Threat Assessment for Schools

schoolsafety.dps.mn.gov

Safe School Initiative
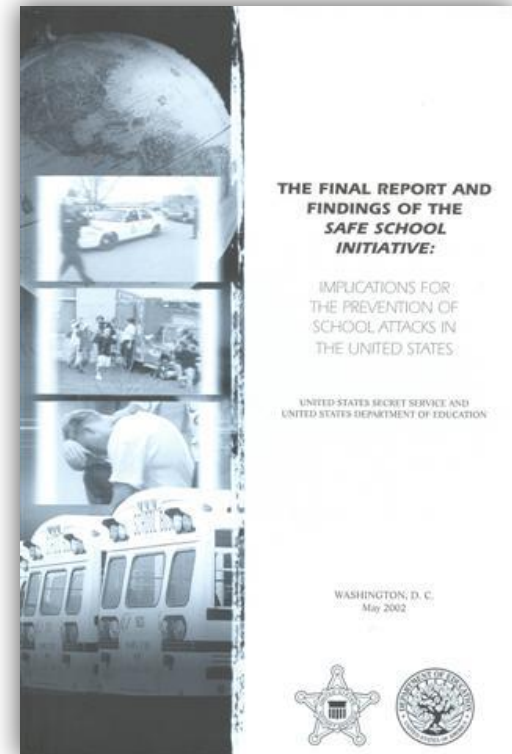
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Safe School Initiative

- U.S. Secret Service and Department of Education

- Published in 2002

- 37 incidents involving 41 attackers

- 1974-June 2000

THE FINAL REPORT AND
FINDINGS OF THE
*SAFE SCHOOL
INITIATIVE:*

IMPLICATIONS FOR
THE PREVENTION OF
SCHOOL ATTACKS IN
THE UNITED STATES

UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE AND
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

WASHINGTON, D. C.
May 2002

Defining <u>Targeted</u> School Violence

- Current student or recent former student attacked someone at his/her school with lethal means.

- A school was deliberately selected as the location for the attack and not simply a random site of opportunity.

Purpose of TA

- Prevent targeted violence

- Centered upon analysis of facts, evidence of behaviors in a given situation

School Shooters . . .

. . . by the numbers

Safe School Initiative Key Findings

- **Targeted violence at school *rarely* are sudden, impulsive attacks**

- **Other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack**

- **Attackers did not threaten their targets prior to the attack**

- **No profile of students who engage in targeted school violence**

- **Attackers engaged in behavior prior to incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help**

- **Attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide**

- **Attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack**

- **Attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack**

- **Other students were involved in some capacity**

- **Most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention**

Key Finding #1
Conceptualizing the Attack

"Incidents of targeted violence at school *rarely* are sudden, impulsive attacks"
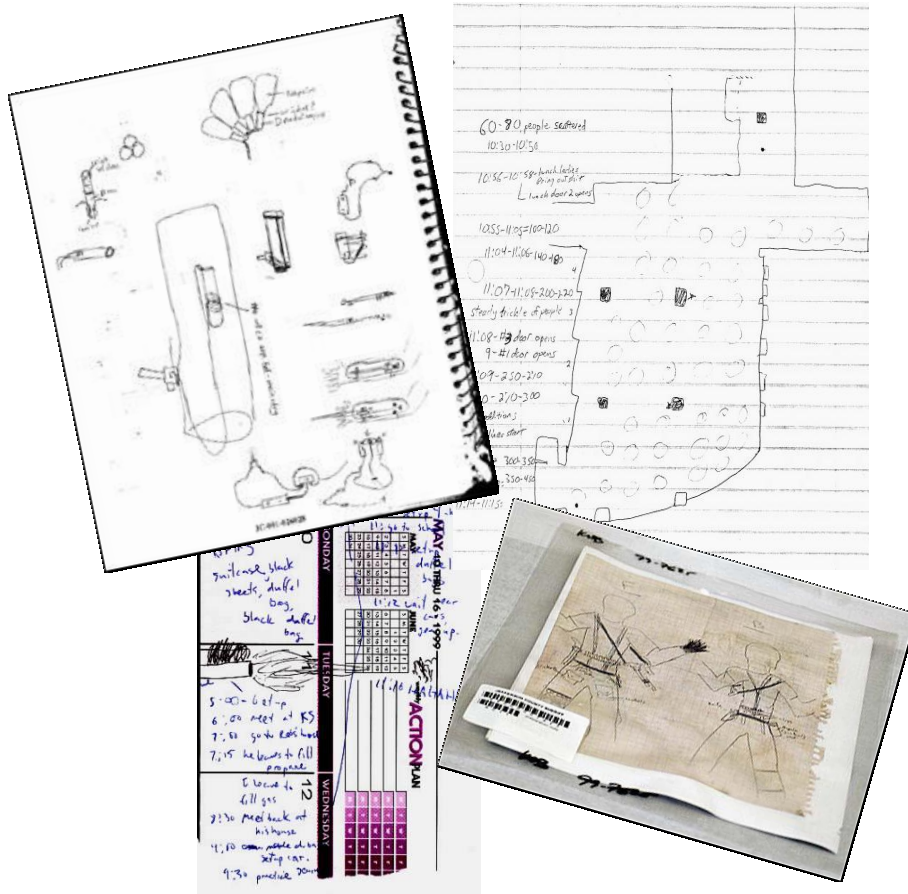
Key Finding #1
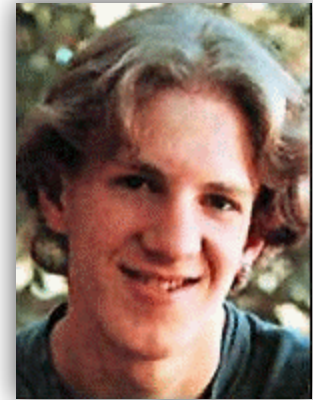## *Conceptualizing the Attack*

Myth

"He just snapped."

April 20, 1999

Eric Harris - 18 years old

Dylan Klebold - 17 years old

Columbine High School

Littleton, CO

Key Finding #2
Signaling the Attack

"Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack "

HSEM
Homeland Security and Emergency Management

Key Finding #2
Signaling the Attack

Myth

"No one knew."

Feb. 19, 1997

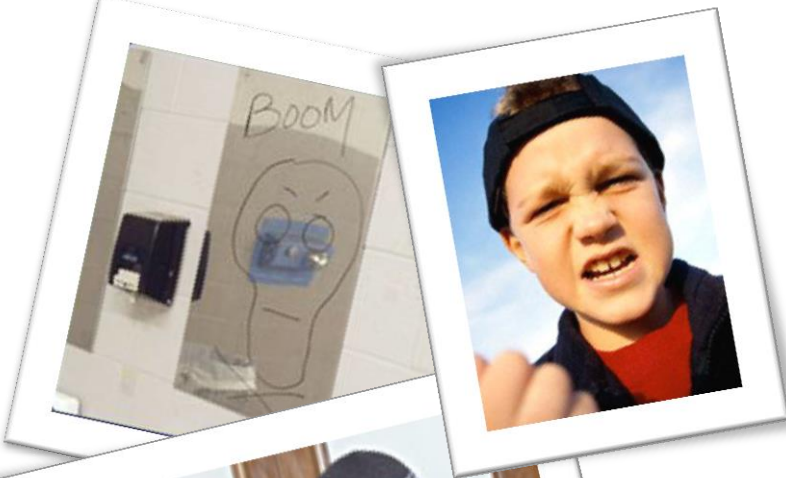**Evan Ramsey**

16 years old

Bethel High School

Bethel, Alaska
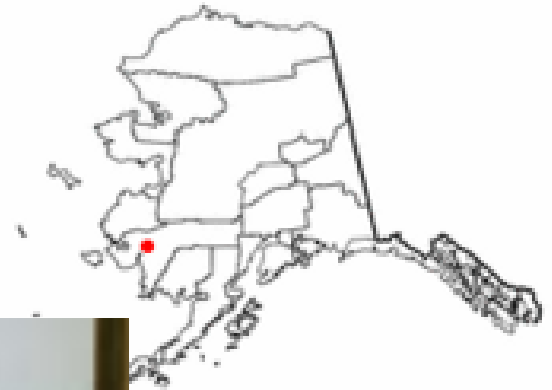
Key Finding #3
Signaling the Attack

"Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack"

Key Finding #3
Signaling the Attack

Myth

"He hadn't threatened anyone."

May 21, 1998

Kip Kinkel

15 years Old

Thurston High School

Springfield, OR

Key Finding #4
Characterizing the Attacker

"There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engage in targeted school violence"

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Key Finding #4
Characterizing the Attacker

Myth

"He didn't fit the profile."

May 26, 2000
Nathaniel Brazil
13 years old
Lake Worth Community
Middle School
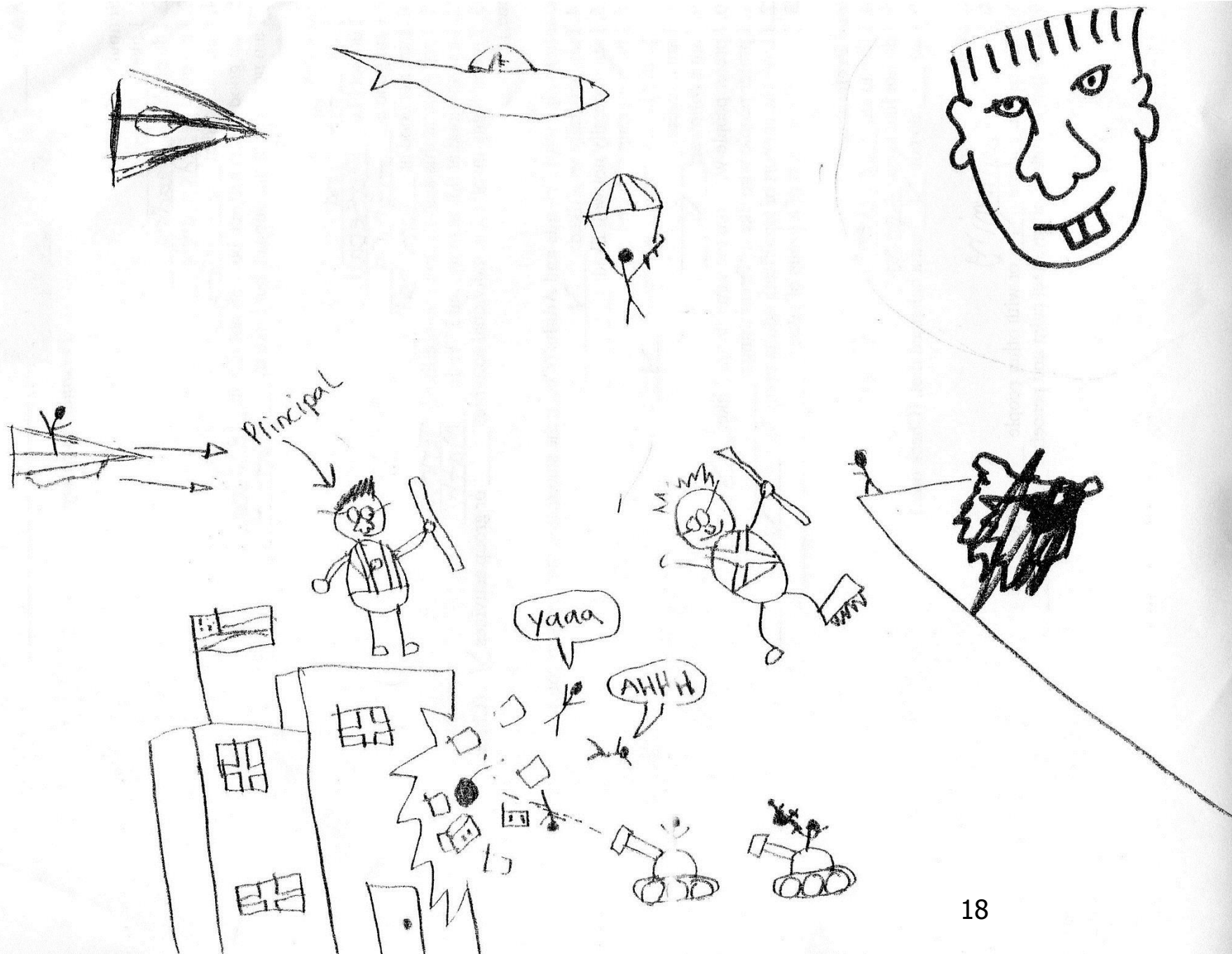Lake Worth, FL

Key Finding #5
Signaling the Attack

"Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help"

Principal

yaaa

AHHH

Key Finding #6
Characterizing the Attacker

"Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide"

Key Finding #7
Characterizing the Attacker

"Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack"

Key Finding #8
Advancing the Attack

"Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack"
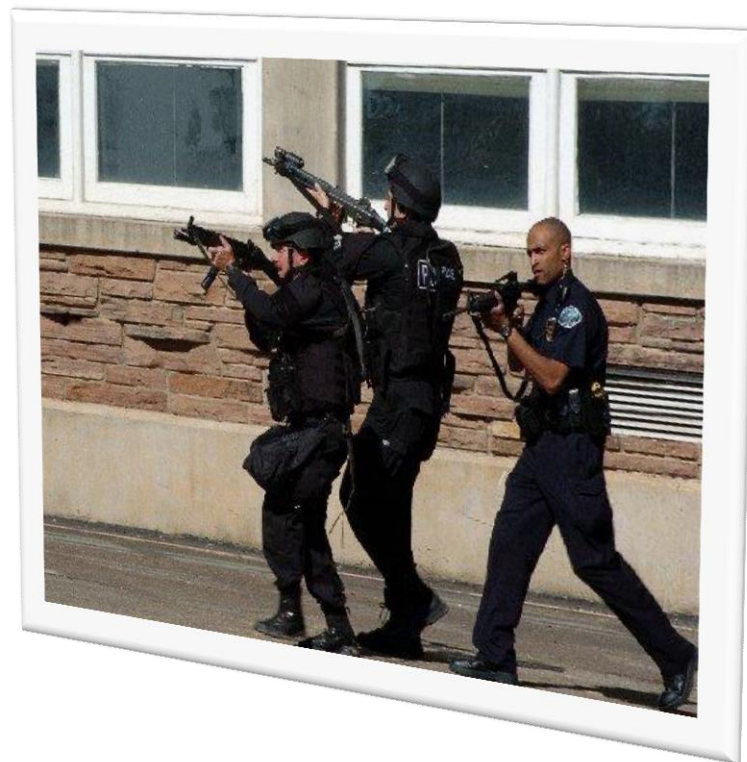
Key Finding #9
Advancing the attack

"In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity"

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Key Finding #10
Resolving the Attack

"Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention"

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Behaviors/possible indicators:

- Fatalistic- Don't think they are going to live long

- No fear of consequences

- Dependent personality- need to be part of something

- Desensitized to violence– often through video games

- Disregard for social obligations- detachment

- Lack of feelings/empathy for others

- Callous concern

- Gross disparity between behavior and social norms

Behaviors/possible indicators:

- No friends- only objects
- Behavior not readily modified by experience- "hot stove"
- Affectively cold
- Abnormally aggressive
- Irresponsible
- Very manipulative
- Low tolerance for frustration
- Always blames others- someone else's fault

Threat Assessment

- Strategy for determining the credibility of a threat and the likelihood it will be carried out

- Part of comprehensive school safety program

- Conducted by a team of trained professionals

- Carefully examine the full range of relevant factors and provide appropriate interventions

4 Basic Steps in TA

- Identify threats of violence
- Evaluate the seriousness
- Intervene to reduce the risk
- Follow-up to monitor and re-evaluate the effectiveness of the safety plan

Threats

A threat is an expression of intent to do harm or act out violently against someone or something.

A threat can be spoken, written, or symbolic.

Types of Threats

- Direct

- Indirect

- Veiled

- Conditional

Threat Assessment Process

- Attempts to identify information that was *knowable* prior to the attack.

- Relies on the appraisal of *behaviors*, rather than *stated threats* or *traits* as the basis for determining a cause for concern.

Outcome Strategies

- Develop capacity to pick up and evaluate knowable information that might indicate a risk of a targeted school attack.

- Employ results of "threat assessments" in developing strategies to prevent potential school attacks from occurring.

Threat Assessment

Appraisal of risk focuses on:

- Actions

- Communications

- Specific circumstances

...that might suggest an individual intends to mount an attack and is engaged in planning or preparing for that event.

Principles of Threat Assessment

- Targeted violence is the result of discernible, understandable process of thinking and behavior

- Stems from interaction among individual, situation, setting and target

- Based on facts rather than characteristics or traits

- Focus is on whether a student *poses* a threat rather than *made* a threat

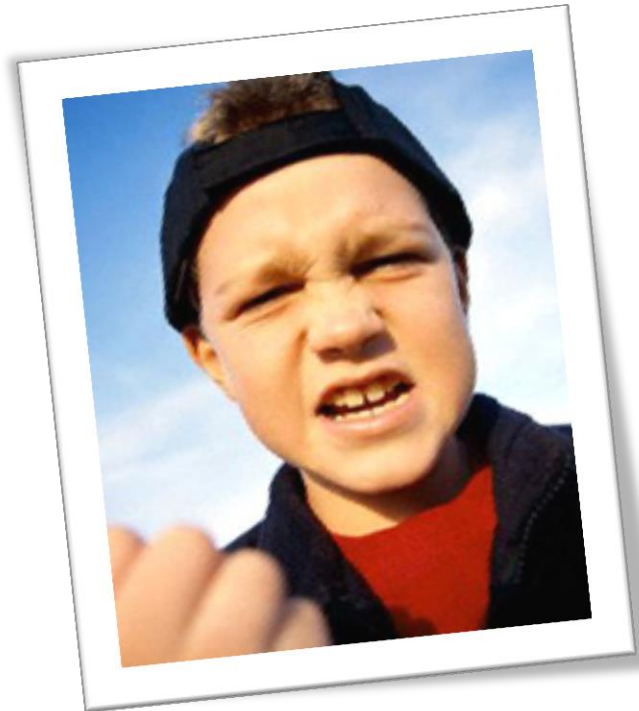# Principles of Threat Assessment

An investigative, skeptical mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.

The Bottom Line

The central question is whether a student **poses** a threat not whether a student has **made** a threat.

Path to Intended Violence

Attack

Breach

Preparation

Research/Planning

Ideation

Grievance

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Path to Intended Violence

Attack
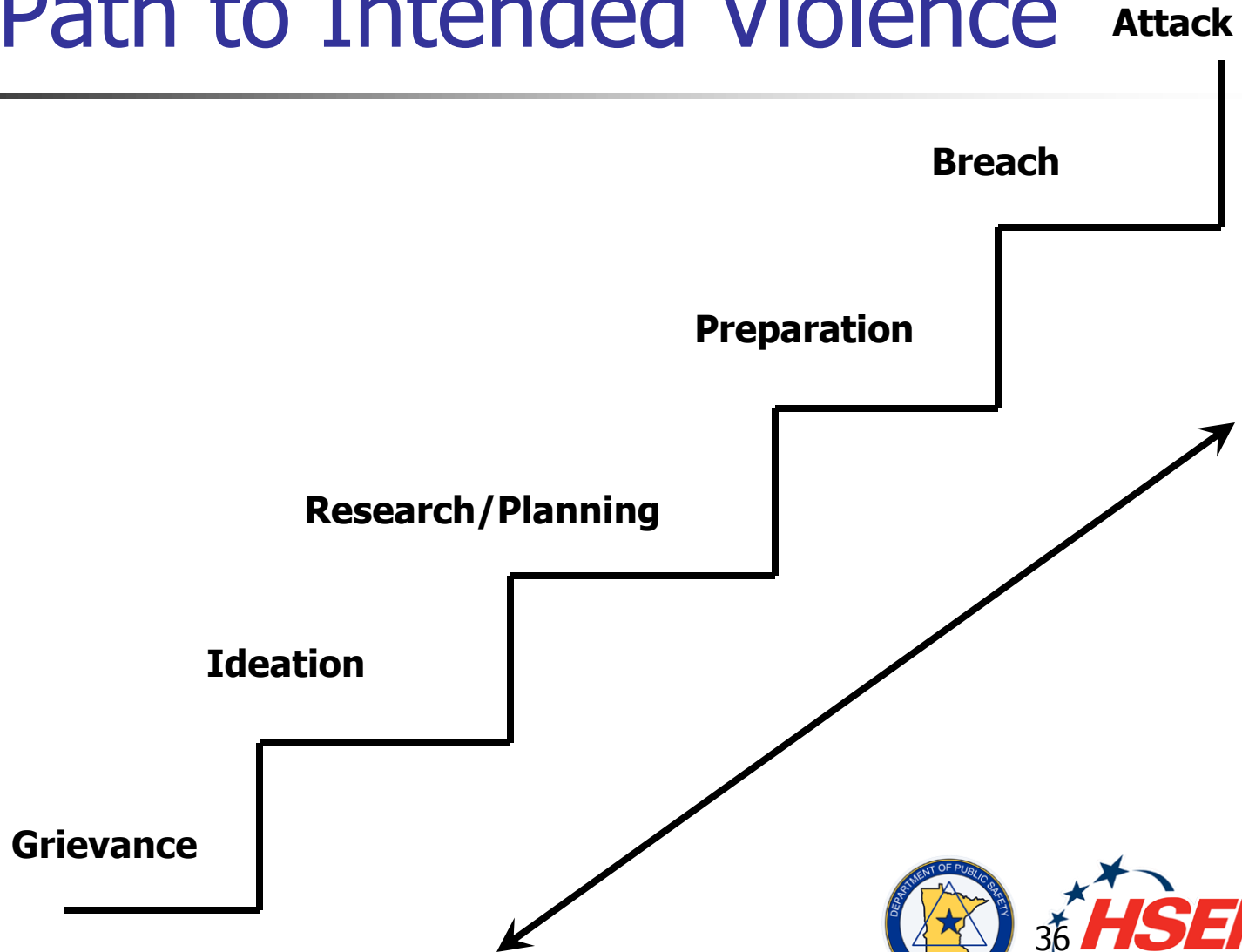
- Sense of Injustice
- Desire for Revenge
- Sense of Destiny
- Sense of Loss
- Sense of Mission

Breach

Preparation

Research/Planning

Ideation

Grievance

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Path to Intended Violence

Attack

- Discussing the idea
- Interest in anniversaries
- Fixating on violence
- Fascination with weapons
- Discussing the idea

Breach

Preparation

Research/Planning

Ideation

Grievance

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Path to Intended Violence

Attack
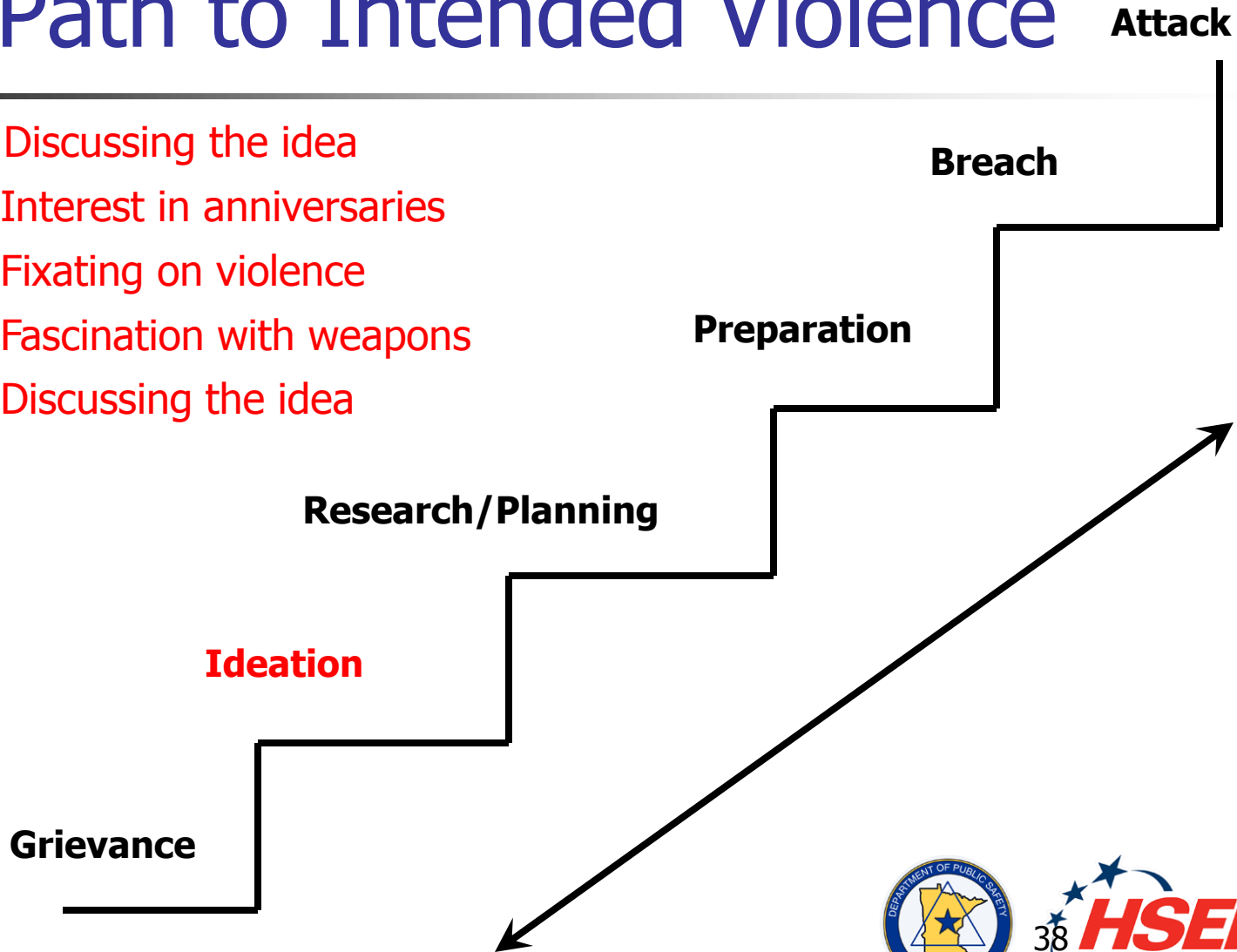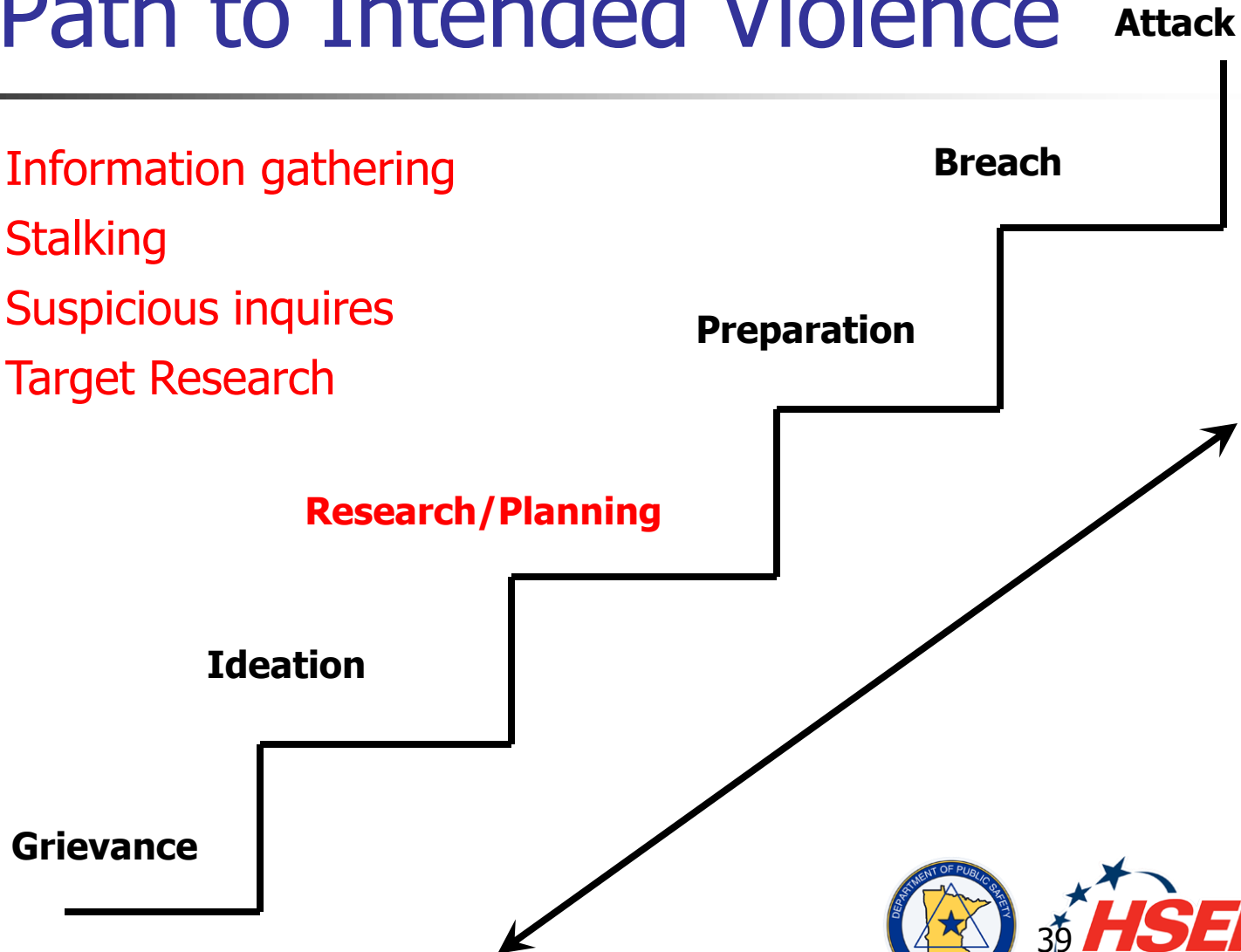
- Information gathering
- Stalking
- Suspicious inquires
- Target Research

Breach

Preparation

Research/Planning

Ideation

Grievance

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Path to Intended Violence

Attack

- Acquire weapons
- Assemble equipment
- Arrange transportation
- Observe significant dates
- Final-act behaviors
- Costume

Breach

Preparation

Research/Planning

Ideation

Grievance

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Path to Intended Violence

Attack
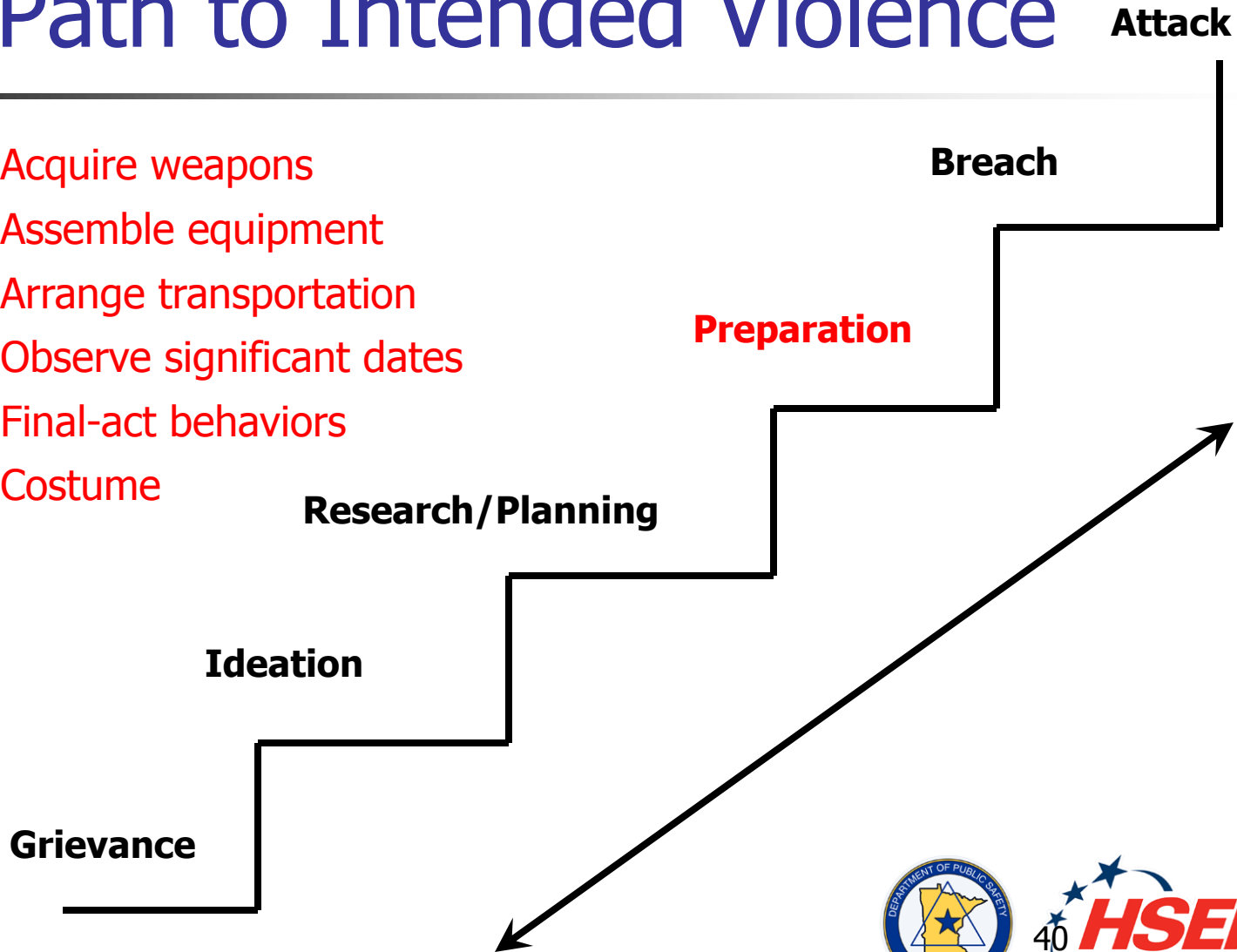
- Probing security
- Lethal approach
- Surreptitious approach

Breach

Preparation

Research/Planning

Ideation

Grievance

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Path to Intended Violence

Attack

Breach

Preparation

Research/Planning

Ideation

Grievance

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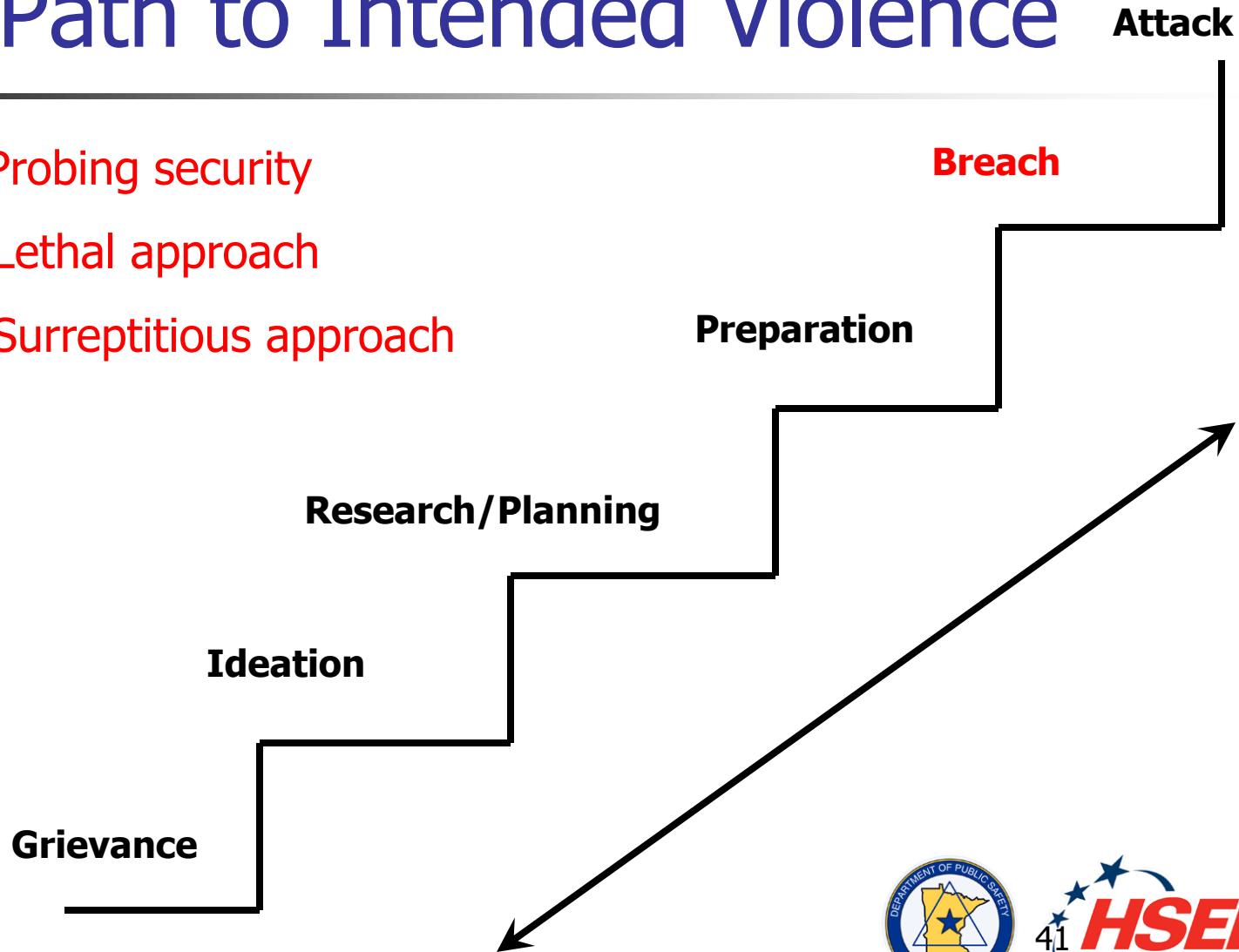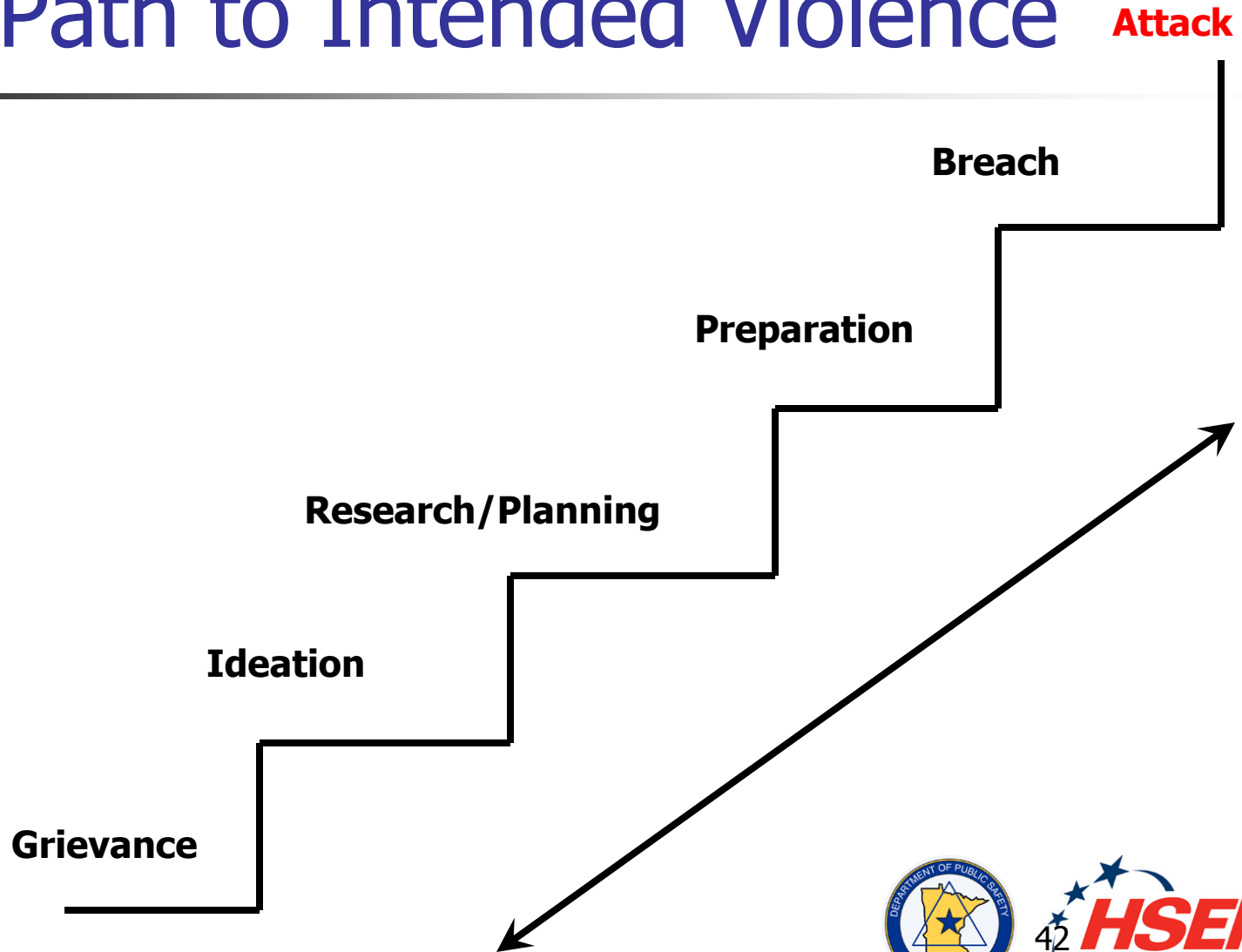
TA Team Models

- Law enforcement based

- School based

- Blended

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TA Team Composition

- School administrator

- Law enforcement – SRO

- Mental Health

- Social Services

Mental Health
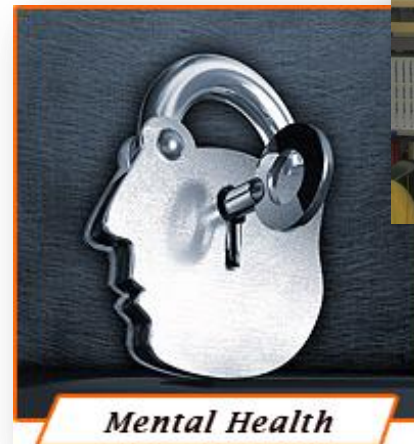
TA Process

- When students communicate their plans to others, after peers, teachers represent the second most likely recipient of that information

Threat Assessment Continuum

Situation of Concern

Threat Assessment Inquiry → **Threat Assessment Investigation**

Does the student pose a threat of targeted school violence?

Inquiry vs. Investigation

Inquiry: initiated, conducted, controlled by school threat assessment team

Investigation: initiated, conducted, controlled by law enforcement agency

Transition from Inquiry to Investigation?

- TA Team determines threshold in consultation with law enforcement

POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

- Case by case basis

- Policies/procedures

Who?

Concern about a particular student who has come to the attention of school officials.

Not of value in wholesale examination of the student body.

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How?

Engaging in communications that cause concern:

- Class assignments
- E-mail/text messaging
- Websites & social networking sites
- Direct threats
- Written
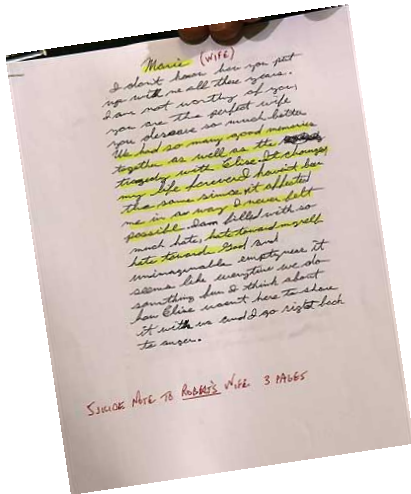
How?

Through second or third parties:

- ■ Staff

- ■ Students

- ■ Hearsay

- ■ Other

How?

Anonymous:

- Letter, note, written
- Phone call
- Tip line

Requires careful evaluation, work with law enforcement.

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When Should TA be Initiated?

- How much time do we have?
  - Imminent threat, notify police immediately
  - Safety is the priority

- How do we handle the student during the inquiry or investigation?
  - False or unfounded allegations

Information for the Inquiry

Facts that drew attention to the student

- Behaviors reported? By whom?

- Situation?

- Witnesses?

- Context of behaviors?

- Motive(s) of reporting party?

- Corroboration

Information - Student

Identifying
- Name
- Physical description
- Identification numbers

Life Information
- Stability of home life
- Nature/quality of relationships & personal support
- Recent losses/loss of status
- Current grievances/grudges
- Perceptions of unfair treatment
- Known difficulty coping with a stressful event
- Downward progression in functioning
- Hopelessness, despair, suicidal thoughts/actions

Background
- Residences
- Family/home situation
- Academic performance
- Criminal behavior
- Mental health/substance abuse
- Social networks
- History of violence to self/others
- Access/experience weapons
- Attitudes towards violence
- History of bullying
- Relationships/conflicts
- History of grievances/grudges

Information - Attack Related Behaviors

- Ideas/plans about injuring himself or others; attacking a school

- Communications suggesting unusual interest in school attacks

- Comments express/imply considering school attack

- Weapon seeking behavior, particularly if linked to an attack

- Communications suggesting violence to redress a grievance

- Rehearsals

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Motives

- Revenge for grievance or injury

- Attention seeking behavior or notoriety

- Desire to solve problem perceived as unbearable

- Desire to die or be killed

Target selection

- Identification of targets to friends

- More than one target?

- Target may shift over time

- Target information may provide motive

Sources of Information

- School resources

- Collateral interviews

- Parent/Guardian interviews

- Interview student of concern

- Potential target interviews

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Evaluation of Gathered Information
11 Key Questions

1. What are the student's motives or goals?
2. Have there been communications suggesting attack?
3. Inappropriate interest school attacks/weapons/mass violence?
4. Has the student engaged in attack related behaviors?
5. Does the student have the capacity to carry out the attack?
6. Is the student experiencing hopelessness, desperation, despair?
7. Does the student have a trusting relationship with at least one responsible adult?
8. Does the student see violence as acceptable/desirable/only way to solve problems?
9. Is the student's story consistent with his/her actions?
10. Are other people concerned about his/her potential for violence?
11. What circumstances might affect the likelihood of an attack?

If TA team concludes…

Insufficient information exists to be reasonably certain student does not pose a threat

Or

Student appears to be on path to attack

Then

Recommend matter be referred to law enforcement immediately.

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TA Investigation

- Interviews/Re-interview
  - Focus on attack-related behaviors
  - Efforts to acquire weapons
- Searching
  - Consent and/or warrants
  - Include electronic data
- Seek counsel from outside experts
- Evaluation of evidence
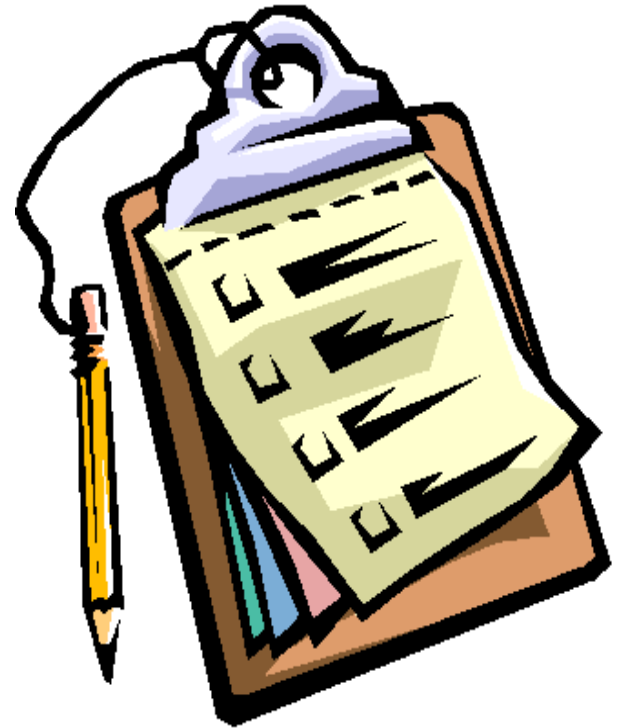 - Should potential targets be warned?

TA Investigation/Inquiry

Documentation

- Baseline of students thinking & actions at a particular point in time

- May be important in future inquiry to identify changing behaviors/thinking

- Record for administrative/ criminal/civil proceedings

Managing Threatening Situation

- Controlling/containing the situation/student in a way that will prevent the attack

- Protecting & aiding possible targets

- Providing support to help student deal successfully with his/her problems

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Managing Threatening Situation

- ## Short term considerations
  - Reduce potential for violence

- ## Long term
  - Deter future threat for violence
  - Cause student to abandon plan

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Managing Threatening Situation

- What strategy has greatest potential for <u>long-term</u> preventive power?

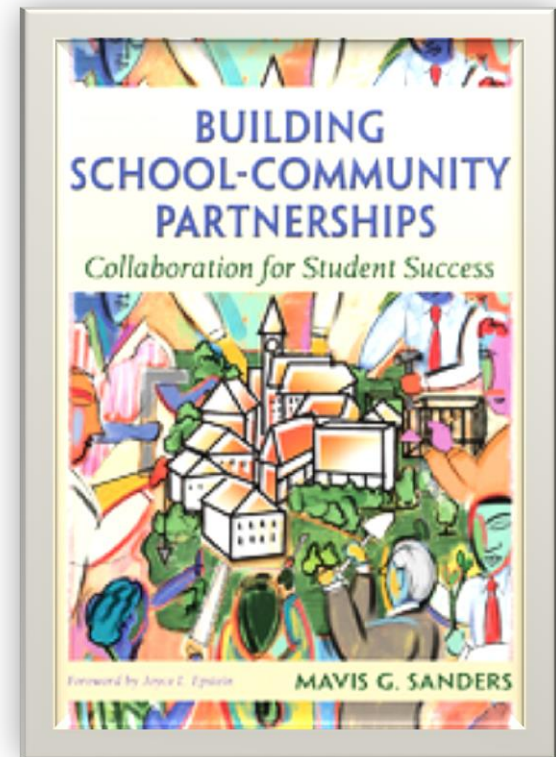- Most effective and least damaging course of action?

Managing Threatening Situation

Integrated Systems Approach

- School officials

- Law enforcement

- Mental health workers

- Youth service

- Court

- Probation

- Correctional staff

BUILDING SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration for Student Success

Foreword by Joyce L. Epstein

MAVIS G. SANDERS

Implementation

- Communication to staff

- Training of appropriate staff

- Incorporation of process

- Transparency

Information Sharing

Must be determined through consultation with local legal counsel!

LIVE 1:18 ET

MSNBC

73 **HSEM**
Homeland Security and Emergency Management

Creating Climates of School Safety

- Foster a culture of respect

- Create connections between adults and students

- Break the 'code of silence'

Creating Safe/Connected Climate

- Assess the school's emotional climate

- Emphasize importance of listening

- Take a strong, caring stance against the code of silence

- Find ways to stop bullying

- Empower students by involving them in planning, creating, and sustaining a school culture of safety and respect

- Ensure that every student has a trusting relationship with at least one adult in school

- Create mechanisms of developing/sustaining safe school climates

- Be aware of physical environments and their effects on creating comfort zones

- Emphasize an integrated systems approach

- All climates of safety are ultimately "local"

Remember…

- All threats are not created equal

- A threat is an expression of intent to do harm against someone or something

- Spoken, written or symbolic

- Most who make a threat will never carry it out

- Conversely, others who pose a real threat may never convey their intentions

www.secretservice.gov/ntac_ssi.shtml