy (trauma/attachment focus)
- In-school mentorship with trusted adult who also provides tutoring and check and connect
- School safety officer/TA Coordinator check-ins/Guardian & PO check-ins
- Continued assessment by monitoring communications and examining attack related behavior

## Intervention/Management Strategies (Home/Community)

- Safety proof home (LE observed)
- Check belongings and person prior to school (staggered start)
- Comprehensive psychiatric evaluation and follow all recommendations
- Talk to friends' parents
- Limit access to inappropriate media
- Volunteer with track program
- Ongoing family support (referral if necessary)

# Current Outcomes

- Affect and mood improved; however, mental health issues continue
- Coping and grades improved
- Attends therapy weekly (initial telehealth @ school but now in-person)
- Self-harm behaviors have subsided; Future oriented
- Openly discusses SI with grandpa, TA Coordinator and school staff
- No homicidal communication or ideation indicated, nor any attack related behavior
- Suicidal ideation an ongoing concern (recent deterioration in MH – g/f)

# Threat Assessment Team

- School threat assessment team has managed case since October 2021 with no indications of increased risk factors
- Community level 2 team reviews regularly and TA Coordinator checks in w/ student and school lead regularly

# Threat Assessment Process Recap

- Determine the Facts
- Initial Assessment
- Immediate Actions
- Investigation
- Continuous Assessment
- Develop Management Plan
- Follow Up



# Potential Risk Factors:

The potential risk factors are **not** predictive; however, a community that is aware of the risk factors is an empowered community and is able to proactively engage in prevention programs

- Depression/Suicidal ideation
- Intense anger
- Mental illness
- Social isolation
- Family financial difficulties
- Family-based discord

## Potential Risk Factors (cont.):

- Family-based mental health problems
- Abuse/Neglect
- Parental absence
- Academic poor performance
- Previous disciplinary actions
- Holding a grievance
- Family-based substance abuse
- Family-based arrest/incarceration

# Indicators:

If a student has demonstrated any of these indicators, a community's threat assessment and management team or law enforcement should be contacted immediately

- Threatening a target
- Expressed intent (verbalization) to carry out an attack including threats on social media
- Planning an attack

# The Pandemic Effect on Students & Families



# COVID and Increased Exposure to Potential Risk Factors

Due to the pandemic, many schools across the U.S. adjusted to operate in either partially online (“hybrid”) or entirely online environments. This led to an immediate impact of COVID-19 – social isolation. Subsequently, a nationally representative survey of 3,300 youth (aged 13-19) found that students have been experiencing multiple negative impacts including:

- 78% of respondents reported spending four hours or less each day in class or working on assignments
- 30% of respondents reported feeling unhappy or depressed with nearly as many reporting they worried about having basic needs (food, medicine, and safety) met

# COVID and Increased Exposure to Potential Risk Factors

- 29% of respondents did not feel connected to school adults with nearly as many reporting they did not feel connected to their classmates or their community
- In addition, respondents reported losing sleep, feeling under constant strain, or experiencing a loss of confidence
- Some respondents also reported poorer overall health
- In addition, many families of students experienced (or are continuing to experience) financial hardships during the pandemic including job or wage loss

# Takeaways

- Student threat assessment is most effective when tailored for the K12 environment and with a prevention mindset
- Management in a K-12 environment can be engineered
- Level 2 team offers considerable advantage
- Anecdotal experience suggests that increased social media access has increased opportunity for fixation and identification

# Challenges

- Needs to be user friendly, resource rich, and protocol driven
- Creating open source expertise and maintaining over time
- Reviewing with an equity lens
- Ongoing training
- 24-7 system access



# Wrap-up

- Q&A
- NEWESD 101 Website for Student Threat Assessment:  
<http://www.esd101.net>
- Leon Covington 509-789-3609