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## **ALERT**

February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018

### **Traumatic Aftermath and Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA)**

*“The fields of Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) and Crisis/Trauma Response are inseparably connected.” J. Kevin Cameron*

Since January 1,( 45 days)2018 there has been a total of 17 shootings on school campuses in the United States and an overall increase in complex high risk VTRA’s. In the aftermath of the school killings in Coral Springs, Florida we are now in a national critical period for both increased threats as well as a critical period for an increase in trauma symptoms.

Whether the case is VTRA, Crisis/Trauma Response or both, remember that high-profile violence does not cause people to go from zero (no risk) to sixty (extreme risk). Instead, it simply “intensifies pre-existing symptoms in already troubled individuals.” Pay attention to those individuals self-identifying in the immediate aftermath of this tragic event. School staff, district leaders, helping professionals from the community and others should formally meet to identify those believed may currently be at an elevated level of risk.

## Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA)

### Key Points:

1. It is essential to stay hyper-vigilant when receiving any reports of students, staff, parents or others exhibiting “worrisome behaviours”. Because of how high-profile this incident is we should also be watchful of anyone who may be struggling at this time.
2. Be aware that if there is a shift in the behavioural baseline of a student, it is important to collect digital behavioural information in collaboration with local support agencies and conduct other assessments prior to taking any disciplinary measures. *“Stage 1 Threat Assessment (VTRA) trumps suspension”*.
3. The school/police relationship is the foundation for Stage 1 Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) and staff should be formally connecting with each other to review the VTRA protocol/process. Mental health, child protection, probation and other related community partners should be informed as to the contents of this ALERT.
4. Pay close attention to VTRA cases where the individual being assessed has inordinate knowledge of violent incidents worldwide or seems fixated on this recent incident.
5. Identification with the Aggressor: **“The more a troubled individual identifies with the aggressor the more it will increase their level of risk”**. Therefore, pay close attention to the media coverage on details of the alleged perpetrator. The profile they create and/or glean from social media about the shooter will provide insight to VTRA team members across the country as to who may be contextually high risk, because they are caught within this current impact zone.
6. Reminder that a critical period is a ‘predictable time frame for increased threat-making or threat-related behaviour’ that will extend at least **two weeks beyond** *the extensive media coverage and social media reports.*
7. All VTRA cases that come to your attention need to include a comprehensive review of the individuals’ online behaviour and digital footprint as this is where we find the most blatant pre-incident signs and indicators. The role that social media plays as both a risk enhancer as well as a prominent contributing source of VTRA data has never been stronger.

An accurate VTRA risk determination cannot be made without reviewing the entirety of their digital baseline (contact Safer Schools Together if you need assistance with this).

8. We need to “strategically” intensify our connections with our highest risk children and youth (as well as staff and parents and caregivers) who may be “Empty Vessels”. Remember “no one can engage in a serious act of violence unless they feel ‘justified’ in attacking that target or type of target”. The power of positive, meaningful human connection is one of the best violence prevention strategies we can utilize.

### Conclusion

We are aware that in some regions of the country where signed VTRA Protocols exist the task of giving “Fair Notice” about the protocol has not been completed or not done at all. As noted in the 9<sup>th</sup> Edition of the “Community Protocol for Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) and Intervention”:

*Prior to any violence threat risk assessment (VTRA) protocol being implemented, all students, staff, and parents should be provided with information about the protocol and procedures so that “fair notice” is given that violence and threats of violence will not be tolerated. Senior school division and community agency personnel should take the lead in presenting the protocol to ensure that students, parents and staff are all aware that the new protocol is a jurisdiction-wide policy and that a consistent message is given regarding its use.*

*Students should also be aware that the schools may collect, use and disclose personal information about students for the purposes of investigating and addressing student misconduct, safety and maintaining order and discipline in school. Such collection and use of student information may include information that is obtained from witnesses or collected from other secondary information sources (e.g. social media). All personal information of students collected by the school will be collected in compliance with and under the authority of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (ss. 26(a),(b), and(c)) and the School Act.*

*Fair Notice can be given through letters to parents, brochures, media releases, parent meetings, staff meetings, new student orientation or all of the above. School districts/divisions may also include a brief “Fair Notice” statement in student “agendas”.*

We need to educate staff to know what they should report; when to report; and to whom. A staff meeting where those trained in VTRA can give a quick overview of Worrisome Behaviour will help untrained professionals to be more aware. We recommend that all VTRA protocol jurisdictions provide a brief overview (or refresher) of the basics of the model such as:

- Serious violence is an evolutionary process, no one just snaps
- Everyone moves along a “Pathway of Justification”
- The biggest problem in the aftermath of high-profile violence is “under reaction” often to blatant indicators someone is moving on a pathway to serious violence
- First hypothesis in threat assessment “It’s a cry for help”!
- Second hypothesis in threat assessment “conspiracy of two or more”
- The Quote that Kills: “Good Student (Nice Staff) with no history of violence, can’t believe they would do it” as justification for not reporting a threat
- Empty Vessels

There is no question that as a country we have been doing amazing work in strengthening multi-agency collaboration in a number of areas including Violence Threat Risk Assessment & Digital Data Collection. We need to continue to model calmness, be compassionate, be open, and be truly “available” during this critical phase.

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