

# ADDRESSING DISTRESS BEFORE IT BECOMES DISASTER

By Julie Roe and Nate Taylor

DO NOT CROSS POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS  
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*How HR at One University Is Driving a Threat  
Prevention and Assessment Program for Staff and Faculty*

**W**ith acts of violence seemingly becoming more common in workplaces and schools across the country, many organizations are taking a fresh look at their threat prevention and assessment strategies. At the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), human resources has for the past eight years been the driving force behind a strategy to identify, assess and address the risk of violence or threatening behavior among staff and faculty.

### **Identifying a Need**

In 2006, UTK's division of student life developed a referral line to help distressed or distressing students (974-HELP). Around that time, the Bureau of Labor Statistics released results from its 2005 *Survey of Workplace Violence Prevention*. The findings indicated that more than half of state agencies with 1,000+ employees reported employee-on-employee violence. The findings from this survey, along with the Virginia Tech tragedy in 2007, three UTK employee suicides in 2008-09, and an increasing number of calls to the university's police department in regards to concerning employee behavior, catapulted conversations about campus threat assessment and prevention strategies at UTK. Says Dr. Mary Lucal, associate vice chancellor for human resources, "We realized there was a need that we had to address, and that we couldn't do it alone."

In 2010, with support from the chancellor and provost, HR launched the 946-CARE program for distressed faculty and staff. By using a holistic approach, the program provides tools and resources to enhance safety and mitigate risk among the campus's workforce, allowing the university to connect early and often to help those in distress long before an issue becomes a disaster.

### **A Threat Assessment Model**

The 946-CARE program uses the threat assessment strategy outlined in the book *The Handbook for Campus Threat Assessment and Management Teams*, which states that threat assessment comprises four components: (1) learning of a person who may pose a threat; (2) gathering information about that person from multiple sources; (3) evaluating whether the person poses a threat of violence

to others; and (4) developing and implementing an individualized plan to reduce the threat.

The 946-CARE line provides distressed faculty and staff and those who notice a peer or colleague exhibiting concerning behavior a place to turn when they don't know what else to do. Available resources include the UT police department, employee assistance program (EAP) referrals, suicide prevention resources and more. Using the SIGMA model rating system ([www.sigmatma.com](http://www.sigmatma.com)), the 946-CARE response team evaluates threats and responds accordingly. Many cases, such as reports of concerning behavior, may fall under general case management. However, statements of self-harm or threats toward others constitute automatic referral for threat assessment and receive a priority rating, allowing the response team to assess and intervene as necessary to ward off potential impending threats.

**In the diverse, complex and legal environment of higher education, threat prevention and assessment are critical to the health, safety and well-being of every campus community.**

### **The Response Team**

The 946-CARE program is coordinated by HR and led by a response team comprised of individuals from HR, the provost's office, the office of equity and diversity, the UT psychological clinic and the UT police department. The general counsel's office serves in an advisory capacity. This diverse team is able to address concerns using a holistic approach to case management. Collectively, they are subject matter experts on things such as policy, procedure, faculty affairs, diversity, mental health and more. This group is equipped to creatively address faculty and staff cases with professionalism. Having this diverse group enables the response team to collaboratively review cases and develop plans. Ad hoc members may be utilized as needed, and may include representatives from various campus partners, including media relations, the dean of students office, the Title IX office, or other senior leaders

as appropriate. This ensures that all the appropriate parties are connected for cases involving both students and faculty. Of the 946-CARE hotline, John Zomchick, vice provost for faculty affairs, says, “It is one of the many ways that faculty and staff can help those that they work with on campus. It can be in the form of calling to ask advice on how to help a fellow employee or voicing concerns based on what they have been seeing. Since its inception,

946-CARE has been instrumental in getting timely and effective help to employees experiencing life challenges.”

### **What Happens When an Employee Calls?**

The campus community is encouraged to contact 911 or local authorities for emergencies, as the 946-CARE line is not designed to replace 911. 946-CARE is a separate dedicated phone line maintained by trained HR

## **Psychological Testing: A Tool for Assessing At-Risk Behavior**

The goal of a risk assessment is to determine an individual’s vulnerability and propensity for at-risk behavior and to recommend the appropriate resources to address the behavior. Some activities that create potential risks for organizations include workers’ or students’ emotional/psychological problems, unsafe work or campus practices, drug/alcohol abuse, performance issues and coworker or family disputes. According to Dr. Gerald Lewis, a prolific writer on at-risk behavior, we can understand the causes and conditions that precipitate a tornado, but we do not know when or where it will actually occur or how bad the damage will be. We can identify populations more likely to respond violently, but we cannot predict the risk for any specific individual. While there are possible warning signs or signals, there are no absolute predictors.

The utilization of psychological testing to help predict unusual or extreme behaviors is widespread. These tests are developed to estimate the probability that an individual’s traits occur more than just by chance. They can be effective indicators of at-risk tendencies when they identify personality traits, a history of problem behaviors and/or clinical pathology. Combinations of tests seem to have greater usefulness and predictive power. However, judging threat potential involves more than written assessments. Consideration must be given to the relationships of participants, preceding events, the culture, the life outside of work or school, and the emotional state of the threatening individual.

The most effective evaluation process includes both a battery of tests and an in-depth oral interview with a skilled evaluator who understands that the primary client is the organization. Although the individual’s needs are carefully identified, the focus is on the level of impairment and whether there is a risk to the organization. The process is developed to provide relevant, supportive information to organizations’ HR and legal teams who view the results as only one component of the overall evaluation. Organizations and institutions have a duty to provide a safe and healthy environment for students and workers. Therefore, it is vital that management learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of troubled individuals. Employee assistance professionals can provide this training, which includes the process for referring troubled individuals to get the help they need to live and function better.

Predicting dangerous or harmful behavior is difficult. We may understand the causes, but again, we cannot know if the harm will occur or the degree of harm it will cause. While there are simply no absolute predictors, psychological assessments provide a valid and helpful measure of troubling behavior.

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professionals. These individuals have been trained in the areas of conflict resolution, dealing with difficult people, and Question, Persuade, Refer (a suicide prevention technique). The line is staffed by HR professionals Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. After 5:00 p.m., on weekends and during scheduled university closings, the line is answered by the UT police department. The police department completes an intake form for CARE calls and forwards the form to the HR response coordinator.

Once a call is received, information is recorded on an intake form and then reviewed with the HR response coordinator. The types of calls vary. Sometimes an employee will call about him/herself. More often, someone will call with concerns about a colleague exhibiting signs of distress (some of which include depression, fixation on weapons, anger or paranoia, chemical dependency, social isolation, zealotry, pushing the limits of acceptable behavior, contempt for authority, newly acquired poor personal hygiene, verbal threats, bullying, stalking or harassing others, etc.) The information is assessed with three general methods of addressing a case.

Most calls fall under Step One: a referral to the appropriate resource. Many calls result in a referral to the state EAP. Other referrals might include the campus ombudsperson for mediation services or the Title IX office for complaints related to sexual harassment. Some calls may fall solely under HR purview for consultation and coaching, while others may warrant a discussion with the response team in order to assess next steps.

Step Two involves case management by the response team, which is convened at the discretion of the HR response coordinator. A case may be reviewed during a regular monthly meeting for non-urgent calls, or the response coordinator may call an immediate meeting for more urgent cases. Cases that fall under case management generally include concerning behaviors, potential harm to self, inability to care for self, or domestic violence.

Step Three consists of a threat assessment conducted by the response team using a specialized assessment form. Individuals are assigned a priority level (1-5) indicating the resulting threat level. From there, a case management plan


is developed with short- and long-term approaches to intervene, minimize the threat(s), mitigate risk and ultimately enhance campus safety and provide support for the individual.

### **An HR-Led Initiative**

HR plays a vital role in the operation of the 946-CARE line. The response coordinator is an HR representative who manages the process. This person trains the call-line staff, tracks calls, organizes and updates the cases in case management, and schedules regular monthly meetings or urgent meetings for the response team. HR also plays a significant role in educating UTK faculty and staff about this resource, regularly speaking at staff and department meetings across campus to remind the campus community of the 946-CARE line resource and to familiarize people with the signs of potentially distressed colleagues. HR shepherds the entire process, paying close attention to important elements such as confidentiality, HIPAA, FERPA, FLSA, mandatory reporting responsibilities and other laws and mandates.

### **What's Next?**

In the near future, we plan to incorporate additional technological advances into the 946-CARE program, including creating a 946-CARE app for smartphones, an ability to text the hotline, and providing ways to report concerns through the HR web page. The goal at UTK is to close the gap of resources available to distressed faculty and staff. We strive to mirror the process and resources available for students and to translate these into a proactive resource for faculty and staff.

Threat prevention and assessment is not a one-size-fits-all process. With HR leading the way, UTK has taken steps to address this issue and make the campus a safer place for all. Threat assessment will not eliminate disasters, but it can serve as a critical step toward overall campus safety. In the diverse, complex and legal environment of higher education, threat prevention and assessment are critical to the health, safety and well-being of every campus community. 

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