SECURITY
MANAGEMENT

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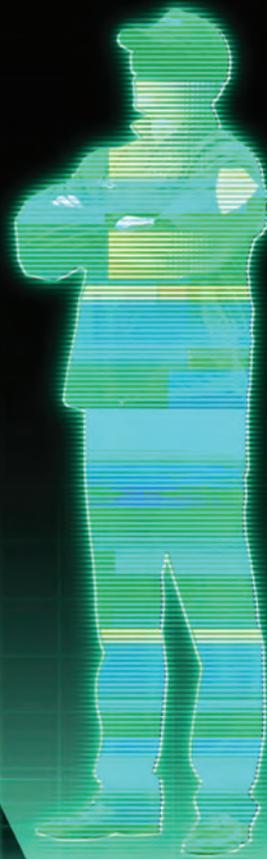U.S. facilities struggle to meet federal standards.

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THE POWER
OF AWARENESS

SARPY COUNTY, NEBRASKA, EMPLOYS A WEB-BASED TOOL FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT TEAMS, RESULTING IN COMMUNITYWIDE COLLABORATION. **BY HOLLY GILBERT STOWELL**

FOR CITIZENS IN SARPY COUNTY, NEBRASKA, reporting threats is as easy as clicking a button. Anyone with Internet access can report suspicious behavior and activity by clicking on a red square labeled TIPS, located on the websites of the county's schools and law enforcement agencies.

The tool is part of Awareity, a Web-based platform for threat assessment teams.

"We've had well over 400 tips since we've been involved in this," says Captain Kevin Griger, investigations commander for the Sarpy County Sheriff's Office.

Griger played an essential role in building a communitywide threat assessment team in Sarpy County. Originating in January 2016, the idea was to keep tabs on people and cases of interest and to involve stakeholders who could act to prevent or mitigate those threats, including schools, the county attorney, the probation office, behavioral health officials, and others.

Once the participating organizations—including schools, city officials, and the military—signed a memorandum of understanding, the sheriff's office funded the first contract with Awareity in July 2016. The four school districts in the county now fund the platform, and the most recent contract was renewed in July 2018. After an initial licensing fee, Awareity charges a small amount for each user.

"You can click on the button and submit a tip, like 'Bill has a gun and he's threatening to shoot up the school tomorrow,' or 'Sally has a hit-list,'" Griger says. "Sometimes they are less serious in nature—but we get everything."

The Web-based platform contains detailed reports and allows users to make updates on particular threats. Notifications about new threats or updates to existing cases are emailed to team members. For privacy purposes, the emails contain only a link that goes to the secure Awareity website where threat information can be viewed.

"As people come up on the radar, one way or another—whether through the school or through anonymous notification—our threat assessment team then sits down and decides what course of action to take to try to mitigate any issues ahead of time, instead of waiting until something has happened," Griger explains.

However, not all threats contain plans to harm others. "We've had three suicides prevented as a result of it, where somebody felt it was serious enough to report," Griger says.

For example, a school was able to intervene when someone reported that his girlfriend was talking seriously about suicide.

"When we get that information, we're able to send somebody out to make contact, come up with a safety plan right then, and deal with the situation," Griger adds.

Awareity allows users to build out different teams and have emails directed to just those groups. So, if an issue comes up at Bellvue High School—for example—school officials with access to Awareity can choose to provide the details of the case only to that school's personnel.

"I think every one of our four super-intendents has a license, so they see in real time anything that comes in through their particular school," Griger says. "The particular people that are assigned to our threat assessment team can get onto Awareity and see the documents that pertain to each individual case."

There are times, however, when schools may choose to escalate the threat and make everyone on the team aware of it.

"If they think it's something that's bigger, and say, 'You know what, we need to bring this to the threat assessment team meeting and talk about this kid'...then you can open it up and let everybody on our team see it, all 20 people," Griger says.

When dealing with threat information, he adds that privacy concerns are treated with the utmost consideration.

"Because we are talking about students, school records, behavioral health issues, juvenile arrest records, things like that—we restrict it as much as possible," Griger notes. "Everybody signs a

You can click on the button and submit a tip.

memorandum of understanding for confidentiality that the things we discuss in our threat assessment meetings are only for those meetings."

While the reported threats or tips involve students about 80 percent of the time, sometimes the cases pertain to the community at large. One man, for example, was put on the list for making threatening comments to a county official.

"He's always bringing in these odd things to the courthouse where he's suing us for $5 million, but they don't make sense, just weird gibberish that he writes out," Griger says. "But he did threaten one of our county attorneys, so while he's somebody we don't feel has the means to carry it out or even the heart to carry it out, it's somebody we are watching."

At monthly meetings, the threat assessment team discusses cases and can decide to eliminate threats that are no longer credible.

"I have a list that we maintain, and I say, 'Okay John Doe is on this list, we have a safety plan,' and after six months we decide if we can drop John Doe off the radar," Griger notes. "We don't need to talk about him every month if there's no change or update."

Awareity has been responsive about making tweaks or changes to the platform to better suit the county's needs, according to Griger.

"It's been a great program for us. The business itself has been very receptive to any ideas that we have to make it more user friendly, so if we ask, 'Is it possible to tweak it like this?' they say, 'Absolutely,'" he adds. "They are very responsive to doing things and changing things the way we want them done."

Overall, Griger notes that smaller threats can have a snowball effect, sometimes quickly escalating into bad situations, so prevention is key.

"While being picked on while riding the bus isn't a big deal in the grand scheme of what's happening in the entire world, to that kid who reported it, or to his parents, it's a big deal to them," Griger notes.

He points out that the student could decide to retaliate one day with violence if the bullying doesn't stop. "If we can deal with issues early on, that is better for everyone," Griger says. ◢

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
RICK SHAW, INFO@AWAREITY.COM, WWW.AWAREITY.COM, 402.730.0090