

BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT UNITS

A GUIDE FOR STATE AND LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT
TO PREVENT TARGETED VIOLENCE



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY
UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE
NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER



This guide was prepared by the staff of the U.S. Secret Service
National Threat Assessment Center

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY
UNITED STATES SECRET SERVICE

NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER



MESSAGE FROM THE ACTING DIRECTOR



Since its inception over 150 years ago, the U.S. Secret Service has safeguarded our nation's financial systems and protected our elected leaders, critical locations, and major events. The agency's operational law enforcement experience in both our investigative and protective missions has led to the creation of robust principles that guide the agency's approach to violence prevention.

The prevention of targeted violence in our country remains critical as communities have far too often been impacted by mass shootings and other targeted attacks. Keeping communities safe requires a team effort and the combined resources of federal, state, and local law enforcement. To support these efforts, our agency's National Threat Assessment Center produces guidance on behavioral threat assessment and the prevention of targeted violence as part of the Secret Service's no-fail mission to safeguard our nation's highest elected officials.

The prevention of targeted violence in the United States is everyone's responsibility, and the Secret Service remains steadfast in supporting our law enforcement partners as part of our shared mission of protecting and serving the American people.

Ronald L. Rowe Jr.
Acting Director, U.S. Secret Service

MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF OF NTAC



For over 25 years, the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) has produced research examining all forms of targeted violence to advance the agency's protective and investigative missions and to support the safety and security of the broader homeland. NTAC delivers research and guidance to our public safety partners on how to prevent targeted violence in communities across the United States, with further support offered through our training and consultation missions. This support continues with the release of the following operational guide, ***Behavioral Threat Assessment Units: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement to Prevent Targeted Violence***.

The framework presented herein reflects the principles and strategies of the Secret Service's behavioral threat assessment model. The Secret Service model is designed to identify individuals displaying threatening or concerning behavior, gather information to assess if that individual poses a risk of violence, and then manage the risk by implementing the appropriate interventions. This model for violence prevention is informed by decades of NTAC research, which continually finds that most individuals who engage in acts of targeted violence elicit concern in those around them prior to the attack.

It is everyone's responsibility to prevent targeted violence, and NTAC stands ready to provide continued support to our community partners as they implement violence prevention programs. With the creation and distribution of this guide, NTAC offers principles and best practices to state and local law enforcement agencies as they work tirelessly to prevent future tragedies.

Dr. Lina Alathari
Chief, National Threat Assessment Center

NTAC was created in 1998 to provide guidance on threat assessment both within the Secret Service and to others with criminal justice and public safety responsibilities. Through the Presidential Threat Protection Act of 2000, Congress formally authorized NTAC to conduct research on threat assessment and various types of targeted violence; provide training on threat assessment and the prevention of targeted violence; facilitate information-sharing among agencies with protective and/or public safety responsibilities; provide case consultation on individual threat assessment investigations and for agencies building threat assessment units; and develop programs to promote the standardization of federal, state, and local threat assessment processes and investigations.



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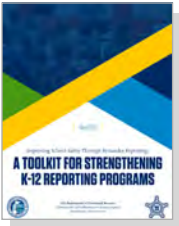
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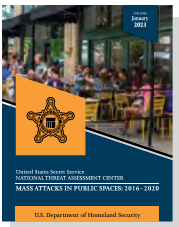


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FROM THE NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER

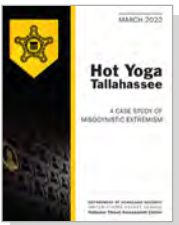
All publicly available resources by the National Threat Assessment Center are available at www.secretservice.gov/ntac.



Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs (May 2023) provides school staff with ways to encourage reporting by students and the broader school community.



Mass Attacks in Public Spaces: 2016 - 2020 (January 2023) analyzes 173 attacks that occurred from 2016 to 2020 in public or semi-public locations in the U.S.



Hot Yoga Tallahassee: A Case Study of Misogynistic Extremism (March 2022) examines the background of an attacker who killed two women and injured four others in 2018.



Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools (March 2021) examines 67 averted attacks at K-12 schools from 2006 to 2018 planned by current or recently former students.



Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence (November 2019) examines 41 attacks perpetrated by current or recently former students at K-12 schools from 2008 to 2017.



Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence (July 2018) provides actionable steps for schools to develop multidisciplinary violence prevention programs that proactively identify and assist students who may pose a risk of harm to themselves or others.



Attacks on Federal Government: 2001 - 2013 (December 2015) analyzes 43 attacks directed toward federal government facilities and officials from 2001 to 2013.



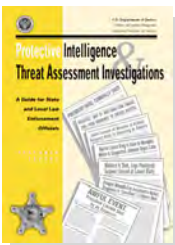
Campus Attacks: Targeted Violence Affecting Institutions of Higher Education (April 2010) examines 272 incidents of violence that impacted institutions of higher education from 1900 to 2008.



Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information Students Learn May Prevent a Targeted Attack (May 2008) explores how students with prior knowledge of attacks (i.e., bystanders) made decisions regarding what steps, if any, to take after learning the information.



The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States (May 2002) analyzes incidents of targeted violence in schools and outlines how schools could adopt the threat assessment process pioneered by the Secret Service to prevent future attacks.



Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials (July 1998) is the seminal publication in the field of threat assessment that shares findings and implications from the Secret Service's *Exceptional Case Study Project*.



INTRODUCTION

In 1902, Congress directed the Secret Service to assume full-time responsibility for protecting the President. In the decades that followed, the agency's capacity to identify and intervene with those who pose a risk of harm to a protected person became a central feature of its protective mission and came to be known within the Secret Service as *Protective Intelligence*.

Just as the Secret Service's mission to prevent assassination using Protective Intelligence is long-standing, so is the agency's interest in behavioral assessment as a field of scientific study, with the agency's earliest behavioral science research commissioned in the 1960s. To further understand the relationship between behavioral assessment and violence prevention, the Secret Service convened a conference in 1981 involving agency representatives and leading behavioral scientists from across the country. One of the resulting recommendations was that the Secret Service establish an internal behavioral science research capacity to continue advancing the agency's ability to prevent violence. Relatedly, participant feedback from a subsequent Secret Service conference on stalking behaviors encouraged the agency to conduct an in-depth examination of the most serious known cases of assassination. These two events led to the *Exceptional Case Study Project* (ECSP), a research study initiated in 1992 that sought to provide operationally relevant information and guidance to law enforcement agencies and other organizations with protective responsibilities.

The ECSP coined the term *targeted violence* and established the foundational model of the Secret Service's *behavioral threat assessment* approach, which is still in use today. The Secret Service model involves identifying individuals who display an unusual or inappropriate interest in a protected person, gathering information to assess whether an individual poses a risk of violence to



the protectee, and managing the risk to preempt the possibility of an attack. Or put more simply: *identify, assess, and manage*. The same behavioral threat assessment model that is used to keep Secret Service protectees safe can be utilized by other federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to prevent other forms of targeted violence, including attacks targeting schools, workplaces, houses of worship, and public gatherings.

In 1998, the Secret Service established the National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) to produce research and provide training and consultation on behavioral threat assessment to federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. Today, NTAC continues to lead the field of behavioral threat assessment and assist the agency's public safety partners in their mission to prevent targeted violence. As part of its congressionally mandated mission, NTAC produces groundbreaking operational research studies examining targeted violence in a variety of settings and publishes best practice guidance for public safety partners entrusted with ensuring the safety of our communities. NTAC staff also deliver training by request to tens of thousands of public safety officials every year and routinely consult with a variety of agencies and organizations that are developing their own threat assessment capacities. In addition to aiding external partners with violence prevention efforts, research produced by NTAC continues to shape the Protective Intelligence methodology used by the Secret Service.

Preventing targeted violence in America is everyone's responsibility. Far too often, communities have witnessed mass injury and loss of life at the hands of an attacker, only to learn that the perpetrator had a long history of threatening or concerning behaviors. In many cases, the attacker's behavior was witnessed by community bystanders, some of whom sought to report their concerns to public safety officials. Unfortunately, many communities lack the structured systems to receive, evaluate, and respond to these reports in a way that reduces the likelihood of a violent outcome.



The framework presented herein is the latest NTAC offering intended to support the violence prevention efforts of state and local law enforcement agencies. The steps that follow describe how agencies can adopt the principles of the Secret Service model to proactively identify and intervene with those who intend to carry out acts of targeted violence in their communities. These steps are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather offer a scalable blueprint that can be implemented by agencies varying in size, structure, and resources, all of which share the Secret Service's mission of preventing targeted violence.





ABOUT TARGETED VIOLENCE AND BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT

The places where we live, work, worship, and learn have far too often been impacted by acts of targeted violence, forcing Americans to question their own safety in the places they should feel the most secure. Only by understanding the problem of targeted violence can communities begin to chart a path toward prevention.

The Secret Service defines **targeted violence** as a premeditated act of violence directed at a specific individual, group, or location, regardless of motivation and generally unrelated to other criminal activity. In addition to assassination, this term encompasses other types of violence that have beset communities across the United States, including mass shootings, workplace violence, school attacks, and acts of terrorism.

Over 25 years of NTAC research on targeted violence has continued to reinforce that:

- **There is no specific demographic profile of an attacker.**
- **Those who pose a risk of violence do not always make direct threats prior to an attack but often communicate their intentions to those around them.**
- **Attackers often elicit concern from those around them because of their behaviors or communications.**
- **Bystander reporting and intervention can avert planned acts of targeted violence.**

Targeted Violence:

A premeditated act of violence directed at a specific individual, group, or location, regardless of motivation and generally unrelated to other criminal activity.



THE PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES OF BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT

The Secret Service recognizes that preventing targeted violence is possible if communities are equipped with the training and resources necessary to identify individuals of concern, assess their risk of violence, and intervene appropriately, namely through **behavioral threat assessment** (also referred to as behavioral threat assessment and management or “BTAM”). Behavioral threat assessment is an approach to proactively prevent incidents of targeted violence. NTAC research and Secret Service operational experience have established that behavioral threat assessment:

Behavioral Threat Assessment:

A behavior-based approach to proactively prevent incidents of targeted violence.

- **Is a systematic risk management approach.** Unlike traditional criminal investigations that focus on arrest and criminal prosecution, behavioral threat assessment involves determining if an individual poses a risk of violence while developing proactive management strategies to reduce the likelihood of a violent outcome.
- **Requires corroboration from diverse sources.** In addition to gathering information directly from the individual of concern, a behavioral threat assessment should evaluate information obtained from those who know the individual, as well as lawfully accessible information contained in records and other forms of documentation.
- **Emphasizes rapport building.** A behavioral threat assessment should employ rapport-building techniques to facilitate positive engagement and successful intervention.
- **Utilizes a low threshold of concern.** Acting at the first sign of concerning behavior, instead of waiting for a direct or explicit threat, improves the chances of preventing violence.
- **Provides an avenue for early intervention.** A behavioral threat assessment facilitates the delivery of appropriate interventions and resources as part of a violence prevention strategy that focuses on addressing the factors driving an individual toward violence.
- **Is not profiling.** Rather than focusing on demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age, race, or ethnicity), behavioral threat assessment prioritizes understanding an individual’s thinking and behavior.
- **Is not prediction.** Rather than attempting to predict who will act violently, a behavioral threat assessment should focus on identifying and addressing the concerning factors that appear to be driving a person toward violence.



Behavioral threat assessment should be approached with a prevention mindset. The primary objective of a behavioral threat assessment is to gather information about an individual of concern in order to assess and manage the risk of violence they may pose—in other words, *prevention*. Oftentimes, individuals eliciting concern have not violated a criminal statute, which serves as an important reminder that an individual need not commit a criminal offense before being the subject of a behavioral threat assessment.

In some cases, however, it may come to light that the individual of concern has committed a crime, and once uncovered, it would be appropriate to investigate those criminal violations. In these instances, any required criminal investigation should run parallel to, and in coordination with, a behavioral threat assessment.

Imagine a scenario in which a local law enforcement agency is notified by a concerned family member that their loved one has become increasingly angry at his former boss, who fired him after a series of disciplinary actions for safety violations. The individual of concern made comments about having nothing left to lose and claimed that his former boss was to blame for his recent divorce. The family notified law enforcement because they were concerned for the safety of the former boss and coworkers. Concerning scenarios like this, in which no criminal violation has yet occurred, highlight how criminal prosecution should not be the primary objective of a behavioral threat assessment.

BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT...

is a proactive approach to **violence prevention**.

provides an avenue for **early intervention**.

focuses on assessing and managing **concerning behavior**.

is not a criminal investigation.

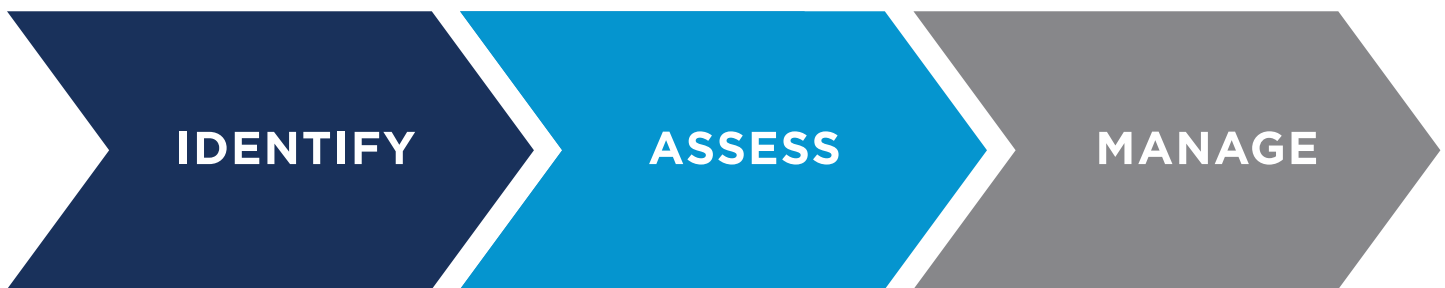
is not a physical security measure.

is not profiling.



THE SECRET SERVICE MODEL

The Secret Service originally developed behavioral threat assessment to prevent assassinations and safeguard the nation's leaders. The process was built upon NTAC's research which found that most individuals who engage in acts of targeted violence elicit concern in those around them prior to the attack. The Secret Service model, therefore, is designed to **identify** individuals displaying threatening or concerning behavior, gather information to **assess** if an individual poses a risk of violence, and then **manage** the risk by implementing appropriate interventions.



The Secret Service model has since been adapted to prevent all forms of targeted violence impacting communities in America, including acts of workplace violence, K-12 school shootings, terrorism, and mass attacks in public spaces.

THIS GUIDE'S FRAMEWORK

The steps presented here are meant to guide state and local law enforcement as they establish **behavioral threat assessment units (BTAUs)** specifically designed to assess and intervene with individuals identified as posing a risk of violence. Doing so requires the development of operational policies and standard operating procedures that clearly outline how the unit will function. Once complete, the unit will be positioned to receive and manage information, including bystander reports about individuals displaying concerning behaviors in the community. The BTAU will then conduct an assessment to determine if the reported individuals pose a risk of violence, and if so, develop management strategies to reduce the likelihood of violent outcomes. As part of this overall structure, the BTAU should continue to promote a culture of prevention, both within the agency itself and among its community partners. In doing so, the BTAU will work alongside its partners to prevent the injury and loss of life that research continues to demonstrate is preventable.



THE FRAMEWORK

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| STEP 1: | Establish a Behavioral Threat Assessment Unit and Policy |
| STEP 2: | Create Operational Protocols and Procedures |
| STEP 3: | Identify and Process Reports of Concerning Behavior |
| STEP 4: | Gather Information to Assess for Risk |
| STEP 5: | Develop Risk Management Strategies |
| STEP 6: | Promote Continuous Improvement and a Culture of Prevention |

Change can be challenging, but law enforcement in the United States has demonstrated the ability to evolve its operations to better address emerging threats to public safety. Examples range from the incorporation of crisis intervention and mental health responses into daily police operations, to the adoption of new investigative techniques to counter the criminal use of advanced technologies. Similarly, law enforcement has long promoted the general welfare of the communities they serve and protect through preventive measures, including welfare checks, traffic and crowd control, drunk driving prevention, and drug abuse education. The adoption of behavioral threat assessment reflects a movement toward a more structured approach to targeted violence prevention and is a natural progression of the public safety role law enforcement has historically played in the United States.



The adoption of behavioral threat assessment reflects a movement toward a more structured approach to targeted violence prevention and is a natural progression of the public safety role law enforcement has historically played in the United States.



STEP 1: ESTABLISH A BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT UNIT AND POLICY

Preventing targeted violence requires a prevention mindset along with a clearly defined policy that establishes the BTAU within an agency while clarifying the unit's legal authorities, operational objectives, and threshold for initiating cases. Creating a written policy establishes these parameters and ensures the BTAU operates as intended.

ADOPT A PREVENTION MINDSET

When establishing a BTAU, law enforcement agencies must first recognize that targeted violence is preventable. As research continues to show, individuals planning acts of targeted violence almost always exhibit observable concerning behaviors, offering opportunities for intervention and redirection before criminal behavior or violence occurs. It is important for agencies to internalize this concept of prevention and recognize that law enforcement can be proactive in addressing targeted violence and are not limited to reactive responses to crimes or active assailants. A structured behavioral threat assessment process can empower agencies, within all existing legal and constitutional parameters, to prevent future tragedies and loss of life.

RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

The success of BTAU operations is dependent upon senior agency leadership support and direction. Agency leadership must be supportive of the behavioral threat assessment mission



and promote the agency-wide prevention mindset. Additionally, agency leadership must also ensure that a BTAU is fully integrated into the agency's organization on equal footing to other components in the agency. Externally, agency leadership can help promote a prevention mindset to other community organizations through the creation and strengthening of partnerships and through information-sharing efforts.

The role of agency leadership in the establishment and development of a BTAU includes:

- promoting an agency-wide prevention mindset;
- overseeing the development of agency policies for conducting behavioral threat assessments;
- procuring and allocating resources, including personnel, funding, and training;
- promoting the BTAU as a life-saving agency resource to other community organizations;
- inspiring purpose among the BTAU and other agency personnel more broadly; and
- understanding that successful violence prevention efforts may be difficult to measure with data.

DETERMINE LEGAL AUTHORITIES

BTAU policies should clearly identify from where the law enforcement agency draws its authority to conduct behavioral threat assessments. For example, the Secret Service's investigative and protective authority is established by Title 18, United States Code, § 3056 (Powers, Authorities, and Duties of the United States Secret Service). As public entities, state and local law enforcement agencies across the United States draw their police powers from local ordinances and state statutes, which generally grant them the authority to detect and prevent crime, to safeguard life and property, and to preserve the peace. Law enforcement agencies routinely take steps to reduce opportunities for crime through preventive measures, and behavioral threat assessment can serve as one such method of prevention.

DETERMINE ORGANIZATIONAL PLACEMENT

BTAUs can be established within state and local law enforcement agencies, as well as within state and regional fusion centers. The type of agency to establish the unit will dictate the authorities under which the unit operates, the resources available (e.g., staffing, funding, and technology), and the unit's geographic jurisdiction. Agencies should consider how a BTAU can be most effectively positioned within their overall organization.



State Law Enforcement Agencies and Fusion Centers

BTAUs have been developed by state law enforcement agencies and within fusion centers across the country. State agencies may operate with broader authorities and with greater resources than smaller local agencies, and fusion centers provide law enforcement with opportunities to share information and intelligence, collaborate with partner agencies, maximize their resources, and streamline their processes. The North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation (NCSBI), for example, chose to establish its Behavioral Threat Assessment Unit, known as the BeTA Unit, as a part of the North Carolina Information Sharing and Analysis Center (ISAAC) with the goal of taking a proactive approach to violence prevention. One of the contributing factors to establishing the BeTA Unit in the ISAAC, a state fusion center, was the North Carolina General Assembly's decision to provide the state fusion center with express legal authority to analyze information related to any threat of violence to an individual in a school or a place of worship (NC Gen Stat § 143B-929, 2022).¹



Other examples include the Hawai'i State Fusion Center (HSFC), which supports Threat Team Hawai'i (TTH), a multidisciplinary team that identifies, assesses, and manages situations where the risk of targeted violence is imminent and/or anticipated. Similarly, in the nation's capital, the DC Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency (HSEMA) established a behavioral threat assessment and management program as a part of the DC Fusion Center.

Fusion centers allow multiple law enforcement agencies to share resources and information with the common goal of safeguarding the homeland and preventing crime and threats to public safety. Such a focus on prevention aligns with the primary objective of behavioral threat assessment, making fusion centers effective placements for BTAUs. Local agencies seeking to establish a BTAU can contact their local fusion centers and other regional partners to determine if such programs already exist and how they can create an agency-level BTAU that could collaborate with existing programs.

¹ Jones, N. T., & Gray, A. E. (2020). Threat assessment and management: Identifying the ethical and legal challenges within a law enforcement setting. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 7(1-2), 98-112.



Local Law Enforcement Agencies

BTAUs can also be established within local law enforcement agencies, including city police departments and sheriff's offices. For example, in July of 1990, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) established the Threat Management Unit (TMU) due to a disturbing increase in obsessive, fixated, and sometimes violent behavior directed at high-profile public figures. The TMU was initially created to facilitate direct reporting of and a timely response to the stalking behaviors of those who persistently attempted to contact area celebrities. The LAPD determined there was a need to develop a specialized unit capable of providing nontraditional law enforcement services to intervene and manage individuals of concern before the potential for violence escalated further. Today, the TMU is responsible for investigating and providing early intervention for aggravated stalking cases, criminal threat cases directed at elected city officials, and workplace violence cases involving city employees and departments, with the overall aim of managing cases before violence occurs.² The TMU also staffs the Los Angeles City Threat Assessment Team and liaises to maintain relationships with entertainment studios, the Secret Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the California Highway Patrol's Dignitary Protection Unit, and other similar units.

As another example, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) in Florida established its Threat Management Division in 2021. The Threat Management Division's mission is to identify indicators of potential targeted violence as early as possible and to act before they become actual threats or result in violence. In addition to its specific threat management functions, the 71-member division also houses the agency's mental health unit, mass casualty planning unit, and intelligence lead policing section. These units work in concert to prevent targeted violence by identifying, assessing, and managing individuals who have exhibited concerning behavior; providing field-based mental health services; assessing site safety at schools and other critical infrastructure; and conducting active assailant response training. Public schools in Florida are mandated by law to have threat management programs, but PCSO also operates a dedicated school-based threat management program for private schools throughout Pinellas County. PCSO has partnered with several multi-disciplinary community entities, including community mental health providers, school district representatives, the local prosecutor's office, and the state probation office, all of whom meet weekly to support open threat management cases.

² Bixler, B. S., Dunn, J., & Grundland, T. (2021). Operations of the Los Angeles Police Department Threat Management Unit and Crisis Support Response Section. In J. R. Meloy & J. Hoffmann (Eds.), *International Handbook of Threat Assessment* (2nd ed., pp. 454-470). Oxford University Press.



INTERAGENCY ALTERNATIVE

Behavioral threat assessment programs can also be established as interagency collaborations without a sole managing entity. These types of programs generally serve in a consultative or advisory capacity, offering support and resources to member and non-member agencies without assuming formal ownership of an assessment.

For example, the Rochester Threat Advisory Committee (ROCTAC) is a behavioral threat assessment advisory team created to facilitate information sharing and coordinate threat management around Rochester, NY.³ Participating agencies include federal, state, and local law enforcement and other government agencies, along with universities, K-12 schools, mental health professionals, houses of worship, corporations, and community outreach partners. The advisory team meets regularly, and any participating member agency can present a case to the team. While all responsibilities associated with the case remain with the presenting agency, other agencies in the advisory group can make recommendations about possible intervention options and share resources when appropriate.

These types of interagency partnerships help ensure collaboration and information sharing during situations where warning signs or risk factors for violence are present. Such interagency groups can follow many of the behavioral threat assessment principles presented in this guide.



³ Monroe County Sheriff's Office. (2019, February 28). *Monroe County Sheriff Todd K. Baxter Announces Implementation of Rochester Threat Advisory Committee* [Press release]. <https://www.monroecounty.gov/files/sheriff/News%20Releases/2019/ROCTAC%20News%20Release%2002.28.19.pdf>



DETERMINE STAFFING AND FUNDING NEEDS

Staffing

BTAUs should be staffed by law enforcement personnel who have training and experience working with partners across the community. This may include personnel with experience in crisis intervention or officers with experience navigating the mental health system and social services. Those assigned to BTAUs should also receive training specifically on behavioral threat assessment research and best practices. All BTAU members should understand that tragedies can be prevented by recognizing and appropriately intervening when warning signs of targeted violence are present.

BTAUs may vary in size, as this preventive approach allows for scalability. An agency that lacks the resources to establish a BTAU could begin with a single, designated violence prevention officer who maintains the responsibility of gathering information and managing situations involving a potential for violence and who leverages assistance as needed. New BTAUs can also be established with a small, initial core team, which may develop in size and sophistication as additional resources become available. For example, at the time of this writing, the LAPD TMU was staffed with five case-carrying detectives and one officer-in-charge, an expansion from the TMU's original structure of three detectives and one supervisor.⁴

If resources allow, larger agency units can utilize multidisciplinary support to enhance the efforts of their law enforcement staff by including intelligence analysts, a staff psychologist, legal counsel, or liaison positions from other agencies (e.g., detailees from local courts, mental health systems, or school districts). For example, at the time of this writing, the NCSBI BeTA Unit is staffed by eight law enforcement personnel (one assistant special agent in charge and seven special agents) one intelligence analyst, two psychologists, and one social worker.⁵



Small
Agency



Medium
Agency



Large
Agency

⁴Bixler, B. S., Dunn, J., & Grundland, T. (2021). Operations of the Los Angeles Police Department Threat Management Unit and Crisis Support Response Section. In J. R. Meloy & J. Hoffmann (Eds.), *International Handbook of Threat Assessment* (2nd ed., pp. 454-470). Oxford University Press.

⁵Jones, N. T., & Gray, A. E. (2020). Threat assessment and management: Identifying the ethical and legal challenges within a law enforcement setting. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 7(1-2), 98-112.



Funding

At the time of this writing, there are grant programs at the state and federal levels created to support the establishment of BTAUs and related functions, including funds for behavioral threat assessment training and for the development of bystander reporting programs. For example, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) Grant Program is dedicated to enhancing the capabilities of local communities to prevent targeted violence and terrorism. TVTP grants support the DHS approach to violence prevention, which focuses on providing local communities with evidence-based tools to prevent violence while protecting civil rights, civil liberties, and privacy rights. The TVTP Grant Program is open to state, local, tribal, and territorial government agencies; institutions of higher education; and nonprofit organizations. The TVTP Grant Program has named “Enhancing Local Threat Assessment and Management Capabilities” as one of its top priorities.⁶

ESTABLISH A BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT POLICY

Establishing a BTAU policy within the broader agency’s policy allows the organization to establish the guiding principles and parameters of the program. The agency can articulate the legal authorities under which the unit will operate, specify unit objectives, and clarify the threshold for case initiation.

Drafting a written policy should begin with a policy statement, through which the agency will establish a shared vision of the program’s mission and ensure the BTAU members work within the program’s intended scope. Defining the parameters of the program can also assist an organization with educating the larger community and other interested partners on the purpose of behavioral threat assessment and the role community members play in prevention.

SAMPLE POLICY STATEMENT

[Name of agency/organization] is committed to [list objectives]. In support of that commitment, this policy specifically addresses the implementation of [name of BTAU], which will be dedicated to taking a proactive approach to the prevention of targeted violence in [community/jurisdiction]. Staffed by [operational makeup of BTAU], [name of BTAU]’s mission is to identify, assess, and manage individuals of concern within [community/jurisdiction] before the risk of potential violence escalates to physical harm. [Name of agency/organization] will achieve this mission by [describe BTAU approach/process].

⁶ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2024, May 20). *Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships: Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program*. <https://www.dhs.gov/tvtpgrants>



IDENTIFY UNIT OBJECTIVES

BTAU policies should ensure that the objectives of the unit align with the objectives of behavioral threat assessment. The primary objective of a behavioral threat assessment is prevention, not criminal prosecution. Although criminal prosecution may be required or warranted in certain instances (see STEP 5: Develop Risk Management Strategies), BTAUs should prioritize the assessment and management of risk as the unit's primary objective. Many cases may not involve a criminal violation but will still require action to assist an individual in crisis or mitigate the potential risk for violence.

As an example, Secret Service policy states that the primary objective of Secret Service Protective Intelligence investigations is to gather and evaluate information about potential risks to the people, places, and events the agency protects. Secret Service policy clearly establishes that investigating violations of federal criminal statute as part of a Protective Intelligence investigation is a secondary objective. Although BTAU objectives may differ based on the agency in which the unit resides, the primary objective of any BTAU should be violence prevention.

ESTABLISH THRESHOLDS FOR CASE INITIATION

BTAU policies should clearly establish the thresholds for initiating a behavioral threat assessment, and those thresholds should not be limited to criminal behaviors or direct threats. For example, while making a direct threat against the president would initiate a behavioral threat assessment, it is not the Secret Service's sole threshold. The Secret Service initiates a Protective Intelligence investigation when an individual displays a threatening or concerning direction of interest toward any person or place protected by the agency.

Similarly, a BTAU should initiate a behavioral threat assessment in response to **concerning behaviors**. Concerning behaviors include actions or communications by an individual that are troubling or inappropriate and indicate a potential risk of violence. Concerning behaviors exist along a continuum of criminal and non-criminal activities and may include escalating interpersonal disputes, grievances, concerning social media content, stalking and harassing, obsessions with violence, idolizing past attackers, fixating on people or locations, suicidal ideations, self-harm, unusual levels of aggression, threats, or other behaviors that elicit concerns for safety. As such, the threshold for initiating a behavioral threat assessment should include behaviors along this entire continuum, not only behaviors that have a criminal nexus. When criminal acts have occurred, the resulting criminal investigation will occur parallel to the behavioral threat assessment.

Early intervention is at the core of a BTAU's involvement in managing concerning behaviors, with an emphasis on guiding the outcome of the situation to an end that does not result in violence or other criminal behavior. In doing so, BTAUs must operate with an understanding of individual rights protected by the U.S. Constitution, including freedom of speech. Within the boundaries of these protections, BTAUs should operate with a low threshold of concern, promoting early intervention and de-escalation wherever possible.



SCENARIOS THAT MAY INITIATE A BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT

- Parents notify law enforcement that their 21-year-old son is driving to the state capital. They state he has recently grown paranoid about the government spying on him and say that he wants to speak to the governor.
- An individual shows up at her former workplace following a recent termination, stating that her former boss is going to “get what he deserves.”
- Police receive reports from a family member of a convicted felon who is in possession of firearms. After police arrest the individual for the federal weapons violation, a search of the felon’s person produces a handwritten list of names, including several family members and former coworkers.
- An individual who has a history of violent outbursts arrives at the home of his ex-wife, who has a restraining order filed against him. After unsuccessfully demanding to see his children, over whom the wife has full legal custody, he leaves the property while shouting, “I’ll be back, and I will get my children.”
- Coworkers notify law enforcement after they notice an individual is sharing songs and images on social media about violence and retribution. In the weeks prior, his work performance decreased drastically, and he began to withdraw socially from coworkers, with whom he had previously been friendly. On the day he posted the violent songs on social media, he did not show up to work.
- Concerned friends notify law enforcement that their friend has recently expressed growing dissatisfaction with the current political climate, and she feels motivated to “do something big” to bring attention to the problems. The friends reported the individual has recently started selling off her possessions and has stated that she “would rather die than see the country continue in its current state.”
- A school contacts local law enforcement about a student expressing fascination with a past school attacker. The student completed a school writing assignment about how he idolizes the school attacker and hopes to emulate him. The school has tried repeatedly to engage with the student’s parents, but they have been unresponsive.



STEP 2: CREATE OPERATIONAL PROTOCOLS AND PROCEDURES

BTAUs must establish protocols by which the units will operate. Documenting these procedures allows for a clear understanding of processes, roles, and responsibilities. Creating written protocols also promotes consistency and continuity while setting the stage for future program evaluation and development.

ESTABLISH STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

While agency policies establish the guiding principles and parameters of the behavioral threat assessment program (the “what”), standard operating procedures (SOPs) outline the stages of the BTAU’s daily operations (the “how”).

The SOPs should describe the roles and responsibilities of the BTAU as a whole, its individual members, and any associated community partners involved in the behavioral threat assessment process. The SOPs should account for each phase of the process (i.e., from receiving an initial report to closing a case) and identify actionable steps and tasks throughout. The SOPs should identify who is responsible for completing required actions at each step and the timeframe for each of those actions to be completed.



SOPs should also establish the frequency of BTAU meetings and by whom the meetings are led. The BTAU should convene regularly, regardless of whether any assessments are active.

Routine meetings (e.g., weekly or biweekly) ensure team cohesion and provide consistent opportunities for unit members to:

- review previous cases,
- participate in scenario-based exercises,
- receive training on relevant topics,
- make process improvement recommendations,
- identify resource shortfalls, and
- collectively examine trends in targeted violence.

It is also a best practice to review the established SOPs on a routine basis (e.g., quarterly or annually) to account for lessons learned, new techniques, and revised membership roles and responsibilities that may change as the BTAU matures.

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

- Describe the roles and responsibilities of the BTAU and its members/stakeholders
- Account for each phase of the behavioral threat assessment process
- Identify actionable steps to move through the process
- Identify who is responsible for completing required actions
- Identify a timeframe for when actions should be completed
- Establish frequency of team meetings and by whom the meetings are led



IMPLEMENT CENTRALIZED CASE ADMINISTRATION

A distinguishing feature of the Secret Service's behavioral threat assessment approach is that all cases are centrally administered by the Secret Service Protective Intelligence and Assessment Division (PID). Centralized case administration ensures standardization in initiating cases, gathering information, and managing cases over time. For instance, within the Secret Service, each case is centrally administered by special agents and intelligence analysts at Secret Service Headquarters in Washington, DC, while the investigative work for those cases is conducted by special agents in Secret Service Field Offices around the world, all of whom have been trained in behavioral threat assessment methodology. In other words, Secret Service field agents routinely conduct interviews, review records, write reports, make assessments, and employ behavioral management strategies, while those processes are centrally coordinated, reviewed, and documented at Secret Service Headquarters.

A centralized, dedicated staff provides BTAUs the ability to view a concerning incident in its entirety, ensure that concerning behaviors are assessed appropriately and consistently, and design effective management plans for individuals of concern. Centralized case administration further aids in the review of trends and the progression of concerning behaviors over time while also allowing the BTAU to direct and advise investigators who may not work on behavioral threat assessments as part of their normal duties. For example, the BTAU may require a patrol officer to conduct a welfare check or interview an individual of concern and then report back their findings. In these cases, the patrol officer should provide any documentation regarding the results of the encounter to the BTAU in accordance with the BTAU's requirements.

ENSURE PRIVACY PROTECTIONS

BTAUs must operate with a comprehensive understanding of individual rights to privacy with a particular focus on the handling and protection of personally identifiable information (PII). Agencies should consult with their counsel or privacy personnel knowledgeable about the applicable laws and regulations related to individual privacy within their jurisdiction. Some questions to consider regarding PII include, but are not limited to:

- What rules allow the BTAU to request from individuals information that would otherwise be protected?
- Where and how will the BTAU maintain documents and files (e.g., completed forms, case plans, and supporting documentation)?
- Who will have access to these files?
- How will the BTAU facilitate the sharing of information internally and externally with relevant agencies and partners while also ensuring appropriate protections of PII?



In addition to the above considerations, BTAUs should develop an understanding of the rules and laws that govern the sharing of information held by their community partners. For example, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) protects the privacy of individual health and medical information held by healthcare providers and healthcare businesses.⁷ Similarly, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects the privacy of individual education records held by education agencies and institutions receiving funds from any program administered by the U.S. Department of Education.⁸ Units should have a firm understanding of exactly what information these laws protect and what exceptions allow for sharing information when a risk to public safety exists. Even if mental health providers and local education agencies cannot share information with the BTAU, those agencies can receive whatever information the BTAU is authorized to share. Sharing information with these entities will inform the strategies used by the mental health providers and local education agencies to promote the wellbeing of individuals under their care.



CREATE ASSESSMENT FORMS

As the behavioral threat assessment proceeds, the BTAU will want to document all relevant information gathered during the assessment. Templated forms can be used to organize, prompt, and standardize information gathered during the behavioral threat assessment process. Using templated forms will also improve consistency and reliability in the behavioral threat assessment process by ensuring the same type and quality of information is gathered in each assessment.

It is important to remember that templated forms should be used as a starting point for

gathering and collecting information. These forms should not be considered all-inclusive and should allow the flexibility to make common-sense adjustments during the behavioral threat assessment process. For example, information learned during an interview may prompt additional follow-up questions not explicitly listed on an interview form.

⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d.). *Health Information Privacy*. <https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/index.html>

⁸ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Student Privacy at the U.S. Department of Education*. <https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/?src=fpcoc>



Assessment forms can facilitate the information gathering process by systematically capturing the following:

- basic identifiers of the individual of concern, the reporting party, potential targets, and potential parties to interview;
- information about the circumstances that brought the individual of concern to the attention of the BTAU;
- answers to the questions posed during interviews with the individual, as well as during corroborative interviews with others;
- potential sources for gathering additional information;
- individualized case management plans (see STEP 5: Develop Risk Management Strategies); and
- updates to case records if an individual returns to the BTAU's attention;
- details about each of NTAC's 20 *Assessment Themes*, including the individual's recent life stressors, concerning communications, and history of contact with law enforcement (see STEP 4: Gather Information to Assess for Risk).





STEP 3: IDENTIFY AND PROCESS REPORTS OF CONCERNING BEHAVIOR

BTAUs must establish avenues to receive reports of concerning behavior in the community, including internal and external agency referrals and bystander reporting from the public. Without clear channels for reporting, BTAUs may miss opportunities to identify and intervene with individuals of concern. Units must further have the capability to triage all reports for imminent threats to life or safety and respond accordingly. BTAUs may then triage reports for relevancy to the units' objectives and share information with parties external to the units as necessary.

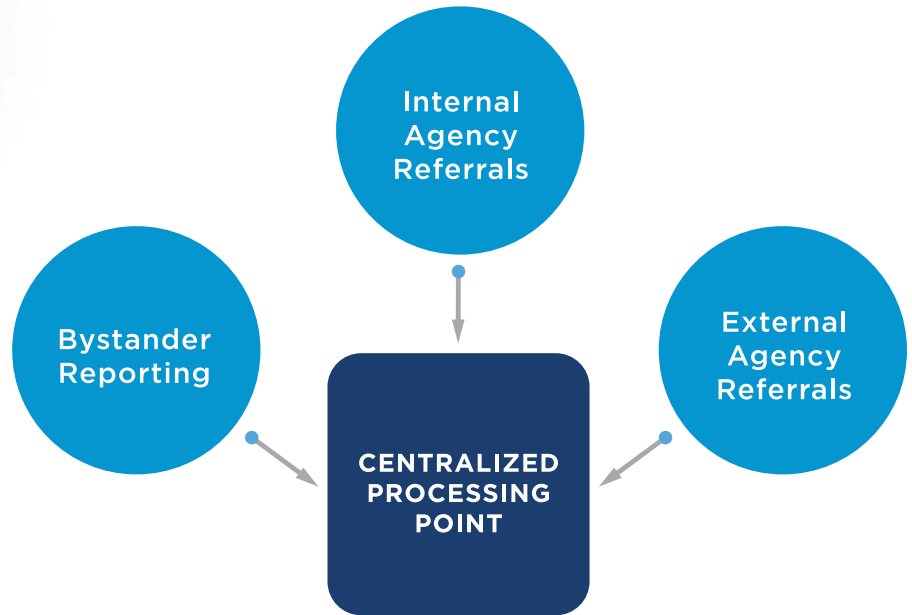
RECEIVE REPORTS AT A CENTRALIZED POINT

The Secret Service receives information relevant to the agency's protective mission from a variety of sources, including concerned bystanders, law enforcement agencies, and other organizations. Regardless of the source, all information with a Protective Intelligence nexus is collected and processed through a centralized operations center within the Secret Service. BTAUs will similarly receive reports of concerning behavior from within their own agency, members of the community, and outside law enforcement agencies and partner organizations, which should be routed to a centralized point for processing.



Bystander Reporting

In this framework, the term *bystander* is used to describe an individual who observes threatening or concerning behavior in another person and is able to report that behavior to the appropriate public safety professionals. Bystander reporting is a cornerstone of targeted violence prevention efforts. BTAUs may establish a centralized reporting mechanism or utilize an existing reporting program to facilitate bystander reporting.



To improve accessibility, reporting mechanisms should provide a variety of avenues for reporting, including smartphone apps, online web portals, dedicated email addresses, and tiplines. Programs should offer an anonymous or confidential reporting option, as research has shown that these features increase bystander reporting rates. Additionally, reporting mechanisms should be monitored 24/7, and all reports should elicit a response. Reporting systems must also be regularly promoted as a resource available to the public, making clear to bystanders that there is an avenue for them to report when they have concerns for the safety of themselves or others. If reporting programs are operated by another agency, the BTAU will want to ensure clear lines of communication to ensure timely forwarding of relevant reports.



Some states and fusion centers already have established programs for statewide reporting, which may serve as a resource for BTAUs or as a model for developing new reporting programs.⁹ For example, iWatchTexas is a public portal through which reports enter the Texas Suspicious Activity Reporting Network (TxSARNet) and the School Safety Network. These statewide reporting networks help provide a holistic view of terrorism, crime, and school safety-related suspicious activity and concerns in the State of Texas.¹⁰ Other states have bystander reporting systems designed specifically to support school safety, such as Safe2Tell Colorado. In addition to receiving tips about potential school violence, programs like Safe2Tell also receive tips about other concerning behaviors involving students, such as bullying, drug use, depression, suicide, and self-harm, all of which have been observed as common precursors to school violence.¹¹



Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs is a joint publication produced by the Secret Service and the Cybersecurity

and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). The toolkit outlines strategies for establishing and enhancing bystander reporting programs. While this toolkit was written primarily for K-12 school audiences, the principles presented are applicable to broader, community-based reporting mechanisms.

www.secretservice.gov/ntac

BYSTANDER REPORTING PROGRAMS

- Multiple avenues for reporting (e.g., smartphone apps, online web portals, dedicated email addresses, and tiplines)
- Anonymous/confidential reporting
- 24/7 monitoring
- Timely response to all reports

⁹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2024, January 19). "If You See Something, Say Something®": How to Report Suspicious Activity. <https://www.dhs.gov/see-something-say-something/how-to-report-suspicious-activity>

¹⁰ Texas Department of Public Safety. (2022). *iWatchTexas*. <https://iwatchtx.org/index.html>

¹¹ National Threat Assessment Center. (2021). *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.



Internal Agency Referrals

A BTAU should be a known, internal resource for all agency personnel and should provide clear instruction to all agency employees on the types of information that should be referred to the unit for assessment. For example, if a patrol officer is dispatched to conduct a welfare check and concerning behavior is identified as a result, the officer should know to report the concern to the BTAU for an assessment. Successful prevention requires all agency personnel to have familiarity with the program. In-service training opportunities designed to educate all members of the agency on the internal referral process can enhance clarity, improve consistency in implementation, and help build capacity across the agency.

Agencies may also choose to establish certain automated internal referrals that will initiate an assessment. For example, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) Threat Management Division has identified criteria for internal law enforcement reports to be automatically routed for review by PCSO analysts for possible threat management follow-up. These criteria include:

- evidence of targeted/planned violence toward people or property;
- direct or indirect threats of violence;
- physical or verbal intimidation (e.g., bullying);
- contextually inappropriate comments about harming others;
- stalking;
- arson;
- animal cruelty;
- fixation on mass murder, weapons, or violence;
- fixation on hate groups, terrorist activity, or extremist material;
- suicidal statements with an articulated plan and threats to others;
- statements regarding revenge for perceived injury or grievance;
- statements regarding a quest for justice;
- statements regarding a desire for notoriety; and
- statements regarding a desire to solve an unsolvable problem.

External Agency Referrals

Similarly, a BTAU should be a known resource for partner agencies and organizations in the local community. BTAUs will have to receive and respond to reports of concerning behavior submitted directly from other law enforcement agencies, workplaces, houses of worship, and schools. By conducting proactive outreach across the community (see STEP 6: Promote Continuous



Improvement and a Culture of Prevention), BTAUs can educate outside organizations about the BTAU; its ability to receive, assess, and manage reports of concerning behavior; and how to report concerning behavior or the potential for violence.

TRIAGE AND RESPOND TO IMMINENT THREATS TO LIFE

When reports of concerning behavior are received, the BTAU must be prepared to triage the information quickly and accurately with an initial focus on identifying and responding to imminent threats to life. In emergency situations where an imminent threat to life exists, mitigation of the threat takes precedence over the initiation of a behavioral threat assessment. For example, if coworkers report that an employee showed up armed to a meeting at which the employee expected to be terminated, then an immediate law enforcement response should be prioritized over a behavioral threat assessment. In such a scenario, the focus is on mitigating the physical threat and protecting the safety and wellbeing of everyone present. A behavioral threat assessment should take place only after the imminent risk is alleviated. Therefore, BTAUs should have established protocols for responding to reports indicating an imminent threat to life and should define at what point a behavioral threat assessment is incorporated into the process.

CONFIRM JURISDICTION AND SHARE INFORMATION

Part of the BTAU's initial processing of reports involves confirming jurisdiction and sharing information with the appropriate internal and external parties as needed. It is important that any information that may assist in protecting public safety is not unnecessarily siloed within the BTAU or the agency.

The BTAU should ensure that other components within its agency (e.g., criminal investigative units) are aware of reports relating to their respective missions. Likewise, the BTAU should ensure that reports and information it receives that relate to other geographic jurisdictions are shared with those jurisdictions' public safety personnel. For example, if a BTAU receives information about an individual of concern in a neighboring state, that information must be shared expeditiously with law enforcement agencies in that jurisdiction.

Sharing information with relevant parties can help the BTAU build and strengthen relationships both within its agency and with public safety partners in its community. This can foster an environment of trusted, proactive communication that may benefit the BTAU in its operations, including when seeking information for behavioral threat assessments or assistance in managing individuals of concern, and when responding to imminent threats of harm as described above.

INITIATE AN ASSESSMENT

After triaging reports for imminent threats to life and confirming BTAU jurisdiction, the BTAU must evaluate whether the reports and information received are relevant to the unit's mission and if the behavior described warrants an assessment.



At times, it may be determined that a report is unfounded and an assessment is not warranted. Foregoing an assessment should be reserved for scenarios when doing so is clearly articulable and defensible. Even for reports determined to be unfounded, the information should still be documented as future developments or reports may cause the BTAU to revise its assessment. Unfounded reports may also be relevant to other internal and external partners (e.g., fusion centers or federal law enforcement agencies), and the BTAU should have procedures in place for sharing this information as appropriate. Examples of unfounded reports that may require no further action from the BTAU include nuisance/prank reports and reports lacking any investigative avenues for gathering additional information, including unidentifiable anonymous threats. If a report is deemed actionable, the BTAU will initiate an assessment following the procedures described in STEP 4.





STEP 4: GATHER INFORMATION TO ASSESS FOR RISK

BTAUs should establish clearly defined protocols to guide their assessment process. Assessment is the process of collecting and analyzing information to understand threatening and concerning behavior in context. During this process, information will be gathered from a variety of community systems and should address the Assessment Themes identified by decades of NTAC research on targeted violence. Doing so ensures all relevant information is gathered and considered when assessing if an individual of concern poses a risk of violence while also identifying possible prevention strategies.

PRINCIPLES OF ASSESSMENT

Once a case has been initiated, the BTAU will begin gathering information to assess if the individual poses a risk of engaging in targeted violence. The information gathering process is intended to provide the BTAU with a comprehensive fact-based picture of the individual's behavioral history and current life circumstances and to enable the unit to make an objectively reasonable and articulable assessment of the potential for violence.



This approach is based on foundational principles identified by NTAC research and the Secret Service’s pioneering efforts in the field, which have established that behavioral threat assessment:

- utilizes a low threshold of concern,
- requires corroboration from diverse sources,
- emphasizes rapport building,
- is not profiling, and
- is not prediction.

PRELIMINARY INQUIRY VS. FULL ASSESSMENT

Following the BTAU’s initial processing (see STEP 3: Identify and Process Reports of Concerning Behavior), the unit will need to determine the scope of the behavioral threat assessment based on the information available. At this stage, some cases will receive a preliminary inquiry to determine whether a full assessment is warranted, while other cases may move immediately into a full assessment.

PRELIMINARY INQUIRY	FULL ASSESSMENT
• Gather as much information as necessary to establish context for reported concerns • Determine whether the case should be closed or if the case warrants a full assessment	• Gather all relevant information from all relevant sources • Comprehensively assess the risk posed by an individual • Identify strategies to mitigate risk



Preliminary Inquiry

For any actionable report of concerning behavior that meets the BTAU's criteria for opening a case, the minimum level of response would be an inquiry. An inquiry is itself a form of assessment, though limited in scope. The purpose of an inquiry is to gather as much information as necessary to establish context for the reported concerns, allowing the BTAU to determine the credibility of the report and whether the case should be closed or elevated for a full assessment. An inquiry may involve steps such as

- interviewing the reporting party,
- interviewing the individual of concern,
- conducting a corroborative interview with someone who knows the individual well,
- conducting a criminal records check, and
- conducting a preliminary review of publicly available online activity (e.g., social media).



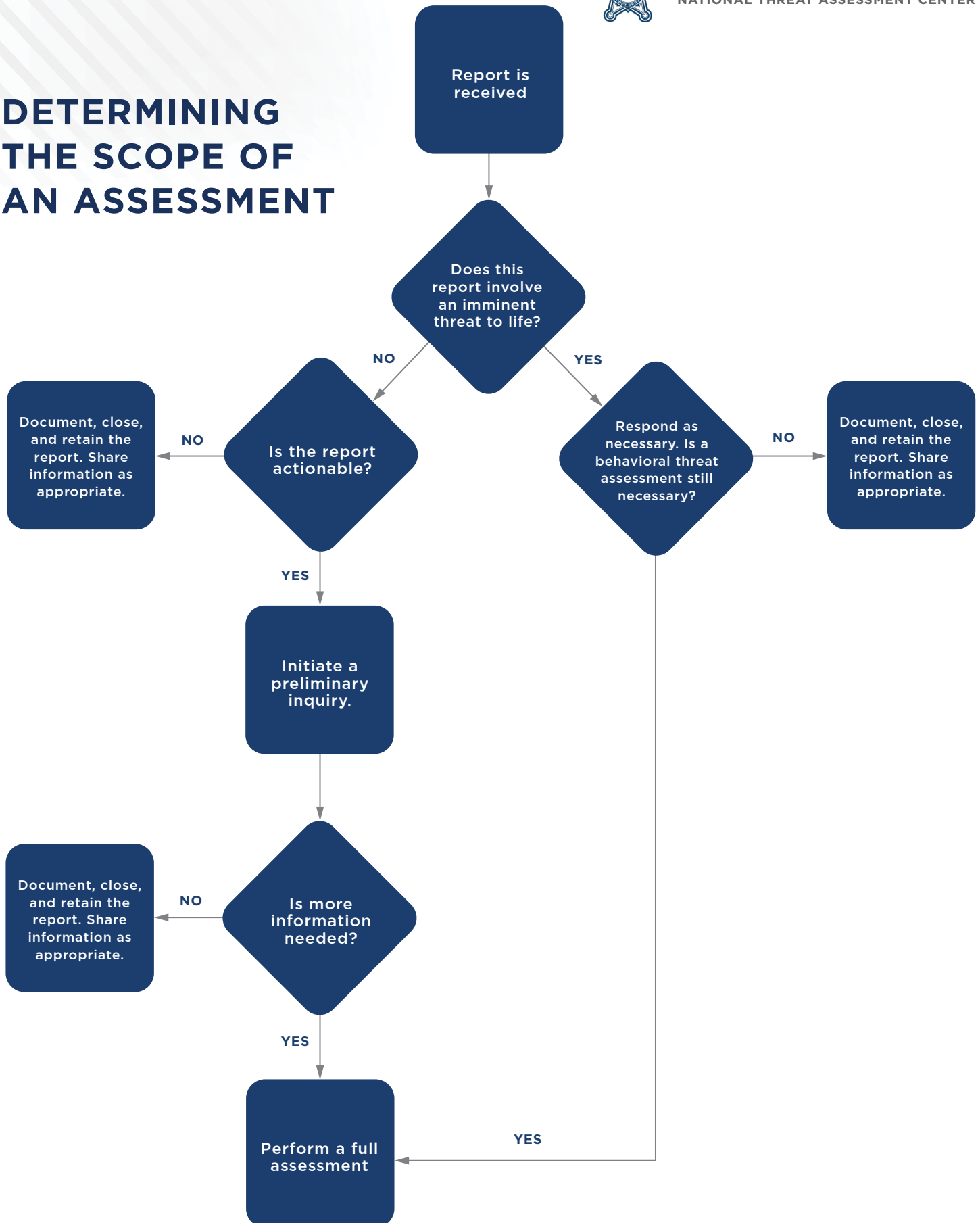
At the conclusion of an inquiry, the BTAU may decide to either close the case or elevate it to a full assessment. The rationale for the decision to close a case or elevate it for further assessment should be documented. Like other decision points in a behavioral threat assessment, this determination should be objectively reasonable and articulable, taking into account the totality of all relevant information along with the training and experience of the BTAU members.

Full Assessment

Full assessments are initiated when safety concerns are elevated by the result of an inquiry or when the content of the initial report on its own justifies a full assessment. The goal of a full assessment is to gather all relevant information from a range of sources in order to comprehensively assess the risk posed by an individual while also identifying potential strategies to mitigate that risk. A full assessment should involve an extensive interview with the individual of concern, multiple corroborative interviews (e.g., family, friends, neighbors, employers, and classmates), records checks (e.g., criminal, employment, educational, and mental health), reviews of online activity (e.g., social media and personal websites), and physical searches. Physical searches should be conducted in accordance with existing protocols and may involve plain-view searches, searches conducted with consent of the individual, or searches conducted with a warrant, depending on the circumstances.



DETERMINING THE SCOPE OF AN ASSESSMENT





THE SYSTEMS APPROACH

Secret Service research pioneered the **Systems Approach** to behavioral threat assessment when it published *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide for State and Local Law Enforcement Officials* in 1998. The guide describes how examining the “systems (family, work, community, criminal justice, mental health, and social services) that the individual is involved with are key to assessing and managing a potential threat.”¹² Gathering information from a variety of community systems will provide BTAUs with an organized and comprehensive way to assess an individual’s thinking and behavior.



The Systems Approach operationalizes how people tend to exhibit different behaviors in different environments. An individual’s communications and behaviors will often adapt to the context of their current situation. For example, individuals may act differently when visiting family compared to how they act in a meeting with coworkers. Therefore, gathering information from various community systems provides a more comprehensive and reliable assessment of an individual’s behavior than would be possible by only focusing on a single area of their life.

¹²Fein, R. A., & Vossekuil, B. (1998). *Protective Intelligence and Threat Assessment Investigations: A Guide For State and Local Law Enforcement Officials*. U.S. Department of Justice. <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/protective-intelligence-threat-assessment-investigation-guide-state-and-local>



Utilizing the Systems Approach also allows BTAUs to corroborate information as it is gathered and make note of any inconsistencies or anomalies they identify.

Another benefit of the Systems Approach is that it allows BTAUs to connect pieces of information that are traditionally siloed. Often, communities in the United States identify warning signs for acts of targeted violence after violence has already taken place. In some cases, attackers had demonstrated concerning behavior at home, at work, in school, and online, but no program existed to examine all those behaviors together.

Additionally, information gathered from community systems can help to show changes in behavior over time. For example, if a supervisor from an individual's current workplace provides a starkly different description of the individual compared to a supervisor from a prior workplace, the BTAU may seek to identify any traumatic events or other situational factors that occurred during the timeframe of the individual's current employment that could explain the dramatic change in behavior.

Community systems fall into two general categories: formal and informal.

Formal Systems

Formal systems are structured organizations or groups that tend to maintain a physical location and records. Examples include judicial, law enforcement, employment, mental health, and education systems. In these types of systems, there are often formal records that document an individual's history of interaction with the systems (e.g., judicial records or education records). While such records can provide vital information for a behavioral threat assessment, it must also be noted that formal records sometimes lack context for explaining an individual's behavior and rarely tell the whole story. For example, a student may have a long history of eliciting safety concerns among teachers and classmates at a university, but there may be little documentation in their university education record regarding the concerning behavior or any interventions applied. As another example, a man with a long history of stalking and harassing women may have a law enforcement record reflecting only a single charge of trespassing without any additional details about the months of behavior that led to the charge.

BTAUs should seek access to records from formal systems when authorized and in accordance with all relevant privacy protections. BTAUs may be able to access records from other law enforcement agencies, courts, and community organizations. However, any information gathered should be further supplemented through appropriate interviews. For example, if a BTAU obtains information through a police record provided by another agency, the BTAU may want to establish further context around the information by contacting the police department and officers who have previously interacted with the individual or by requesting more detailed police reports about those interactions.



Informal Systems

Informal systems represent the less structured environments with which an individual routinely interacts, including family, friends, neighbors, and other community groups. Unlike formal systems, informal systems rarely maintain records about an individual and instead provide information most often through interviews. Interviews with informal systems provide BTAUs with the perspective of those who have maintained close or frequent relationships with the individual, sometimes over many years.

Online activity represents another informal system from which to obtain information to guide a behavioral threat assessment. BTAUs should have protocols in place for evaluating open-source online information, including publicly available social media and other publicly available information (e.g., posted pictures, videos, communications, or shared files). If visible, social media content may provide insight into an individual's behavior, mindset, interests, and activities, all of which are useful when assessing an individual's risk of engaging in violence. BTAUs should also establish protocols for information gathering using popular search engines, which can reveal things such as personal websites and instances when an individual appeared in media coverage. Partner agencies and fusion centers may employ specialized analysts who can assist BTAUs in open-source information gathering.

INTERVIEWS AND RAPPORT BUILDING

Initial Interview

When the Secret Service conducts a behavioral threat assessment, one of the earliest steps will involve an initial interview with the individual of concern. For BTAUs, the initial interview provides an opportunity to engage with the individual, directly observe their behavior, and gain insight into their mindset while also beginning to identify factors that indicate whether the individual does or does not pose a risk of violence. In addition to observing the individual's general thinking and state of mind, the BTAU should prioritize open-ended questions regarding each of the Assessment Themes identified later in this section.

The initial interview is also an early opportunity to begin establishing rapport with the individual. Because behavioral threat assessments are not the same as criminal investigations, the initial interview will often take place outside of police custody and only with the consent of the participating individual. Rapport building is a key element in establishing a positive relationship that can help the individual being interviewed to feel at ease while sharing information. In many cases, an individual of concern may be experiencing a personal crisis or other stressful event. Being receptive to the individual's needs will help establish a foundation of trust, which can then be used to help motivate changes in behavior.



STRATEGIES FOR RAPPORT BUILDING DURING INTERVIEWS

- Explain your role, the purpose of the interview, and next steps using plain language. Be clear, direct, and truthful, and clarify any misconceptions.
- Maintain a calm, respectful demeanor for the entire interaction, not just while asking questions.
- Prepare strategies for responding to extreme or emotional responses (e.g., aggression, sadness, or silence).
- Invite the individual to provide their perspective. Be respectful and patient if they are not interested in speaking at first.
- Offer realistic choices during the interview, when possible. The more the individual feels in control of how the interview time is spent, the more they may want to talk.
- Use the time to explore the individual's interests, relationships, past experiences, future plans, concerns, and coping skills.
- Provide an opportunity for the individual to suggest ways they can be supported in order to prevent the situation from escalating further.

BTAUs can maintain a positive rapport with individuals of concern while also establishing firm and professional boundaries around public safety. For example, a statement such as, “We are concerned that you might hurt someone, and we want to work with you to figure out a better way forward,” communicates an expectation for safe and nonviolent behavior and demonstrates a willingness to provide support. Approaches like this can help to dissuade someone from considering violence and create further opportunity for rapport building.

If officer safety allows, interviews with individuals of concern should be conducted face-to-face in order to observe nonverbal cues and physical reactions to questions. If conducted at the individual's residence, officers will have an opportunity to observe the individual's living conditions and home environment. At the conclusion of the interview, the individual may be advised of next steps and any lawful requirements they must adhere to (e.g., if they are the subject of a restraining order).



BTAUs should consult with their legal counsel to determine if an interview will take place in police custody and if the individual needs to be informed of their constitutional (“Miranda”) rights against self-incrimination.



Corroborative Interviews

The initial interview with the individual of concern should be followed by corroborative interviews with other people across the individual's formal and informal systems. These interactions provide opportunities for the BTAU to gather new information about the individual's behaviors from people who know them and to corroborate information already identified in the assessment. For example, when conducting a behavioral threat assessment involving the potential for workplace violence, the BTAU may conduct corroborative interviews with the individual's coworkers and supervisor, in addition to the individual's close family members. For an assessment involving a student who threatened a school attack, the BTAU would likely interview the student's parents, the student's teachers, other school staff, and possibly classmates.

Establishing rapport continues to be important when engaging with the individual's family, friends, and other support networks. The people in these systems should be made aware that the BTAU's primary goal is to prevent negative outcomes, in part by getting help for their loved one, friend, or colleague.

ASSESSMENT THEMES

While gathering information from the subject's formal and informal systems, BTAUs should focus on exploring each of NTAC's 20 **Assessment Themes**. Assessment Themes are not intended to be used as a checklist. The purpose of Assessment Themes is to provide a broad scope through which to understand an individual's behavior and the context in which they are operating. These themes have been identified by decades of Secret Service research examining targeted violence in a variety of forms, including acts of mass violence targeting public spaces in the United States. Assessment Themes are based on frequently observed or particularly noteworthy factors in the backgrounds of those who have engaged in previous acts of targeted violence. Gathering this information will allow the BTAU to assess if the individual poses a risk of violence and plan the interventions needed to mitigate that risk.

Information about Assessment Themes should be gathered using the Systems Approach described previously, namely through records checks, an interview with the individual of concern, corroborative interviews with others, and a review of open-source social media. For example, BTAUs could identify a history of stalking and harassment both through an examination of criminal records and interviews with people who know the individual of concern. Similarly, BTAUs could identify concerning communications both through interviews and through an examination of the individual's open-source social media posts.

Examining each of these Assessment Themes will provide the BTAU with comprehensive information to assess if the individual poses a risk of violence by identifying the *contextual themes* that may impact the individual's thinking and behavior, the *behavioral themes* they have exhibited, and the *summative themes* that must be considered as part of an overall assessment. Exploring each theme is necessary for a thorough assessment and may uncover other avenues of inquiry.



Keep in mind that there is no need to wait until the BTAU has completed all interviews or addressed every theme before taking action. As soon as an area for intervention is identified, suitable management strategies should be enacted.

➤ The Assessment Themes identified here are not individually predictors of violence but are factors that should be evaluated in context when conducting a behavioral threat assessment. Further, some of the identified themes involve activities that are protected by the Constitution and should be viewed with those protections in mind.





STRESSORS

Significant setbacks, losses, and other life challenges that may be acute (e.g., romantic breakups) or chronic (e.g., ongoing medical conditions). Stressors can be experienced across several life domains, including family/romantic relationships, social interactions, work or school environments, personal health, legal actions, and other identified areas. Specific examples include being bullied or harassed by others, financial instability, job loss, divorce or child custody issues, and failed life aspirations.

HOME LIFE

Family dynamics or home environments that negatively impact an individual, including family discord, abuse, drug use, criminality, domestic violence, mental/physical health concerns, death, and dissolution of relationships. Conversely, positive home life factors may include supportive families, healthy relationships, and other dynamics that could support intervention strategies to mitigate risk.

MENTAL HEALTH

Current or previous history of mental health symptoms that negatively impact the individual, particularly when left untreated, including paranoia, delusions, hallucinations, depression, and suicidality. Mental health history may or may not include prior formal diagnoses, hospitalizations, and treatment (e.g., prescription medication).

CRIMINAL HISTORY

A history of criminal behaviors identified in formal records, including arrests, convictions, and other legal actions. Criminal history may also include other criminal behavior and contacts with law enforcement and the courts that have not resulted in official legal actions. Criminal behavior outside of formal records may be identified during the assessment through interviews with family, friends, coworkers, classmates, and others familiar with the individual.

INTERPERSONAL DIFFICULTIES

A pattern of strained or conflicted relationships with family members, romantic partners, friends, coworkers, classmates, neighbors, or other members of the community. Interpersonal difficulties may include an inability to form or sustain positive relationships with others due to the individual's inappropriate or concerning behaviors.

LACK OF CONSEQUENCES

A pattern of engaging in criminal or inappropriate behavior for which the consequences were either absent or not commensurate with the behavior. Examples of past behaviors that may not have received appropriate consequences could include threatening communications, domestic violence, physical/sexual assaults, inappropriate touching of others, stalking, and harassment.

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CONCERNING OR THREATENING COMMUNICATIONS

Any violent, threatening, or disturbing communications which may be conveyed verbally (e.g., in-person or via phone), in writing (e.g., journals or drawings), electronically (e.g., text messages or emails), online (e.g., websites, blogs, or social media), or by other means. The content of the concerning communications may reveal information on threats, grievances, violent intention, feelings of hopelessness/suicidality, obsessions, paranoid thinking, or a fascination with violence or weapons.

INTEREST IN VIOLENT TOPICS

An unusual or excessive interest in weapons, violence, gore, prior attacks, notorious killers, or other concerning topics. Fascination with weapons and violence can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, including stockpiling or manufacturing weapons, being described as obsessed with weapons, consuming or producing violent or graphic media, and writing stories or lyrics indicating a desire to harm others. Particular concern should arise if the individual demonstrates an idolization of or desire to emulate past attackers.

HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

Prior acts of physical violence against people, animals, or property that may appear in criminal records or may be observed or experienced by others, including physical and sexual assaults, domestic/family violence, animal cruelty, aggressively menacing behaviors, or arsons. A history of violence may reveal signs of an escalation in aggressive behavior, for example, moving from property crimes to crimes against persons.

STALKING, HARASSING, OR BULLYING

A pattern of conduct that willfully and maliciously causes another to feel bullied, stalked, persecuted, threatened, injured, or attacked. The victim of this behavior may or may not have a pre-existing relationship with the individual of concern. Examples of victims with a pre-existing relationship to the individual include romantic partners, family members, coworkers, classmates, or neighbors, while those without a prior relationship may include elected officials, government employees, or celebrities.

EXTREME BELIEFS

Extreme ideological, political, or conspiratorial beliefs that advocate hate or violence, form the basis of an individual's worldview or significantly influence an individual's daily life. Extreme beliefs may be based on distortion of facts (e.g., conspiracy theories) or may advocate distrust, hatred, or the use of violence targeting others based on biases against a particular race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity.

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FIXATIONS

An intense or obsessive preoccupation with a person, event, activity, or belief to the point where it negatively impacts aspects of an individual's life. Fixations often carry an angry or emotional undertone and may be evidenced through an individual's extreme beliefs, grievances, interest in violence or weapons, and stalking or harassing behaviors.

BEHAVIOR CHANGES

Changes in behavior observable to others, including notable shifts in mental, social, occupational, physical, or interpersonal functioning. This may be evidenced through changes in mood, appearance, or hygiene; withdrawing or isolating from others; new or increased substance use; sudden aggressive, violent, or threatening behavior; changes in work or school attendance or performance; signs of depression or paranoia; or other uncharacteristic actions that demonstrate a distinct change from an individual's baseline behavior.

DESPERATION OR DESPAIR

Feeling hopeless, despondent, desperate, or out of options. An individual's inability to perceive an improvement in their situation may lead to feelings of extreme distress, depression, frustration, and the perception that violence is the only option to cope with their circumstances.

INTENSE ANGER OR AGGRESSION

A pattern of intense or escalating anger or aggression that is observed through the individual's behavior, communication, or reported feelings. This may be marked by impulsive angry outbursts, significant overreaction to circumstances or events, or frequent episodes of verbal or physical aggression directed at others.

INCONSISTENCY

Evidence of unusual inconsistencies in an individual's communications and behaviors that may occur across the various community systems in their lives, including how they behave at work, home, school, or in social or romantic contexts. When inconsistencies are found, these may be indicative of efforts to conceal violent intentions or behavior.

PLANNING AND FINAL ACTS

Specific steps taken to prepare to carry out an act of violence, including researching, visiting, or following potential targets; researching, manufacturing, acquiring, or practicing with weapons; documenting preparations for an attack through hit lists, to-do lists, maps, or manifestos; researching prior attacks and tactics; developing attack plans; researching logistical concerns; or using deceptive practices to hide activities. Individuals may also engage in final acts intended to make a statement or to prepare for their inevitable arrest or death. These acts may include drafting a last will and testament, making financial arrangements for family members, leaving farewell messages or notes, posting goodbye messages online, and selling or giving away personal possessions.

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MOTIVE

The reason(s) why the individual engaged in the behavior that elicited concern or brought them to the attention of law enforcement. Motive also includes assessing the reasons that may drive an individual to carry out an act of violence. Motives may be multifaceted and include retaliating for grievances or perceived wrongs (e.g., bullying, failed romantic relationships, or workplace issues); furthering ideological, bias-related, or political beliefs; acting in response to psychotic symptoms; having a desire to kill; achieving fame or notoriety; or committing suicide-by-cop.

ELICITED CONCERN IN OTHERS

The individual's behaviors or communications have caused fear, alarm, worry, or distress in those who observed them. Particular attention should be paid to whether others are in fear for their safety as a result of the individual's behavior. Family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors, law enforcement, mental health professionals, and others may have been concerned about an individual's demeanor, mental wellbeing, threatening or disturbing communications, harassing or other violent behavior, obsession with weapons or violent topics, isolating or withdrawing from others, substance use or abuse, or other concerning behaviors.

ACCESS TO WEAPONS

Current or future ability to access weapons that could be used to cause harm, including firearms, bladed weapons, explosives, chemicals, or poisons. Access to weapons may include those that are readily available to the individual in their home, whether secured or unsecured, as well as those accessible in the homes of relatives or friends.



Contextual Themes

Contextual themes represent significant elements of an individual's personal circumstances and surroundings which may negatively impact their thinking and behavior. Some of these Assessment Themes have their own body of existing research examining their impact on an individual, and prior NTAC research has found that many past attackers had experienced substantial negative experiences related to these contextual themes as well. Gathering both positive details (e.g., caring and supportive family) and negative details (e.g., familial discord and violence) about these factors will establish the context of past, present, and impending circumstances within which the individual of concern is operating and will inform the BTAU's intervention strategies.

Behavioral Themes

Central to assessing whether an individual poses a risk of targeted violence is understanding the nature of concerning behaviors commonly observed in previous attackers. While the presence of these behaviors alone cannot predict if an individual will become violent, it will inform the final assessment and management strategies employed by BTAUs. For example, if an assessment reveals an individual is fixated on past attackers, has grown increasingly isolated, has posted concerning violent content on social media, and has been researching upcoming public gatherings, the BTAU will need to develop the appropriate strategies to manage the risk the individual may pose toward public spaces or other potential targets.

Contextual Themes

- Stressors
- Home life
- Mental health
- Criminal history
- Interpersonal difficulties
- Lack of consequences

Behavioral Themes

- Concerning or threatening communications
- Interest in violent topics
- History of violence
- Stalking, harassing, or bullying
- Extreme beliefs
- Fixations
- Behavior changes
- Desperation or despair
- Intense anger or aggression
- Inconsistency
- Planning and final acts



Summative Themes

Summative themes represent key questions that must be answered as part of an overall assessment. BTAUs will be better equipped to make an informed assessment of risk if they have identified what is, or could be, motivating someone to become violent. They will also need to understand if the people who know or have had contact with the individual have been concerned, especially if their concern is related to safety. Lastly, BTAUs will need to assess if the individual has the means and capability to cause harm by gathering information about the weapons the individual has access to or could potentially obtain.

Summative Themes

- Motive
- Elicited concern in others
- Access to weapons

MAKE AN ASSESSMENT OF RISK

As information is gathered from interviews, records, and other sources, the BTAU must assess whether an individual does or does not pose a risk of violence, while also thinking about what intervention is required to move the individual toward a more positive outcome. The BTAU should make this assessment by considering all the information gathered about the Assessment Themes using the Systems Approach, while also considering any other situational factors.

When assessing for risk, the BTAU should not focus solely on whether a person *made* a threat, but whether a person *poses* a threat. In other words, while explicit threats are relevant to assessing risk, they are not the sole indicator for whether a person may become violent and, as such, should not be treated as a threshold for concern by public safety officials. This distinction is based on decades of NTAC research that demonstrates that many attackers do not make explicit threats of violence prior to an attack. Therefore, the central question in behavioral threat assessment is—***Does the individual of concern pose a risk of violence at this time?***



When assessing for risk, the BTAU should not focus solely on whether a person *made* a threat, but whether a person *poses* a threat.

Even if the individual does not appear to pose a risk of violence at this time, the BTAU may decide to implement some management strategies to support the individual's wellbeing and prevent the situation from escalating. Throughout an assessment, it is essential that units continuously assess any potential changes in the threat posed by the individual of concern. For instance, new



information may be uncovered regarding an impending stressor that could have a triggering effect on the individual, or information could be found on previously unknown planning behaviors that indicate the individual is considering violence.

LEVELS OF RISK

While not Secret Service practice, BTAUs may explore classifying their assessments into levels of risk (e.g., low risk, medium risk, and high risk) if needed for case prioritization and management. In doing so, BTAUs should ensure that each classification level is clearly defined and articulable (e.g., clarifying the distinction between low and medium risk) in order to avoid confusion and inconsistencies across assessments. The BTAU's protocols should allow for the unit to deviate from the prescribed levels of risk, if needed, based on any unique circumstances identified during the assessment. Protocols should also allow for implementing risk management resources to all cases, including those deemed low risk.

Assessments should be based on an objectively reasonable and articulable assessment of the potential for violence, taking into account all available information identified by the BTAU. The unit should document the decision and its justification with facts and details identified during the assessment. Based on the results of the assessment, the BTAU will then determine how to manage the risk of violence through interventions and supports, as described in STEP 5.

STRUCTURED PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT TOOLS

While not Secret Service practice, BTAUs may explore the use of structured professional judgment (SPJ) tools to support their process of assessing risk and developing a management plan. SPJs are instruments that can be used by trained personnel to measure the level of risk posed by an individual and may offer management considerations to reduce risk. BTAUs should ensure that any tools incorporated into their behavioral threat assessment process have established evidence of reliability and validity for assessing the risk of targeted violence, specifically, and that the BTAU's protocols allow for the unit members to deviate from the structured tool, if needed, based on their operational law enforcement training and experience.



STEP 5: DEVELOP RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

When individuals of concern are assessed as posing a risk of violence, BTAUs must work to manage the risk and reduce the likelihood of a violent outcome. Along with more traditional law enforcement action, these efforts will often involve identifying the needs of the individual and the community resources available to address those needs. The process of managing risk includes case planning, implementation, monitoring, and, eventually, case closure.

PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT

In behavioral threat assessment, **management** refers to the strategies and efforts pursued by a BTAU with the goal of reducing the likelihood of a violent outcome. Management efforts may include short-term strategies that begin immediately upon receipt of information that indicates a safety concern, as well as long-term strategies driven by the assessment and other situational factors. BTAUs will need to develop and document strategies to address the factors that are contributing to the individual's desire or potential to cause harm.



The concept of management is rooted in the same principles as other intervention-based models of prevention in that the goal is for the BTAU to act in ways that reduce the potential for a negative outcome while increasing the likelihood of a positive outcome. In behavioral threat assessment, management strategies for a case are constructed around the known factors that appear to make an individual more or less likely to engage in violent behavior. When those factors are revealed by an assessment, the BTAU can implement strategies aimed at reducing the negative factors of concern, while increasing any identified factors that are positive. The management phase of a behavioral threat assessment:

- is a systematic risk management approach and
- provides an avenue for early intervention.

Whenever possible, the BTAU should include the individual of concern and their support network (e.g., family and friends) in the process of developing an effective case management plan. Maintaining a positive and collaborative rapport with the individual and their support systems will aid in the success of the management approach.

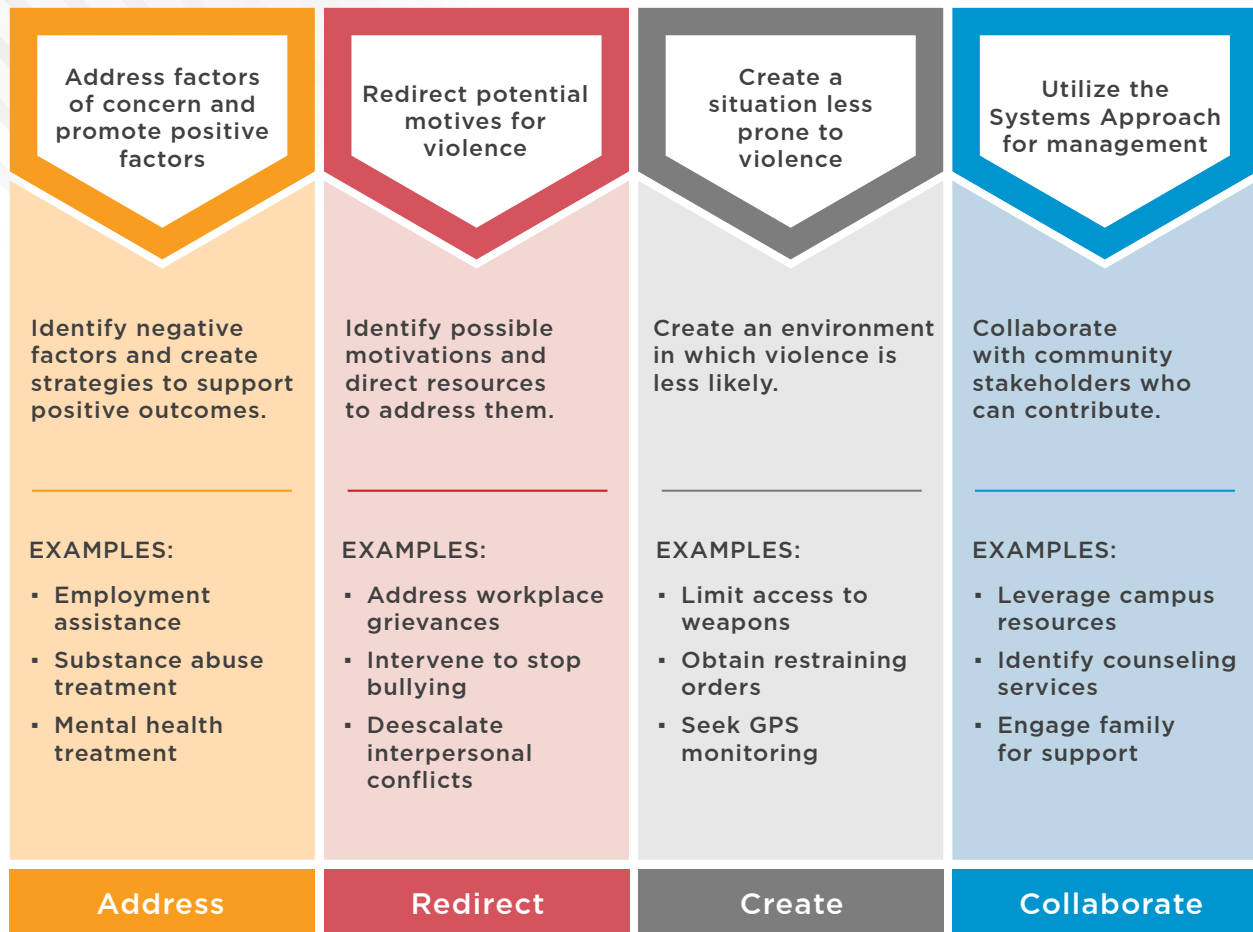
MANAGEMENT PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

The planning phase of management requires the BTAU to identify strategies to reduce the risk of violence and to address the identified needs of the individual. The BTAU should set clear expectations and actionable goals to create a comprehensive plan that can be executed and evaluated for success following implementation. There are four elements that should guide the management of concerning behavior during a behavioral threat assessment. BTAUs should take steps to:

- address factors of concern and promote positive factors,
- redirect potential motives for violence,
- create a situation less prone to violence, and
- utilize the Systems Approach for management.



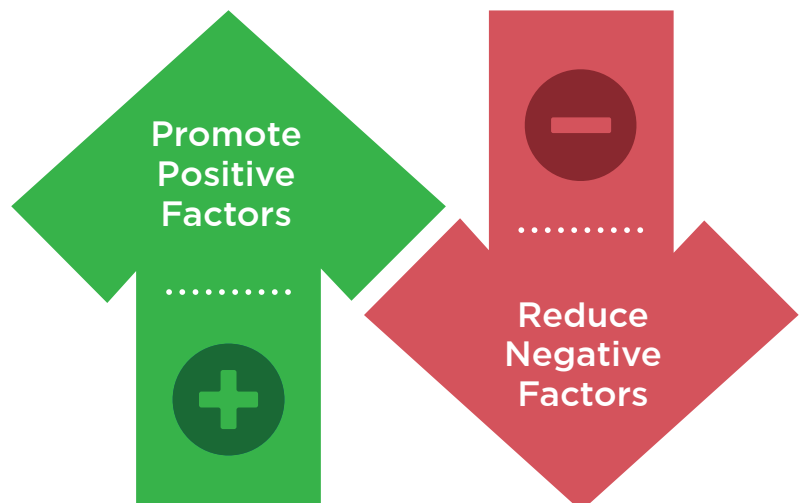
Management may also involve elements of physical security or physical protection for a person or location at risk; however, those efforts fall outside the scope of this guidance. BTAUs should work with their relevant law enforcement and security partners to ensure the physical security of people and places that may be potential targets.



Address Factors of Concern and Promote Positive Factors

BTAUs should adopt a prevention mindset and work to address those factors that appear to make violence more likely while promoting any factors in an individual's life that would reduce the likelihood of violence. This approach should be tailored specifically to the individual and the factors identified utilizing the Systems Approach and the Assessment Themes described in STEP 4.

For example, a BTAU may learn that an individual who threatened violence is experiencing alcohol dependency and recently lost a job but also has a supportive family and is receptive to receiving assistance. In this case, the BTAU could connect the individual with a local employment assistance program and an alcohol abuse program while also leveraging the support of the individual's family members.





Redirect Potential Motives for Violence

Prior NTAC research has identified common motives for those who have planned or perpetrated acts of targeted violence. For example, in a study examining mass attacks in public spaces, NTAC found that such attacks were most commonly motivated by grievances (e.g., personal, workplace, or domestic), ideologies/racial bias, symptoms of psychosis (e.g., paranoia or delusions), desire to kill, and seeking fame or notoriety.¹³ Motives are often multifaceted, and an individual's desire to act violently may not be driven by one factor in isolation. Therefore, the BTAU should work to identify the relevant factors contributing to the motivation for violent behavior and then take steps to redirect those motives to more appropriate prosocial behavior and, ultimately, positive outcomes.

Redirecting motives requires strategic use of resources to mitigate factors of concern, such as resources to mediate interpersonal grievances, counseling to build better problem-solving strategies, mental health treatment, or other social services that can address the circumstances driving the individual's behavior. For example, if a BTAU determines an individual has been harassing neighbors following a land use dispute, the BTAU may be able to identify a community-based mediation resource to help reconcile the disagreement.

Create a Situation Less Prone to Violence

Risk management strategies should work to create a situation less prone to violence. One way to create a less volatile situation is to limit access to weapons when permissible under legal and constitutional protections. NTAC research has shown that nearly three-quarters (73%) of mass attacks in the United States involved firearms, and over one-quarter (29%) of the attackers who used firearms met at least one criterion that federally prohibited them from purchasing or possessing a firearm.¹⁴ In addition to existing federal laws, state law may establish additional restrictions on firearm possession. For this reason, it is important for the BTAU to consider if an individual is in possession of a firearm and, if so, whether that possession is legal. Depending on the nature of the firearm possession, there are three primary strategies for limiting access, which include seeking voluntary storage, pursuing court-ordered removal, and enforcing existing firearms prohibitions.

Voluntary storage:

Voluntary out-of-home storage of firearms is an informal process that does not involve a court order. With this strategy, an individual agrees to temporarily store their firearm with a trusted family member, friend, or participating storage facility (e.g., gun retailer or police department) for safekeeping. Having a positive rapport with an individual of concern can be helpful in encouraging voluntary out-of-home storage. This strategy can be helpful for BTAUs operating in a state where there are no avenues for court-ordered removal or situations in which the criteria for court ordered removal have not been met.

¹³ National Threat Assessment Center. (2023). *Mass Attacks in Public Spaces: 2016 – 2020*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

¹⁴ National Threat Assessment Center. (2023). *Mass Attacks in Public Spaces: 2016 – 2020*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.



Court-ordered removal:

Some states have implemented extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs), also known as red flag laws, which allow for certain individuals (e.g., law enforcement or family members) to petition for the temporary confiscation of firearms from an individual of concern if the court agrees that the individual poses a risk of harm to themselves or others. ERPOs follow procedural due process to protect the rights of gun owners while providing an important public safety tool for communities to limit access to firearms in cases where an individual poses an articulable risk of violence.

Enforce existing firearms laws:

Another strategy for limiting access to weapons is to enforce existing laws designed to keep firearms from individuals who are not legally permitted to possess them. NTAC research has found that many mass attacks in the United States involved a firearm that was illegally possessed at the time of the attack. Federal law has established several longstanding prohibiting factors that make it unlawful for certain individuals to purchase or possess a firearm, including a prior felony conviction, a dishonorable discharge from the military, and being the subject of a current restraining order. Other noteworthy prohibiting factors include illegal drug use within the past year and any prior conviction for a crime of domestic violence (felony or misdemeanor). All law enforcement and other public safety officials must be aware of these restrictions, as well as any additional state or local restrictions, and should take steps to ensure these laws are enforced.

In some instances, an individual of concern may not own or have access to firearms but may reside with someone who does. In these instances, the BTAU should speak with the owner and encourage them to reduce the individual's ability to access the weapons. If the owner is unwilling to remove the firearms from the home, the BTAU should discuss safe gun storage to ensure the firearms remain in a locked safe and to ensure the individual of concern does not have access to the combination or keys. Law enforcement can also educate all parties involved regarding any legal restrictions on allowing firearms access to individuals who are prohibited from possession under federal law.

Although the goal of a behavioral threat assessment is not criminal prosecution, there are times when arrest and prosecution are necessary. When the BTAU is made aware of an incident involving a threat with a weapon, physical violence, stalking, harassment, or other criminal behaviors, criminal charges may play a critical role in ensuring public safety. In these cases, the BTAU may work with the justice system to pursue conditions for pretrial release or probationary requirements. If criminal charges result in new firearms possession prohibitions (e.g., domestic violence conviction or felony conviction), the BTAU should work to ensure that any firearms are confiscated in accordance with existing federal law.



As previously noted, this guidance is not intended to provide a framework for providing physical security. BTAUs should be prepared, however, to work within their agencies and with relevant security partners to ensure the physical security of people and places who may be potential targets. For example, when an individual is assessed as posing a risk to a person at a specific location, the BTAU may take steps to restrict the individual's ability to access that location. This can be accomplished through court orders that bar access, no trespass orders, and ensuring that on-site security at the location is made aware that the individual is restricted from entering. Additional measures could include increasing the number of security guards, screening those who enter the location, and having more visible police patrols.

Utilize the Systems Approach for Management

STEP 4 of this framework discussed the importance of using the Systems Approach for information gathering and assessment. The Systems Approach also provides a framework for management by identifying community-level partners who can contribute resources toward the BTAU's violence prevention efforts. Violence prevention requires a community-wide approach, and law enforcement agencies must be prepared to leverage their partnerships with other agencies to help reduce the likelihood of violence.





Law Enforcement

Management planning and implementation should seek to maximize internal resources from the agency the BTAU belongs to, as well as consider instances when outside law enforcement partnerships may be utilized.

Law enforcement can support management by:

- developing rapport with the individual of concern and their support systems (e.g., family members);
- conducting wellness checks;
- transporting individuals for voluntary or involuntary mental health evaluations;
- facilitating the consensual or temporary safe storage of firearms and other weapons;
- petitioning the court for removal of firearms (e.g., ERPO);
- providing a location for safe firearms storage when firearms are voluntarily forfeited or confiscated through legal means;
- assisting in coordination of physical security strategies (e.g., increased law enforcement presence at special events or potential target locations);
- monitoring open-source social media activity;
- initiating consensual encounters with the individual of concern to monitor the progress of a management plan;
- deploying Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) officers;
- making arrests when necessary; and
- establishing cross-jurisdiction collaboration and information sharing with other state, local, or federal law enforcement partners as appropriate.

Judicial

A multiagency threat management approach that allows for information sharing among criminal justice professionals, including prosecutors, courts, correctional practitioners, and community supervision officers, is critical in managing the risk posed by an individual of concern. While some information sharing may be “one-way” due to privacy regulations, criminal justice practitioners must be informed and have the appropriate context upon which to base their judgements, treatment decisions, and mitigation strategies. The judicial system can serve as a helpful management tool through both its authorities and resources, which can be leveraged in partnership with law enforcement agencies seeking to prevent violent outcomes.



PROSECUTORS CAN...

- help identify appropriate recommendations for processing a case (e.g., requesting a mental health evaluation).
- recommend special conditions during pretrial release and at sentencing (e.g., drug abuse treatment).

COMMUNITY SUPERVISION OFFICERS CAN...

- identify and report concerning changes in an individual's behavior while under supervision.
- ensure adherence to court-ordered supervision requirements.
- ask the individual and their support systems if community services, such as alternative housing or counseling, would be beneficial.





Education

Some individuals who come to the attention of the BTAU may be enrolled in an educational institution. Understanding their school enrollment status can be a helpful management tool, as there are a variety of resources and interventions that can be leveraged through school systems and postsecondary educational institutions.

K-12 SCHOOLS CAN...

- provide counseling services and other school-based social, emotional, and behavioral resources.
- provide academic support.
- promote prosocial behavior by establishing positive relationships with the individual of concern.
- engage with local law enforcement and/or the school resource officer (SRO) to develop collaborative management strategies.
- monitor activity on all information technology (IT) resources (e.g., computers and IT networks) provided by the school.

COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES CAN...

- provide counseling services and other campus-based supports for mental health and wellbeing.
- provide academic support.
- offer on-campus employment opportunities.
- provide career development services and resources.
- provide financial aid information and guidance.
- engage with campus law enforcement to develop collaborative management strategies.
- monitor activity on all IT resources (e.g., computers and IT networks) provided by the campus.



Employment

If an individual of concern is employed, the BTAU may help the individual identify and leverage resources offered by their employer. Coordinating resources offered through an individual's employer should be done tactfully and in collaboration with the individual so as not to unnecessarily create additional challenges in the workplace. Employer-offered resources vary widely between smaller, local companies and larger corporations. Nevertheless, the BTAU may encourage the individual to access available employment resources (e.g., employment assistance programs). As well, it can be helpful to know if an individual was previously employed as a member of the armed services because the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs offers a variety of recourses and supports to eligible veterans.

Employers can support management by:

- providing employee assistance programs (EAPs) to support and counsel individuals experiencing work/life challenges;
- providing short-term mental health counseling;
- providing substance use treatment;
- providing financial counseling;
- providing alternative dispute resolution;
- offering wellness and resiliency programs;
- identifying workplace mentors to model and promote prosocial behavior and professional success; and
- pursuing safe termination practices when termination is necessary (e.g., offering job placement services, severance packages, or extended healthcare coverage).

Mental Health

In some cases, connecting an individual with mental health evaluation and treatment services may be one of the most valuable strategies for a BTAU to pursue. Still, it should be noted that a mental health evaluation is not a substitute for a behavioral threat assessment and that mental health treatment is not a substitute for behavioral threat management.

Newly established BTAUs should catalogue the mental health services and resources available in their communities and initiate proactive outreach to establish working partnerships with them. In addition to private treatment providers, individuals of concern may also be able to access free, charitable, and other community-based treatment programs. When utilizing mental health services as an intervention, the BTAU should strategize directly with the individual, their family, and the local mental health professionals on how to best maintain treatment compliance.



BTAUs must also be prepared to share information with treatment providers. While HIPAA may restrict the provider from sharing information in return, the BTAU may be able to share information obtained during a behavioral threat assessment with the provider. This information could be used by the provider to inform the evaluation and treatment plan for the individual of concern.

Mental health providers can support management by:

- providing behavioral therapy;
- assessing the individual's risk of harming self or others from a clinical perspective;
- developing a mental health treatment plan;
- assisting in the development of the BTAU's case management plan;
- prescribing medication; and
- offering referrals for additional resources.

Family

Family members of an individual of concern can be allies during the management planning and implementation process, as they are well-positioned to identify when a loved one is experiencing a crisis or when the individual's concerning behavior is escalating. For management planning, the BTAU should strategize about the role that the family may be able to play in initiating interventions, information sharing, and supporting the intervention plan. BTAUs may want to educate families that the unit's primary goal is to help support their loved one and, ideally, preempt any escalation toward violent or criminal behavior. As was the case during the assessment phase, building and maintaining a positive rapport with the individual's family is critical.

Family members can support management by:

- petitioning for mental health commitments;
- petitioning for ERPOs;
- providing supervision and observing behavior in the home;
- voluntarily securing weapons, thereby restricting weapons access;
- assisting with transportation to treatment sessions;
- providing insight into treatment compliance and progress; and
- notifying the BTAU of behavioral changes or escalation of behaviors.



Social Services

Community organizations that provide social services can be instrumental in providing assistance during the management phase of the behavioral threat assessment process. These social services can provide interventions and supports to address the personal stressors and other challenges being experienced by the individual of concern.

Social services can support management by addressing:

- **financial stressors** through employment assistance programming, unemployment benefits, social security income (SSI), and social security disability income (SSDI) for qualifying individuals;
- **housing instability** through subsidized housing opportunities, emergency housing placement, and shelters;
- **food insecurity** through subsidized programs, such as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program, as well as food banks and other community food programs;
- **medical needs** through assistance with applying for Medicare, Medicaid, or benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs or HealthCare.gov for qualifying individuals, as well as access to community-based health services and clinics; and
- **behavioral health needs** through intervention programming that addresses substance use disorders and/or mental health.



When identifying opportunities to connect individuals with services and resources to address their needs, it can be helpful to connect an individual with an organization capable of addressing multiple needs simultaneously by offering wraparound services. Selecting a multifaceted provider improves efficiency by limiting the number of referrals needed and reducing the number of follow-up appointments with multiple providers. Some communities feature local organizations that offer behavioral health treatment services (e.g., substance abuse and mental health care), a physical location for individuals to access basic life necessities (e.g., clean clothing, bathrooms, and clean water), medical and dental clinics, and advocacy and assistance with accessing social support services (e.g., assistance with applying for social security income and healthcare benefits).



SYSTEMS APPROACH MANAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

LAW ENFORCEMENT	▪ Develop rapport ▪ Involuntary holds ▪ Removal of firearms ▪ Wellness checks ▪ Physical security	▪ Open source monitoring ▪ Consensual encounters ▪ Making an arrest ▪ Cross-jurisdictional collaboration ▪ Crisis intervention
JUDICIAL	▪ Request mental health assessments ▪ Recommend special pretrial release conditions ▪ Identify concerning behaviors	▪ Ensure adherence to court orders
EDUCATION	▪ Counseling services ▪ Academic support ▪ Monitor IT activity ▪ Develop social support ▪ Employment opportunities	▪ Financial aid information
EMPLOYMENT	▪ Provide EAP services ▪ Short-term mental health counseling ▪ Substance abuse treatment ▪ Alternative dispute resolution ▪ Workplace mentorships	▪ Safe termination practices
MENTAL HEALTH	▪ Behavioral therapy ▪ Assess risk of harm to self and others ▪ Develop mental health treatment plans ▪ Prescribe medication	▪ Referrals to other services
FAMILY	▪ Petition for mental health commitments ▪ Petition for ERPOs ▪ Supervise behavior in the home ▪ Voluntarily secure weapons	▪ Provide transportation for services and resources ▪ Provide insight on compliance and progress ▪ Notify BTAU of changes
SOCIAL SERVICES	▪ Employment and financial assistance ▪ Housing placement and subsidies ▪ Food programs ▪ Facilitate medical resources	▪ Behavioral health intervention and treatment



Monitor and Evaluate Progress

Once a management plan has been implemented, the BTAU should monitor the progress of the individual, the effectiveness of the interventions provided, and any changes to the individual's life circumstances. To accomplish this, the BTAU should maintain consensual contact with the individual and continue to build rapport with their family and support members, as well as with community partners providing intervention services. The BTAU should establish regular communication and check-ins with the identified support systems in the management plan and assess whether the interventions and strategies included in the plan are producing the intended result.

In some instances, management strategies may need to be revised and adjusted. For example, if an individual initially agrees to group counseling as part of their management plan, but they do not feel comfortable sharing in front of a large group, the management plan may need to be adjusted to feature individual counseling sessions to promote engagement and effectiveness. As time passes and progress is made, management strategies may be adjusted or removed. Periodic reassessments of risk are helpful in maintaining a dynamic management plan that addresses the factors contributing to concerning behavior.

Discontinue Management When Appropriate

The ultimate goal of management is for the individual of concern to progress to a point where they no longer pose a risk of violence, at which time management can be discontinued. Once known factors of concern have been addressed and the individual is determined by the BTAU to no longer pose a risk, the case can be considered for closure. The determination for closing a case, like other decision points in the process, should be based on an objectively reasonable and articulable assessment of the potential for violence and should be documented with facts that support the decision.

Once a case is closed, the BTAU may need to re-initiate contact with an individual if their concerning behavior returns or if the individual is destabilized by a significant life event. Even upon case closure, the BTAU may decide on a case-by-case basis to check in with the individual and reassess progress after a prescribed period of time.



STEP 6: PROMOTE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND A CULTURE OF PREVENTION

Preventing targeted violence does not end with the establishment of a BTAU. The agency should develop strategic efforts to promote a community culture that invites partner agencies into the behavioral threat assessment process, prioritizes relationship building and information sharing, and empowers community members to recognize and report concerning behaviors. Conducting outreach to educate partner agencies and community members will help to establish trust and invite participation. The BTAU should also focus on continual programmatic evaluation and improvement.

COMMIT TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The best practice for achieving any goal involves continuous self-evaluation and improvement. BTAUs should identify ways of utilizing data to inform program evaluation and strategy development. For example, the BTAU could assess if bystander reporting increases in response to a focused public messaging campaign. Similarly, the BTAU could evaluate if multiagency training activities increase the responsiveness of partner agencies during the assessment and management of individuals of concern. BTAUs will want to be aware of any programmatic strengths or weaknesses and should adapt their procedures appropriately. If resources allow, BTAUs could consider enlisting external expertise to assist with the technical aspects of program evaluation.



Another key component of program evaluation involves fidelity assessments, or evaluations to determine if the program is being implemented as intended. While it would be very difficult to measure if a BTAU was responsible for preventing an act of targeted violence, it is possible to measure the BTAU's internal practices and systems that are meant to reduce the likelihood of an attack. For example, the BTAU might evaluate whether their program has resulted in increased access to counseling and mental health services for individuals reported to the police department. Such a measure could be part of how the BTAU evaluates its consistency in coordinating interventions to address individual needs. Other methods for assessing fidelity could involve tracking case documentation accuracy, consistency, and/or quality in alignment with established protocols. Fidelity data such as these could, for example, help a unit manager explore more efficient practices for case processing if the BTAU is routinely exceeding established timeframes for completing assessments.

After-action reviews allow for another type of program evaluation. Here BTAUs can meet to revisit past cases, identifying which portions of assessment and management worked well and what areas show a need for improvement. Through this process, BTAUs may identify success stories to share with relevant community partners, in accordance with any applicable privacy restrictions, to enhance awareness of the BTAU and promote engagement. Moreover, the field of behavioral threat assessment continues to evolve, and the body of research defining best practices continues to grow. As such, BTAUs will require both an awareness of new research and the internal capacity to adapt procedures to align with the latest advancements in the field.



CONTINUE TO INVEST IN EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships between the BTAU and its partner community systems are critical to the prevention of targeted violence. In addition to sharing prevention resources across agencies and organizations, outreach will also promote the BTAU as a resource to those external systems when they are confronted with situations that elicit concern for safety. Therefore, it benefits the BTAU when agencies and organizations across the community know where they can go for help. Community systems that require proactive outreach from the BTAU include:

- government agencies,
- other law enforcement agencies,
- businesses,
- K-12 schools,
- colleges and universities,
- houses of worship,
- mental health providers,
- social service agencies, and
- nonprofit service organizations.



Agency outreach can begin simply by hosting meetings between the BTAU and partner organizations. During the meetings, the BTAU can explain who they are, the purpose of behavioral threat assessment, how agencies can contact the BTAU to report individuals of concern, and what happens after reports are received. The BTAU should emphasize that while they are a law enforcement entity, their primary objective in conducting behavioral threat assessments is prevention, and their approach is focused on facilitating proactive intervention with the individual of concern while achieving a positive outcome for the individual and the community.

As community relationships develop over time, the BTAU may choose to host training events, tabletop exercises, and other interactive engagements alongside partner organizations to promote a community culture of prevention. These types of proactive engagements help to ensure that multiagency collaboration does not occur for the first time in the midst of a crisis.

For example, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office (PCSO) Threat Management Division conducts weekly meetings with outside agencies and organizations who have a role in their threat management process. Weekly meetings are attended by representatives from groups including:

- State Attorney's Office (for adults),
- State Attorney's Office (for juveniles),
- Mental Health Unit (law enforcement),
- Crisis Response Specialist (mental health practitioner) ,
- Habitual Offender Monitoring Enforcement (HOME),



- Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF),
- State Probation Office,
- School resource officers,
- School districts,
- Community mental health providers, and
- Involuntary mental health intake facilities.

ENGAGE IN COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND PUBLIC MESSAGING

When the Secret Service published research on averted school attack plots, the study affirmed that targeted violence is preventable when communities identify warning signs and intervene. In nearly every averted school plot examined, tragedy was prevented by members of the community coming forward when they observed behaviors that elicited concern.¹⁵ Bystander reporting is paramount to the success of the BTAU and should be the focus of community outreach efforts.

Public messaging campaigns should reach various community members with clear messaging about what concerns to report and how. Billboards and posters in high-traffic and public areas can help to promote the simple message of reporting safety concerns to a centralized place. A dedicated website can provide more detailed information about the BTAU's role and can reiterate to the public the unit's primary objective of violence prevention through early intervention, not criminal prosecution.

One example of public messaging is the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's "If You See Something, Say Something[®]" campaign. This is a national campaign with the mission to raise public awareness around recognizing signs of suspicious activity that may indicate a potential nexus to terrorism, as well as how to report this activity to the appropriate law enforcement authorities. For this campaign, DHS creates and disseminates public outreach materials, co-brands materials with partners, releases public service announcements, and develops strategic partnerships with public and private organizations who help amplify the message in their communities.¹⁶

Fostering a climate of trust is equally vital to bystander reporting. Research shows that trust influences a bystander's willingness to report threats.¹⁷ When the public perceives law enforcement as fair, transparent, and respectful, they are more trusting of the process and more willing to offer information that could help.

¹⁵ National Threat Assessment Center. (2021). *Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Homeland Security. (2023, December 4). "If You See Something, Say Something[®]": About the Campaign. <https://www.dhs.gov/see-something-say-something/about-campaign>

¹⁷ Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency & U.S. Secret Service. (2023). *Improving School Safety Through Bystander Reporting: A Toolkit for Strengthening K-12 Reporting Programs*. Department of Homeland Security.



CONCLUSION

The Secret Service has long held that prevention is the best form of protection. For over 25 years, NTAC’s research examining incidents of targeted violence has demonstrated that future tragedies are preventable if communities are equipped with the training and resources necessary to identify individuals of concern, assess their risk of violence, and intervene appropriately.

By following the steps in this operational guide, state and local law enforcement agencies will be able to adopt the pioneering principles of the Secret Service’s behavioral threat assessment model and move toward a structured approach to targeted violence prevention.

NTAC recognizes that many of the steps in this guide depend on the resources available. As such, the steps within this guide are not intended to be prescriptive but rather scalable to agencies of varying sizes and resources, all with the shared mission of preventing targeted violence in their communities. Everyone has a role to play in keeping communities safe, and the Secret Service stands ready to support our public safety partners in this vital mission.



KEY TERMS

Targeted violence: A premeditated act of violence directed at a specific individual, group, or location, regardless of motivation and generally unrelated to other criminal activity.

Behavioral threat assessment: A behavior-based approach to proactively prevent incidents of targeted violence. The Secret Service behavioral threat assessment model was developed to **identify** individuals displaying threatening or concerning behavior, gather information to **assess** if an individual poses a risk of violence, and then **manage** the risk by implementing appropriate interventions (**identify, assess, manage**).

Concerning behavior: Actions or communications by an individual that are troubling or inappropriate and indicate a potential risk of violence. Concerning behaviors exist along a continuum of criminal and non-criminal activities and may include escalating interpersonal disputes, grievances, concerning social media content, stalking and harassing, obsessions with violence, idolizing past attackers, fixating on people or locations, suicidal ideations, self-harm, unusual levels of aggression, threats, and other behaviors that elicit concerns for safety.

Systems Approach: A process of gathering information from various formal and informal community systems in order to provide a comprehensive and reliable assessment of an individual's thinking and behavior.

Assessment Themes: Areas of inquiry that, when explored, will provide a contextual understanding of an individual's mindset, behavior, and circumstances and will allow the BTAU to assess if the individual poses a risk of violence.

Management: The strategies and efforts pursued by a BTAU with the goal of making a violent outcome less likely. Management should always be driven by the results of the assessment, namely, the thinking and behavior of the individual of concern, along with other situational factors.



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