

## Operational Services

### Administrative Procedure - Threat Assessment Key Areas and Questions; Examples

This exhibit provides examples for Building-level Threat Assessment Team (TAT) members to use when assessing reports of threats to the District's environment. TAT members use this exhibit to assess a threat while following 4:190-AP2, *Threat Assessment Team (TAT)*.

#### Key Areas of Assessment

Review and use the following **key areas** of assessment. This is not intended as an exhaustive or complete list of areas of assessment. Additional questions may be asked for clarification and/or to probe more deeply to fully understand the circumstances.

Before conducting an interview with a subject of concern (subject): (1) learn the facts that brought the subject to the attention of school administrators and others; and (2) review information about the subject's background, interests, and behaviors.

**Interview with threat recipient(s)/target(s) and witness(es):** Interview, when possible, all persons who witnessed the reported and/or concerning behavior, including the subject and all recipients/targets. Inform the interviewee that the primary purpose of the interview is to gather information about a possible situation of concern with the goals of preventing harm to staff or students, and providing assistance to those involved.

Ask potential targets about their relationship to the subject and any recent interactions with the subject. Gather information about grievances and grudges that may exist in these relationships. Conduct interviews of potential targets with special sensitivity and gather information without unduly alarming them. If the TAT believes a risk of violence to a potential target exists, offer him/her any available assistance and support for their safety.

Because the process facilitates increased and revised understanding of issues over time, always review new information and re-evaluate the threat accordingly. Maintain contact with the target to obtain information about any further behaviors of concern, improvements to the situation, or other relevant developments.

**Review records and consult with staff who know the subject:** Background information may assist the TAT's approach to and questioning of the subject. It may also help determine whether the subject poses a threat to particular targets. Knowing background information before the interview may help the TAT judge whether the subject is forthcoming and straightforward. Areas that may contain helpful background information include:

1. Recent (and perhaps historical) work or school performance history
2. Disciplinary or personnel actions
3. Prior TAT contacts
4. Law enforcement or security contacts at school and in the community
5. Prior critical involvement with mental health or social services
6. Presence of problems in the subject's life
7. Current or historical grievances that may be related to the behavior of concern
8. Online searches: Internet, social media, email, etc.

**Interview with the subject of concern:** Directly ask a subject who is a staff member or student about his/her actions and intentions. Many subjects will respond forthrightly to direct questions when they

are asked in a non-judgmental manner. This interview could elicit important information that permits the TAT to understand a subject's situation and identify possible targets, which can assist the assessment of the risk of violence. More leads for further inquiry may also arise.

Interviews send the message to the subject that the District noticed his/her behavior, and it caused concern. They also provide the subject an opportunity to: (1) tell his/her perspective, background, and intent; (2) be heard and experience support/empathy where appropriate; and (3) reassess and redirect his/her behavior away from concerning activities. To a subject who has mixed feelings about attacking, an interview may suggest people are interested in his/her welfare, and that there are better, more effective, ways to deal with problems or with specific people.

Although interviewing a subject might provide valuable information, relying too heavily on that interview to make judgments about whether the subject poses a threat is likely to present problems. Information offered by the subject may be incomplete, misleading, or inaccurate; and seeking corroboration and verifying information learned during the interview is important.

### Key Questions to Ask

Thoughtful consideration of the answers to the following key questions will produce a foundation for the TAT's response to the main question in its assessment: Does the subject pose a threat of targeted violence toward the District's environment? Note: this is not intended as an exhaustive or complete list of areas of inquiry, but as core areas that support assessment and understanding of the situation, the nature and severity of any risk, and that may guide TAT interventions. Additional questions may be asked for clarification and/or to probe more deeply to fully understand the situation.

### **Questions Regarding the Subject of Concern**

Inquiry regarding a subject of concern seeks information regarding the nature and severity of concerns, whether the subject may pose a threat of violence or other harm to self or others; or is otherwise in need of assistance or intervention. The inquiry considers all sources of information that may be relevant to gaining as comprehensive an understanding of the subject and their concerns, as circumstance may allow. Consider the presence of risk and protective factors, warning signs, coping skills and support systems that may be relevant to the case.

#### **1. What behaviors are causing concern for or about the subject?**

Does the situation or circumstance that led to these statements or actions still exist?

When, where, and in what circumstances do the behaviors tend to occur?

Is there a pattern to the behaviors or a change in pattern of behavior that is causing concern?

If the behaviors have occurred previously, how has the subject dealt with the grievances? What kept them from acting violently?

Has the subject previously come to someone's attention or raised concern in a way that suggested the subject needs intervention or supportive services?

Are the subject's behaviors causing others concern for the welfare of the subject or others?

#### **2. Have there been any concerning, aberrant, threatening, or violent communications?**

Were there *directly communicated threats* (threats made directly) to targets or sources of grievances?

Has there been *leakage* (communications to third parties about grievances, ideation, or intent to use violence, planning, or preparation?)

How, e.g., in person, letter, email, diary/journal, social media, website, etc., and to whom, e.g., targets, peers, others, is the subject communicating?

What is the *intensity of effort* (frequency and duration of contact, multiple measures used, multiple recipients or targets of communication) in communications or attempts to address grievance?

Do the subject's communications provide insight about motives/grievances, ideation, planning, preparation, timing, targets, etc.?

- Has anyone been alerted or *warned away*?
3. **What are the subject's motives and goals?**
    - Does the subject have a major grievance or grudge?
    - Against whom? What is the relationship between the subject and any identifiable targets?
    - Are there other motives that support the use of violence, such as a desire for notoriety/fame?
    - What does the subject seem to want to achieve with the behavior?
    - Does the subject seem fixated on the grievance, target, or need for justice through violence?
      - Fixation* may be exhibited through increasing perseveration on person or cause or need for resolution; increasingly strident opinion and negative characterization of target; impact on family and other associates of subject, if present and aware; and/or angry emotional undertone, accompanied by social or occupational deterioration.
    - What efforts have been made to resolve the problem and what has been the result?
  4. **Has the subject shown any inappropriate interest in, fascination, or identification with other incidents or perpetrators of targeted violence (e.g., school/workplace attacks, mass murderers, terrorism, weapons, etc.)?**
    - Do they exhibit a heightened interest, fascination, obsession, or fixation with acts of violence?
    - Do they immerse themselves in exposure to violence through movies, videos, books, video games, social media, etc., to the detriment of other life activities or in ways that negatively impact others?
    - Identification - a strong desire or need to emulate or be like others - may be with the perpetrators of targeted violence or powerful figures; grievances of other perpetrators; weapons or tactics of other perpetrators; effect or notoriety of other perpetrators; and/or ideologies or groups that support and encourage the use of violence to address grievances.
  5. **Does the subject have, or are they developing, the capacity to carry out an act of targeted violence?**
    - Are there *Pathway to Violence* (see 4:190-AP2, E1, *Principles of Threat Assessment*) warning behaviors?
    - Where is the subject along the Pathway? How quickly are they moving?
    - Are there changes in activity levels or rate of movement or *energy bursts* (flurries of or changes in frequency/variety of activity)? Do certain circumstances or events tend to impact their movement?
    - Is the subject's thinking and behavior organized sufficiently to engage in planning and preparation?
    - Is there a history of violence that speaks to capacity or potential targets?
    - Are there aspects of *novel aggression* (testing limits/boundaries or atypical aggression) when there is no history of violence?
  6. **Is the subject experiencing hopelessness, desperation, and/or despair?**
    - Has the subject experienced a recent perceived loss, failure, or injustice?
    - Do they experience shame or humiliation related to the loss, failure, or injustice?
    - Is the subject having significant difficulty coping with a stressful event? Are there multiple stressors?
    - Are there indications of *last resort behaviors* (increasing desperation or distress, pressing subject into violence as a position of last resort)?
    - Has the subject engaged in behavior that suggests they have considered ending their life?
  7. **Has the subject's behavior indicated or raised concern of need for intervention or supportive services?**
    - Does the subject have difficulty coping?
    - Are there symptoms of severe, acute, or untreated mental illness, such as:
      - Significant lack of contact with reality (hallucinations, delusions, or extreme wariness, distrust, or paranoia)
      - Symptoms that impact the subject's perception of grievances or how others respond to subject

Significant or sustained agitation or anxiousness  
Significant or sustained depressed mood  
Alcohol or other drug use/abuse  
Pervasive patterns of maladaptive behavior

Does the subject have access to treatment resources? If so, are they actively engaged in those services and compliant with the treatment plan and/or prescriptions?

**8. Does the subject have protective factors, stabilizers, or buffers that inhibit use of violence?**

Several factors may decrease risk or inhibit escalation to violence. Check for these protective factors to see if they are present and stable, absent, or diminishing, or need to be bolstered:

Views violence as unacceptable, immoral  
Accepts responsibility for actions  
Demonstrates remorse for inappropriate behavior  
Respects reasonable limits and expectations  
Uses socially sanctioned means of addressing grievances  
Values life, job, relationships, freedom  
Fears loss of reputation, job, freedom, life  
Maintains, uses, and builds effective coping skills  
Treatment access, compliance, and engagement  
Sustains trusted and valued relationships/support systems

A sustained, trusting, and valued relationship with at least one responsible person can be a key stabilizer and inhibitor to violence. That person can provide support, challenge distorted perceptions or violent ideation and help connect the subject with support. Consider:

Does the subject have at least a friend, colleague, family member, or other person that they trust and can rely upon for support, guidance, or assistance?

Is that trusted person someone that would work collaboratively with the TAT for the well-being of the subject? Does that other person have skill and willingness to monitor, intervene, and support the subject?

Is the subject emotionally connected to and engaged with other people?

Is there a deterioration of support, increased withdrawal, or isolation from, or alienation by prior support systems?

**Questions Regarding Potential Targets**

Targets (and others impacted by the subject's behavior) may behave or respond in ways that indicate the level of threat they perceive, that increase their vulnerability or diminish their ability to protect themselves, or that reflect needs for assistance or support.

**Are targets (or others) indicating vulnerability or concern about, or impact by, the subject's behavior?**

Are those who know the subject concerned that he or she might act based on violent ideas or plans?

Are those who know the subject concerned about a specific target?

Are they concerned for the well-being of the subject?

Are targets or others around the subject engaging in protective actions, e.g. distancing, avoiding, minimizing conflict, modifying routines or behaviors, etc., even if they do not define the subject as a threat.

Are targets engaging in behavior or in situations that increase their:

*Desirability:* A source of the subject's grievances or fuel fantasies for violence.

*Availability:* The proximity or access between the subject and the target.

*Vulnerability:* Lack of protective factors or behaviors or coping abilities of the target.

Do targets have adequate coping and support resources?

Are targets or others experiencing stress, trauma, or other symptoms that may benefit from intervention?

### **Questions Regarding Environmental/Systemic Factors Impacting the Situation**

These factors impact or stem from the school/workplace/family environment or systemic issues or challenges that may allow, encourage (or not discourage), or exacerbate the use of violence to address concerns, may inhibit reporting of concerns, or that may impact ability to effectively resolve concerns.

#### **Are there environmental/systemic factors that are impacting the situation?**

Systemic, policy, or procedural problems?

Unfair, inconsistent, or biased disciplinary processes?

Silos, gaps, or delays in reporting of concerns?

Poor conflict management skills?

Poor supervisory skills and/or willingness to address?

Inadequate resources to address needs?

School/family/social climate concerns, e.g., harassment, bullying, bias, neglect, or abuse?

Lack of support or treatment resources in the community?

Social influences of others in the environment?

### **Questions Regarding Precipitating Events**

Violence risk is dynamic and situational. It is important to consider not just the current situation involving the subject, target and environment/systems, but also those that may change in the near to mid-term, and whether those changes could make things better or worse for the case.

#### **Are there Precipitating Events that may impact the situation currently and in the foreseeable future?**

Common precipitants are related to loss, failures, or injustices, as well as events or circumstances that trigger memories of past grievances, or situations that create unexpected opportunities to act.

### **Questions Regarding the Integrity of the Threat Assessment Process**

#### **What is the consistency, credibility, and completeness of information about the situation?**

Are the subject's conversation and story consistent with his or her actions?

Do collateral sources confirm or dispute what the subject says is going on and how they are dealing with it?

Are there multiple sources? If so, are they providing consistent information?

What gaps exist in understanding the situation? What don't we know?

What bias or misperceptions may be influencing witnesses, targets, TAT members? Consider sources of bias/distortion in our thought processes, including but not limited to:

*Confirmation Bias:* Seeking and integrating information that supports/affirms our prior beliefs  
*Anchoring:* Base final judgment on information gained early on – first impressions may bias future perspectives.

*Over-Confidence:* Failure to spot limits of knowledge and therefore perceive less risk. Too much faith in ability.

*In-Group Bias:* Overestimate abilities, value, and credibility of people we know (or are similar to) more than people we do not know or who are different.

*Availability:* Overestimate likelihood of events that have greater availability in memory due to being unusual, recent, or emotionally salient.

*Probability Neglect:* Overestimate risks of harmless or low probability events, while underestimate risks of high probability events even when they are not harmless (1/84 chance of dying in vehicle accident vs 1/5,000+ of dying in plane crash).

*Fundamental Attribution Error:* Place blame for own bad outcomes on external events. When others have bad outcomes, make judgements about them – failure to account for interactions between the person and the situation.

*Hindsight Bias:* Overestimate predictability of past events based on current knowledge of facts and outcome.

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