

Popular Video Educates on School Safety

The Ohio School Resource Officers Association, the Boise (Idaho) Police Department and every Pennsylvania school district are just a few of the organizations that account for the countless downloads and more than 3,000 copies distributed of "It Can Happen Here," an admired school safety documentary video.

The video was filmed in high definition and produced by the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice (NIJ) safe school technology portfolio in cooperation with the Weapons and Protective Systems Technology Center of Excellence (WPSTC), which is part of NIJ's National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System. No money was spent to market or advertise "It Can Happen Here"; all requests for the video were generated through the Center's extensive national and international law enforcement and educational network.

According to Drs. Timothy Brungart and John Leathers, co-producers of "It Can Happen Here," the documentary is designed to put a face on school safety by informing and encouraging stakeholders in school safety to prepare for emergencies. The video is also being used by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and members of Pennsylvania State University's (PSU's) International Law Enforcement Forum, which includes the United Kingdom Association of Chief Police Officers.

The video, released in spring 2010, focuses on the Columbine and Platte Canyon school shootings in Colorado and the valuable lessons that communities can learn from these tragedies. Produced by the WPSTC at PSU, its host agency, the 60-minute video includes interviews with victims' parents, school administrators and local law enforcement. It emphasizes the Colorado School Safety Resource Center's efforts to lead the nation in school safety preparation by implementing school safety plans, SWAT team drills, student exercises and other mitigation efforts. It also examines shootings at the West Nickel Mines Amish school, other U.S. schools and schools in other countries.

The video discusses technology solutions that can help law enforcement, including less-lethal technologies, metal detectors and enhanced use of surveillance

cameras. In addition, it includes an interview with the senior Israeli police and public security attaché for North America about successful school safety strategies used in that country's ongoing struggle with terrorism. "It Can Happen Here" also offers a list of resources such as websites, reference materials and contacts for help with writing and implementing school safety plans.

"This video is a starting place for communities to start discussing as to what they would do if a similar event happened where they live, work and play," says Michael O'Shea, NIJ's safe schools technology program manager.

After PSU President Graham Spanier saw the video, he sent a copy along with a personal letter to each of the 501 Pennsylvania public school superintendents, all 23 PSU campuses, and the members of the Pennsylvania House and Senate Education Committees. His endorsement spawned other orders throughout the state, from agencies such as Non-Public Schools and Student Support Services and from other individuals and law enforcement agencies who viewed one of the copies sent out to the public schools.

The positive feedback on the video started even before Spanier's letter was sent, from members of NIJ's School Safety Technology Working Group (TWG), which advocated increased education as a top priority for NIJ's School Safety Program for several years.

"They identified the need for education as a high-priority focus. Education can take a lot of different forms, but we thought a video would be more effective than a manual," says Brungart. "We felt it would offer more and better opportunities to disseminate the message."

"We wanted to take advantage of some of the contacts that were developed by the TWG members and use the actual voices of real people to not only educate viewers, but also to instill a sense of urgency into the audience," he adds.

The WPSTC team obtained contacts from the TWG members and began working with schools that had

taken an active role in planning for school safety. Subsequently, they made several trips to Colorado to speak to officers, parents and school administrators who were involved in the Columbine and Platte Canyon incidents, and also worked with the Pennsylvania State Police and two of the officers who were among the first responders at the West Nickel Mines Amish school shooting.

“When we approached the TWG members about putting a face on school safety and we wanted someone to talk about contraband detection, video surveillance, SWAT tactics and so on, they invited us to come and visit their schools,” Brungart says. “One of them heads the school safety program in Alabama, another is the coordinator of internal security at a school district in Kentucky. From there we went on to schools in Chicago and in Oregon, and finally to Denver.”

“We had a firm agreement that everyone who participated could do a prescreening and anything they wanted to be removed would be taken out,” Brungart explains. “This helped everyone to feel more comfortable. Once they saw we were trying to let them tell their stories, to talk about what they think is important, then they really opened up.”

The resulting video reaches out to viewers through the “faces” that the WPSTC team put on the tragedies and it also provides practical and invaluable information.

“Its purpose was to allow others to provide advice based on their experiences and to act as a springboard

for discussion for those involved in school safety nationally and internationally. We also provide resources to generate a school safety plan if one doesn’t exist or to help schools make improvements to an existing plan,” Brungart says.

The video points out that preparation counts; schools, police, firefighters and other school safety stakeholders must take collaborative actions and continuously train together to respond to specific types of threats; and technologies can enhance school safety programs, but only in situations where specific needs, objectives and operational details are well defined, and they should never be used as a substitute for personal interactions.

“It Can Happen Here” is available at <http://www.arl.psu.edu/WPSTC/schools.php>, or contact NIJ Program Manager Michael O’Shea for a copy at Michael.oshea@usdoj.gov or (202) 305-7954.



This article was reprinted from the Summer 2011 edition of *TechBeat*, the quarterly newsmagazine of the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center System, a program of the National Institute of Justice under Cooperative Agreement #2010-MU-MU-K020, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Analyses of test results do not represent product approval or endorsement by the National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice; the National Institute of Standards and Technology, U.S. Department of Commerce; or Lockheed Martin. Points of view or opinions contained within this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the Community Capacity Development Office; the Office for Victims of Crime; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART).

**The National Law Enforcement and
Corrections Technology Center System
Your Technology Partner**
www.justnet.org
800-248-2742