

Violence can be prevented

By Delbert Elliott and Beverly Kingston *The Denver Post*

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The horrific shooting that took place at an Aurora movie theater on July 20 is another reminder that we can and must take action to prevent violence. As our hearts break from this sad and tragic event, we have an opportunity to turn some of our sadness and grief into action aimed at doing whatever it takes to prevent these tragedies from occurring in the future.

A key violence-prevention strategy is good surveillance and intelligence. Perpetrator warning signs were found in a study of school shootings conducted by the U.S. Secret Service. In four out of five school shootings they examined, someone knew the event was going to take place. They also found that most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused concern or indicated a need for help. There are warnings prior to most of these violent events.

We learned this after Columbine. The shooters left a series of red flags during the 18 months before the shooting. These included a hateful website; reports of bomb-making; threats to another student; arrests for breaking into a vehicle; the acquisition of weapons; a hit list; and disturbing school essays and videos. A number of different people were aware that the shooters had significant problems and were involved in questionable activities.

It also was true that no one in a

position of authority was aware of all these signs prior to the event.

This led the Columbine Commission to recommend that a system be established in Colorado so that students and others could anonymously report conduct or situations that are potentially dangerous or troubling.

Safe2Tell was established in 2003 under the leadership of the Colorado attorney general to ensure that all Colorado students, parents, teachers and community members have access to a safe and anonymous way to report any safety concerns.

Tips are reported anonymously to a toll-free number (1-877-542-7233) or through a Web reporting feature that can be accessed at www.Safe2Tell.org, and through two-way dialog texting.

Our best chance of early intervention to prevent a tragedy of any nature is when we receive information about suspicious or concerning behavior.

Since 2004, Safe2Tell has received more than 11,000 calls resulting in 6,000 reports to law enforcement and schools. As a result of these anonymous reports, Safe2Tell has:

- prevented 28 planned school attacks;
- responded to more than 700 threats of violence, 1,546 bullying calls, 962 reports of substance abuse, and 359 reports of sexually related crimes; and
- taken more than 270 weapons from schools or school buses.

Safe2Tell reports also have led to 799 successful interventions with depressed or suicidal children.

Sadly, as the investigation of the Aurora shooting unfolds, a roadmap of imminent warning signs is likely to be revealed in this case as well. Because these attacks are rarely impulsive events, most shooters engage in pre-attack behaviors that involve obtaining weapons and ammunition; making plans that often include casing the location and rehearsing the planned attack; and expressing an unusual interest or preoccupation with violent assaults in the media or historical events, typically in written essays or e-mails, Facebook postings and blogs.

Often the individual tells someone of his or her plans or enough of the plans that logically give warning of the attack. Along with these planning behaviors, the individual may demonstrate difficulty coping with significant losses or failures and be socially isolated, a loner and at-risk for suicide.

Most people are blessed with some level of intuition and awareness when something just isn't right. Often we dismiss this because we aren't sure what to do. But this type of wanton violence has happened too many times in Colorado. We need to be more aware and smarter about these warning signs and the importance of reporting them.

Safe2Tell provides a safe way to report when the witness does not wish to be identified. The reports are forwarded to local law enforcement and responders. Safe2Tell gives everyone in the community a chance to play a role in the prevention of another violent act.

Contacting local officials or Safe2Tell with concerns is critical to preventing violence. Yet there is much more that we can do to prevent individuals from engaging in violence in the first place. We have learned that the best violence prevention should begin before kids are born and continue through their childhood and adolescent development. There are tested and effective programs to prevent violence (colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints) but seldom are they fully funded or well implemented.

Let us commit to changing this and putting what we know works into action. Then we can make Colorado known for being a leader in preventing violence.

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