



SANDY HOOK: A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF THE POWER OF PLANNING





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Firestorm President, Jim Satterfield and Michael Cech presented a special webinar session, and discussed *Sandy Hook: A First-Hand Account of the Power of Planning*.

Michael Cech's wife, Yvonne, was the Library Media Specialist at Sandy Hook and was present the day of the December 14, 2012 shootings. She was responsible for saving 18 students and three other adults in her library that morning. Yvonne lost her best friend, Principal Dawn Hochsprung, 20 first graders who she taught and five adult colleagues who were also murdered that day.

Michael, a former reporter and crisis communications specialist, recounted the details of that fateful day, analyzed the ensuing media coverage and discussed how a lack of planning for such a crisis led to confusion both during the event and in the aftermath. He shared his thoughts on how to plan ahead for such an event in your community.

"If you remember nothing else that I say in this webinar, I would hope that you would sway yourself from the concept that 'it can't happen to you.' I guarantee the good people at Sandy Hook never thought it could happen to them either."

-Michael Cech

Webinar Session Agenda:

1. The Story of December 14, 2012
2. The media response
3. How can school districts prepare for active shooters?

"I speak today as a private citizen whose wife was employed by the Newtown School District. On that day she was the head of the library at the Sandy Hook Elementary School."

-Michael Cech

You Can Never Be Too Prepared

"Please don't ever assume 'it can't happen to you.' It can happen to you, unfortunately."

-Michael Cech

Principal Hochsprung was an activist for school safety. She enforced all doors to be locked and a buzzer system to enter the school. Two clear, identifiable issues arose that day:

1. "The only thing she didn't have was bullet-proof glass."
 - All doors on the school were locked securely at the start of the day. Anyone wishing to enter the building had to be buzzed in by the secretary. The glass outside the elementary school, however, was shot through in a matter of seconds. At the time of the shooting, bullet-proof glass was expensive. Now, affordable, but just as secure, options are available.
2. Classroom doors locked from the outside
 - Michael recounted a series of events his wife, Yvonne, experienced that day. Upon the lockdown, Yvonne "...had to stand in the hallway, hear the gunshots, smell the gunpowder and see some of her colleagues also locking their doors from the outside."
 - While secure in the library, a co-worker asked her if she had locked the door to the computer lab; a room off the library that had a door leading to the main hallway. Unfortunately, the door had not initially been locked. Yvonne crawled her way through the library to the computer lab. In order to lock the door, she had to ~~open the door~~, reach around and lock from the outside knob. Unfortunately, none of her keys fit the lock.
 - Yvonne instinctively slammed the door and barricaded it with library book carts. She then moved the children and staff members into a small closet behind the kitchen.

“Standards and best practices require classrooms and all rooms in a school to have the ability to be locked from the inside.”

*-Jim Satterfield
Firestorm President*

Warning Signs

For the three weeks before the shooting, the gunman communicated with his mother only by email. He taped black garbage bags over the windows of his bedroom so no one could see in. Analyses of his medical records show many opportunities that could have helped him over the years. Unfortunately, those opportunities slipped through the cracks.

Everything you learn initially...is wrong

Beware, in the first news reporting of a crisis “facts” are usually wrong. In this instance:

At the time of the incident, Michael was in Germany preparing to board a flight back to the States. He received a text from his wife (who was, at the time, locked in the small closet of the library) that read: *“In case you hear, we’re in lockdown; shooting in our school is real...”*

By the time Michael boarded the plane, he had more accurate information about what had happened than the media did.

The media reported an array of misinformation globally including:

- Occupants of a maroon van were wanted for questioning
- A second shooter was at-large in the community
- The shooter’s brother was a co-conspirator
- The shooter’s mother had worked at the school
- The shooter had a vendetta against the Principal

“The kids who came out of the library that day were the last live children to come out of Sandy Hook.”

-Michael Cech

“One of the things you need to do is get ahead of the message and make sure clear information is coming out.”

-Michael Cech

“Almost everything you learn initially is wrong. It’s very important that the training and drilling you are going to be emphasizing takes place in advance because you need to be able to follow your plan through this point. Most often, everything you learn initially will be wrong in these areas.” - Jim Satterfield

The media did not stop with inaccurate reporting. Due to Newtown’s location (70 miles from the number one media market in New York City), the small town was saturated immediately with reporters.

Michael shared that media insensitivity became an issue:

- The media was at every church and funeral following the shooting
 - Several churches requested that no media enter the properties
- Media began to interview children without parental consent
 - These children were put under the glaring light of the media
- The single road leading to Sandy Hook Elementary was blocked due to the overwhelming number of media and emergency vehicles. It subsequently had to be closed down.
 - Some small businesses along the road failed due to loss of sales (time of occurrence was less than two weeks before Christmas and during the shopping season)
- Michael’s family was contacted in the following weeks by various reporters. Over 50 media outlets contacted Michael’s family and arrived at his home within 48 hours. Katie Couric’s producers managed to obtain his daughter’s unpublished cell phone number
- The shooting occurred on a Friday; the Connecticut State Police Department held their briefing Saturday. Only some media representatives attended the briefing due to limited space and the overwhelming numbers

“Instead of comforting my family, I found myself in the media relations role.”
-Michael Cech

It is imperative to train staff that they do not need to speak with the media. Make sure you have a channel for information to flow for your staff.

“I can’t stress enough how insensitive the media was in just running over the town and not really thinking about what was going on with the townfolks.”

-Michael Cech

You do not have to speak with the media – once you start the conversation, they [the media] take over. - Jim Satterfield

Preparing for an Incident

“It Can’t Happen Here”

- It’s tempting (and comforting to believe this)
- It’s also irresponsible
- Floods, hurricanes and even earthquakes can be anticipated (if you live in any area prone to them)
- Active shooter incidents create immediate chaos which is remarkably hard to manage
- Sandy Hook personnel never thought it could happen there although they did train for the eventuality

“The number of people who think ‘Come on, a shooting can’t possibly happen here’ is staggering. They’re putting their heads in the sand. It’s happening with increasing frequency and it’s completely random” – Michael Cech

Media Policy

Michael shared advice for media relations preparedness:

- Control the flow of information – have a media policy as a part of your Crisis Communications Plan
- Plan in advance – coordinate with police and elected officials
- Avoid Panic
 - How? Plan in advance
- Have multiple, back-up spokesperson arrangements
 - At Sandy Hook, the key spokespersons – the Principal and the School Psychologist were deceased
 - Have a deeply detailed backup plan
- Inform your staff not to speak with the media

Access to Information

- Don't leave database passwords on paper or in a rolodex
- Consider electronic attendance sheets
- Have multiple lists (accessible offsite) of staff, students, family contacts – cell phone numbers
- Know local clergy, hospital ER, ambulance responders
- Tell your staff to keep tools with them: cell phones, keys, glasses

What kept Sandy Hook from being even more deadly?

- The numerous and repetitive lockdown drills Principal Hochsprung enforced
- Practice, Practice, Practice

“Be nice to each other. It’s really all that matters.”

*-Dawn Hochsprung
Former Sandy Hook Elementary School Principal*

In addition to lockdown drills, prepare by:

Building Security

- Install bullet-proof glass (stable for 90 seconds – buys time)
- Locked doors; buzzer system for admission
- Video cameras (helps in thefts, assaults)
- Doors should be lockable from the inside
- Armed Guards (not necessarily a panacea)
 - Increases chances for accidental shootings
 - Columbine had armed guards

Monitor Behavior

- Train staff in signs of depression and mood changes
- Be proactive if there is concern

Prepare

- Hold frequent lockdown drills – ensure everyone knows where to go
 - The first 15 seconds can mean life or death
 - Don't assume "it's firecrackers"
 - Don't pretend to lock doors – actually lock them

"Prepare for the worst, hope for the best."
-Michael Cech

Train All Employees

- When seconds matter, the police will be there in minutes. Train your employees frequently for every possible crisis
- Speak openly with staff about the risks/reality
 - They are the true "first responders" (and will be held responsible for what happened)
 - Fight or flight/adrenalin impacts
 - Train substitute staff as well
- In the opening minutes of a crisis, first responders are not on scene. The actions staff members make will make the difference

Dealing with the Aftermath of an Incident

Behavior during and after an Incident

- Heroes will emerge from the most unlikely circumstances
- Some will "freeze," others will amaze with their courage
- Simple language causes issues: "trigger," "bullet points," "if I had a gun to my head I couldn't tell you the answer," "that hit the bull's eye" – anything that insinuates guns or gunfire
- Ability to watch news often ends completely
- Traditional first responders get all the credit; some teachers get some of the blame

Grief and Trauma

- They are separate emotions
 - The cycles don't move in harmony, complicating healing
 - Each human reacts differently
 - Staff and students need time to grieve, regroup

- The emotion is real; administrators must acknowledge
- For some, the conditions last far longer; sensitivity
- Loss of colleagues, students, friends (identifying victims)
- The school character is forever changed; long-term impact

*It's not a public school problem. It's not a private school problem. **It's a problem.***

*-Jim Satterfield
Firestorm President*

Next Steps

Do you want to know what will happen tomorrow?

Can you afford not to know?

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About Michael:

Michael Cech has extensive experience in crisis and risk communication, as a practicing journalist for ten years and, subsequently, in 27 years in both government and the corporate arena.

Currently, Michael is responsible for new business development throughout North America for a Fortune 100 chemical company. He lectures frequently on communication and marketing and is currently writing a book on trends in journalism. Michael holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Boston University's School of Public Communications.

About Jim:

James (Jim) W. Satterfield is the President/COO and co-founder of Firestorm®. Jim is a nationally recognized expert on crisis management, threat assessment, disaster preparedness and business continuity planning. He has experience as President, CEO and COO of various public and private companies in business continuity, communications, crisis management, environmental, insurance, reinsurance, risk management and technology. Jim has extensive expertise in the identification and quantification of risk.

About Firestorm:

Firestorm is a national leader in emergency response, crisis management, crisis communications and workplace violence.

Firestorm provides crisis management to organizations nationally and has identified actionable solutions to address threats before they escalate. Firestorm provided crisis management and crisis communications services to Virginia Tech after the shootings, Littleton, CO, Roswell, NM and Jefferson County School District in Colorado (Columbine, Arapahoe, Deer Creek and Platte Canyon schools).