

The Washington Post

Local

# Maryland school safety training includes Sandy Hook speakers

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By Brianna Rhodes|AP January 20

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Just over four years after the Sandy Hook shooting in Connecticut, schools across the nation are continuing their efforts to promote safety and security for students, including in Maryland through the state's 2017 School Safety Initiative.

The Maryland Center for School Safety and a group called Safe and Sound Schools held safety training this week for school administrators, mental health staff, security staff and resource officers from schools across the state to discuss topics such as mental health, awareness and preparation.

In 2013, the General Assembly created The Maryland Center for School Safety after the fatal Sandy Hook shooting to prepare schools for emergencies and tragedies to help ensure that students, parents, and staff are in a safe, secure environment.

The safety training included presentations from law enforcement expert Daniel Jewiss, who spoke about the shooting and the lessons learned at Sandy Hook; Michele Gay, a mother who lost a daughter, Josephine, during the Sandy Hook shooting; and Benjamin Fernandez, a school psychologist from Loudoun County Public Schools in Virginia, who spoke about recovery after a school tragedy.

Safe and Sound Schools is an initiative to promote safety, prompted by the 2012 Connecticut shootings in which 20 students and 6 adults were fatally shot.

Gay, along with Alissa Parker, who also lost a daughter, Emilie, at the Sandy Hook shooting, are founders of the program to influence communities to come together to find ways to make schools and their community a safe environment.

Jewiss said that after the 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting, law enforcement officers began a strategy of “shaving seconds to save lives,” by cutting down response times of first responders, communicating effectively with dispatchers, and getting to the scene quicker.

Jewiss described the events that occurred the day of the shooting and emphasized the importance of the approach both law enforcement and school officials should take.

Jewiss said that all individuals involved should be properly trained and learn how to respond to an emergency. Officials should be flexible in their roles and get to the scene as fast as possible, thereby hopefully decreasing the number of shots fired.

Jewiss said that response times should also be sped up and every second counts. Dispatchers should ask questions such as the number of shooters, what the shooter is wearing and the location of the shooter and caller.

“I think just making those adjustments in our scripts that we operate under, the way that we answer the calls, the way that school staff call it in and the way that our first responders get there,” Jewiss said. “I think that alone is valuable seconds.”

“We’re trying to save as many lives as possible,” Jewiss said. “Shaving seconds by changing some of the things we talked about is a game changer.”

Gay, who has taught in Maryland and Virginia, gave the perspective of how to deal with school safety, being both a teacher and a mom who dealt with trauma.

“I think it’s a challenge for us all, for my family in particular because you know, we’ve got a trauma history and they don’t love for me to walk out the door because I think in the back of their of minds they’re afraid that I might not come back,” Gay said. “Those are things we have to consider with families that have trauma histories.”

Fernandez spoke about schools handling students who suffer from trauma. He said he believes physical and psychological safety, crisis intervention, preparing for recovery and building resiliency are major factors to consider.

Schools are large access points to mental health care for students and employ mental health professionals who are already in place, Fernandez said.

Gay's late daughter Josephine and her two surviving daughters influenced her to start the Sandy Hook initiative and advocate for school safety training all over the country.

"I wanted to do something very positive," Gay said. "My daughter was very positive and it keeps her close and it helps me feel like I'm building something that she would be proud of."

Gay said she wanted to make sure that her two surviving children and other children were growing up in country where they could go to school safely. She also wanted to make sure teachers wouldn't be afraid to go to work and communities could maintain schools as a center of the community.

Ed Clarke, the director of Maryland Center for School Safety, said he brought guests from Connecticut to learn lessons from Sandy Hook and that he wants school and law enforcement officials to work together.

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Clarke said he wants officials to learn how to respond to a low-level emergency or a catastrophic event that may impact one of the schools in the state, and more importantly, how to recover to get back to a sense of normalcy.

Moving forward, Clarke said, he plans to continue a series of trainings, work with all 24 school districts and listen to the needs of law enforcement.

The Maryland Center for School Safety also plans to embark on providing active shooter training for school districts and law enforcement throughout the state.

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