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By Madeline St. Amour

School will be back in session

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Center: Preventing violence isn’t easy

By Madeline St. Amour

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The answer to the problem of domestic violence is not easy.

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doesn’t rely on a “silver bullet,” she said. While better mental health services, gun control and things like metal detectors could be part of the solution, larger cultural and climate changes need to happen to effectively address violence, she said.

Leadership failures
Woodward trains schools on how to use the center’s model, Safe Communities Safe Schools, to change their climates to prevent and reduce violence. This model is being used in 44 schools across the state as part of a study on its effectiveness. The study will end in the next school year, and so far the data shows it improves schools’ motivation and capacity to address safety issues, Kingston said. They’ll know whether it reduced violence when the study is complete.

The model uses data and research-backed programs to change school climates. The staff on the safety team individually answer a questionnaire to find gaps in people’s knowledge. The students take a climate survey so school leaders can see what the real issues are, including bullying, substance abuse and mental health. Using the information, schools can implement programs that address those issues and are proven to be part of the solution.

The center wrote the Colorado Safety Guide for the Attorney General’s Office and found out of 2,000 school programs, about 80 were proved to be effective.

Some of the programs include LifeSkills Training, Olweus Bullying Prevention and Sources of Strength for Suicide Prevention.

The center’s model also uses a threat assessment test from Dewey Cornell, which has been validated by the federal government’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. After the threat is evaluated as either transient, meaning an empty threat like at teenager saying he’s going to get someone back for winning a game, or substantive, meaning a threat that should be addressed, the school can decide to use one of three management options for the student.

The assessment was used on 7,400 students, Woodward said, and found only 1% were expelled and arrested, suspensions decreased, racial disparities decreased and counseling was utilized more, among other things.

The three types of shooters are considered to be: traumatized people, who score high on the adverse childhood experiences test and account for about 40% of shooters; psychotic people, who suffer from delusions or paranoid schizophrenia and account for about 30% of shooters; and psychopathic people, who can manage their impressions to hide their true nature and feelings and account for the last 30% of shooters.

Each type requires different management or treatment. Those who are traumatized may need therapy or extra supports; those who are psychotic probably need medication; and those who are psychopathic can only be managed externally, through monitoring, check-ins and limiting of movements throughout the school.

When children or people are showing red flags for any of these types, it’s up to leadership to act to prevent the issues from worsening, Woodward said. In Parkland, Florida, for example, the sheriff’s office had received dozens of calls for service related to the boy who would eventually kill 17 students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

“For kids that have that many red flags, it’s a failure of communi ty leadership,” he said.

‘A comprehensive approach’
The two sides of the political spectrum often call for increased gun control or blame these events on a person’s mental health issues.

But focusing on these two factors alone won’t solve the crisis, Kingston said.

“We focus on taking a comprehensive approach to safety,” she said. “Gun control and mental health would be components.”

Research supports ensuring there are systems in place to prevent people from getting weapons for criminal reasons, she said, but there is not yet enough research to confidently say which systems are best. And while mental health is important, it is better to take a broader view of the issue. Supporting people’s mental health before they get to a point of crisis would be more effective in stemming violence, she said.

What the center does know is what programs and strategies can reduce the motivation for violence, which could help more than any one thing alone, Kingston said.

“There’s a lot of focus on the gun itself rather than, why would someone want a gun?” she said.

While some gun control legislation needs to happen, Woodward said it’s a technical part of the solution and not enough to stop the violence.

Woodward also said it’s a “non sequitur” to say that mental illness makes people hurt others, because studies show mental illness does not cause criminality. Generalized mental health treatment also wouldn’t treat those who suffer from psychosis or psychopathy.

“It’s (expletive) to think that mental illness is causing this,” he said.

‘The world that we most want to see’
Kingston said there are proven ways to prevent violence or decrease motivation for violence, but there’s a desire from the public to have one easy solution.

In reality, it would take funding, cultural shifts and a willingness to do complicated things.

“If we invested billions of dollars, at least equal to what we invest in prisons, to prevention, eventually it would flip,” she said.

But it would take at least 50 to 100 years.

To prevent violence, society would have to work with populations throughout their lifetimes. Nurse-family partnerships for high-risk mothers have been shown to result in less dangerous children; the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies program helps students and staff manage emotions; LifeSkills Training provides support for middle school students during that difficult transition; and Safe Dating helps high school students learn what healthy relationships are.

The goal would be to not only throw people life preservers at the earliest point they are acting out, but also give them life vests to help them be resilient and teach them to swim to prevent issues from arising, Kingston said.

Funding could also go toward programs for local needs and infrastructure for children.

“A lot of times, kids aren’t bonded to anything healthy, or their bonds are to toxic and harmful things,” she said. “You can counter that by tapping into kids’ passions.”

Kingston realizes this strategy would be a big lift, but it would benefit everyone in society.

The center is working to create a “standardized violence prevention protocol” that would explain things everyone could do to prevent violence. It would likely start in schools and then be brought to communities. Kingston said they are looking for a grant for the project right now.

While the idea of changing societal culture and how people approach these problems is difficult, Kingston said it will be worth it.

“It’s going to create the world that we must want to see,” she said.