



Dr. Lina Alathari

**Chief
National Threat Assessment Center
United States Secret Service**

Written Testimony

**Before the
United States Senate
Committee on Judiciary**

March 14, 2018

Good morning Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, and distinguished Members of the Committee. I am Dr. Lina Alathari, Chief of the United States Secret Service (U.S. Secret Service), National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC). I want to thank you all for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss school safety and the important work the Secret Service-NTAC program has done in the prevention of targeted violence.

Since the 1990s, the U.S. Secret Service has pioneered the field of threat assessment by conducting research on the targeting of public officials and public figures and established a model for investigating threat cases. This model offered law enforcement and others with public safety responsibilities a systematic investigative approach to identify individuals who may exhibit threatening, inappropriate, or concerning behavior. The objectives of this model are to gather information in order to assess whether the subject poses a risk of harm and identify the appropriate private and community resources to manage that risk. Often in these investigations, our special agents work with local partners to identify strategies for intervention.

Over the last 20 years, NTAC has continued to perform research, training, consultation, and information sharing on threat assessment and the prevention of targeted violence. In fulfilling its congressionally authorized mission, NTAC has researched attacks targeting government officials and facilities, public spaces, K-12 schools, and institutions of higher education. What we have learned from these efforts has broadened our agency's own investigations to adapt to the changing dynamics of those who come to our attention and the various risks they may pose to the larger community. Specifically, there is now heightened concern in some cases that, while the individual or group may be interested in harming the President, they may target a local school, their employers, a public venue, or others for harm. To address these emerging trends, the U.S. Secret Service adapted its operational protocols to ensure that we partner with State and Local law enforcement and others to share information that we uncover during our investigations so that we might prevent a threat to the places where we live, work, or send our children to learn.

Due to NTAC's expertise in the area of school safety, and in support of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) efforts to enhance school security, we are initiating two new projects in support of this effort. The first project will be the creation and distribution of an operational guide that will provide school personnel, law enforcement personnel, and other public safety school professionals with guidance on "how to" create a Targeted Violence Prevention Plan. This guide will outline protocols and procedures for schools on how to create multidisciplinary threat assessment teams, establish central reporting mechanisms, identify student behaviors of concern, define the threshold for law enforcement intervention, outline investigative and risk assessment procedures, and identify intervention and management strategies for decreasing the risk of a targeted attack.

NTAC's second project will be a research study that will build on the Center's previous work. This study will examine incidents in which a current or former student carried out a targeted attack against a school. The study will identify information regarding the attacker's motives, prior behaviors, communications, situational factors, and any other relevant threat assessment variables that will enhance prevention efforts and early warning detection.

The overall goal of NTAC's projects is to further enhance our knowledge related to the prevention of targeted school violence, disseminate the information to stakeholders, and serve as the basis of a

comprehensive long-term training initiative that will provide guidance to thousands of school personnel, law enforcement officers, and others with evidence-based best practices in prevention.

National Threat Assessment Center Research Initiatives

NTAC's research has had significant impact in the area of school safety. In 2002, in partnership with the Department of Education (ED), NTAC released *The Safe School Initiative (SSI)* report, which examined 37 incidents of K-12 school shootings. The findings of this report, and the accompanying guide, served as the impetus for the creation of threat assessment programs in schools, and continue to serve as the standard for establishing protocols for guiding the efforts to prevent targeted school violence. In 2008 and as a result of this study, NTAC collaborated with ED again and released a report titled *Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence*, which investigated barriers that may prevent those persons who have information about a potential incident of targeted school violence from reporting that information. Known as the *Bystander Study*, this report was a follow-on product to the SSI and explored further the SSI finding that, prior to most incidents, others had information about the planned attacks.

In 2010, NTAC in partnership with ED and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, released a report titled *Campus Attacks: Targeted Violence Affecting Institutions of Higher Education*. This collaboration was in response to the *Report to the President on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy*, which recommended that the three agencies explore the issue of violence at institutions of higher education.

In February 2018, NTAC released an update to our 2013 reference guide titled *Making Schools Safer*. The new edition incorporated additional information regarding NTAC's continuing efforts to provide schools with training, the importance of establishing mechanisms for reporting concerning behavior, and management strategies. This guide is available on the agency's public website: (<https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/>) as a resource for our partners and the community. This new version is an update to NTAC's guide originally released in 2013 as part of the Department's response to the Sandy Hook tragedy. The reference guide provided a framework for establishing comprehensive prevention plans in schools. NTAC developed materials titled *Making Schools Safer: Everyone Has a Role in Prevention*, for incorporation into the Department's initiative to provide security briefings to 100 K-12 school districts across the United States. The video was based on the SSI and the *Bystander Study*, and included interviews with school administrators and safety personnel discussing their approaches to threat assessment and efforts to create climates that enhance school safety. From April 2013 through September 2014, U.S. Secret Service special agents assigned to field offices with identified school districts in their area of responsibility delivered this training to teachers, administrators, professionals, and law enforcement employed by the school districts or with equities in public safety for those districts.

Threat Assessments

Based on NTAC's research, the U.S. Secret Service adapted its investigative model to those charged with safeguarding our schools and workplaces. Although the basic tenets of threat assessment apply across these various settings within each, the motives, triggers, and behaviors of individuals may differ. These contextual factors affect how individuals come to the attention of law enforcement, the information accessible during the investigation, and the options available to reduce the risk that an individual may pose.

Threat assessment programs are most effective at reducing the risk of violence when implemented in a comprehensive manner. In fact, they not only have the potential of preventing incidents of targeted violence, but have other positive impacts in the school environment. According to research conducted by Dr. Dewey G. Cornell at the University of Virginia, schools with threat assessment programs also had lower rates of suspensions and expulsions; decreased incidents of bullying; increased reporting from students when they were concerned about a classmate; and climates where students felt safe. The major functions of a school threat assessment program are to identify students who are exhibiting concerning behavior, gather information and assess whether they pose a risk of violence, and identify intervention strategies to manage that risk. A school violence prevention plan should include the following elements:

- A Threat Assessment Team consisting of highly trained professionals to conduct threat assessments and implement crisis prevention when an at-risk student is identified. This interdisciplinary team will work with the school administration to assess the potential for violence, and as appropriate, develop and execute a management plan to address it.
- Clear definitions of prohibited and concerning behaviors as well as methods for addressing them. Examples of these behaviors include intimidation, threats, and physical or verbal abuse; harassment and stalking; sexual assault; using and carrying weapons onto school property; bullying; or any other actions and behaviors considered to be inappropriate or concerning. There should be a low threshold of concern so that the plan addresses a continuum of concerning behaviors, not just those indicative of planning activities in preparation for carrying out an attack.
- A centralized reporting mechanism that includes administrative procedures, such as who to report concerning behaviors to and how, and what the response would be. Schools should work to promote a climate that breaks down the codes of silence by ensuring that students and teachers feel safe in stepping forward.
- Protocols that clearly identify the threshold for notifying local law enforcement when concerned about a student and a coordination plan for their participation.
- Investigative procedures to delineate a plan of action, options of immediate intervention, and procedures for gathering and evaluating information.
- Management options that include having adequate disciplinary and grievance procedures, services available for mediating disputes, conflict resolution, and other administrative and mental health services that can be offered.
- Proactive training initiatives that outline who to train, frequency of trainings, and topics. For example, “See something, Say something” training programs focus on teaching individuals how to recognize and report suspicious activity or concerning behavior and information on whom to contact in an emergency. Other types of trainings include conflict resolution, de-escalation techniques, and suicide prevention.

Training to Law Enforcement, Mental Health Professionals, and Educators

Since the release of the SSI, NTAC has been providing in-depth trainings on the prevention of targeted school violence. To date, NTAC has conducted 444 such trainings to over 93,000 attendees including school administrators, teachers, counselors, mental health professionals, school resource officers, and other public safety partners. The trainings offer detailed information on the creation of comprehensive school-based threat assessment programs and violence prevention plans. NTAC continues to provide these trainings, which are routinely requested by school districts and local law enforcement through our U.S. Secret Service field offices in their districts.

NTAC has also continued to serve as a resource for organizations by providing consultation to law enforcement, schools, and others on the development of threat assessment protocols and violence prevention plans tailored to the agencies' unique missions and resources. Consultations have also been provided on individual threat cases. In addition, NTAC conducts outreach meetings with law enforcement agencies, K-12 schools, and colleges and universities to inform the Center's research, training, and consultation activities. The goal of the outreach program is to learn about the operations and resources of these organizations, with specific emphasis on how threats are identified, assessed, and managed. This activity promotes best practices, information-sharing, and the standardization of threat assessment.

Department of Homeland Security Unity of Effort

As the lead department for the security of our Nation's critical infrastructure, DHS has long engaged in activities to help keep our schools, the people who use them, and the communities in which they are located safe and secure. In the wake of the attack in Parkland, Florida, the Department is examining its ongoing efforts, reviewing past activities, and considering new ways to help enhance school security across a wide range of areas, including education and community awareness, capacity building, training, and exercises. To help coordinate these efforts, the Department has established a Soft Target-Crowded Places Executive Steering Committee that will draw on the expertise of components and assist State, Local, Territorial, and Tribal partners in shaping school security efforts. Following the direction of President Trump, Secretary Nielsen is committed to ensuring that the resources and expertise of the Department are best leveraged to protect our nation's schools against attack. The U.S. Secret Service is proud to be part of these efforts.

Chairman Grassley, Ranking Member Feinstein, and distinguished Members of the Committee, the Secret Service thanks you very much for the opportunity to discuss the NTAC program and ways to prevent future acts of violence at our schools. At this time, I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have on this pressing issue.