

INDEPENDENT

Note: You can learn more about the team at www.swsc.org/CISM

School crisis response team created

COTTONWOOD –When the Lakeview School bus crash tragedy struck southwest Minnesota on Feb. 19, 2008, there was no handbook detailing how to handle the aftermath — there were grieving families to support, funerals to attend, bus survivors and classmates to console, teachers to counsel and so much more.

“During a time of crisis, it takes many people to support the students, staff, family members and community affected,” Lakeview counselor Shelley Buntjer said. *“This can be a daunting task for small communities and school districts, especially when the impact is so great, as was the bus crash.”*

Brothers Jesse Javens, 13, and Hunter, 9, along with 12-year-old Reed Stevens and 9-year-old Emilee Olson, died as a result of the collision, which occurred when the driver of a minivan went through a stop sign at an intersection just south of the rural community of Cottonwood. The bus

was then hit a second time by the driver of a pickup truck who was traveling along Minnesota Highway 23.

“Working together with community members, emergency management technicians, fire departments, first responders, clergy and other local supports is necessary,” Buntjer said. “The communities of Cottonwood and Wood Lake, along with the surrounding towns, provided structure and support during this time – something words cannot express.”

Buntjer said Lakeview School was flooded with many professionals who came to help in a variety of ways.

“Many local schools volunteered their support services as well, and it wasn’t long after that a group of school counselors, school social workers and school psychologists got together, with the encouragement of the Southwest West Central Service Cooperative, and explored the option of a School Crisis Response Team,” she said.

In 2011, the SWWC School Crisis Response Team was created, offering coordinated, on-site support for southwest Minnesota school districts who are affected by traumatic events.

“The SWWC School Crisis Response Team consists of trained, experienced professionals whose mission is to provide support, guidance and resources to schools in Regions 6E, 6W and 8 during and after a crisis situation,” Buntjer said. “The Team’s vision is to provide immediate and consistent response as well as connect school with resources.”

In the year following the Lakeview bus crash, Buntjer shared valuable information in a Minnesota Department of Education’s *“Lessons Learned”* issue, highlighting many of the challenges and positive experiences the district faced in the aftermath.

Buntjer, a current executive committee member and one of three who were original members, said the Team currently has 86 members, all of whom are trained in crisis response.

“We service approximately 40 schools and have responded to 47 calls since the inception of the team,” she said. “So out of the bus crash tragedy came the School Crisis Response Team, which has helped a lot of other schools since then.”

The School Crisis Response Team (SCRT) identifies a crisis as school violence, death of a student or staff member, suicide, natural disaster or accidents.

“The bus crash, along with some other tragedies in schools, was the reason for the formation of the Crisis Response Team,” Lakeview Superintendent Chris Fenske said. “They are able to provide professional and immediate responses to schools now in the wake of tragedy. The Team does an amazing job and is made up of caring people.”

The Team’s overall goal is to lessen the impact of traumatic stress by using the members’ specific training and skills and to work in coordination with the crisis team or plans already in place at school districts.

“We don’t ever go in and take over,” SCRT lead Brian Skogen said. “We go in and support what the school is doing. We have a lot of information and resources to offer. We’ve written many scripts to help staff in communicating with students. So the wheel doesn’t have to be reinvented, but all the bases get covered.”

Skogen has been a social worker at Canby Schools for the past 13 years. After the bus crash, Skogen spent a few weeks helping students and staff at Lakeview.

“There were tough times after the bus crash,” he said. “I’ll never forget it and it wasn’t even my school.”

With the far-reaching and deep impact that was involved, various types of support were offered to students and staff at the school.

“We did a lot of healing circles with the kids and whoever,” Skogen said. “We did that with students in grades 3-12. What transpired at Lakeview was what sparked the conversation that started the team. A bunch of us

got together to have a more comprehensive response to those types of situations, those tragedies.”

Skogen said the logistics were modeled after a group in Iowa, adding that Dan Casey trained the new members.

“He trained us in managing school crisis,” Skogen said. “We had 32 people involved at the original training. Dan was also a grief counselor at Lakeview School after the bus crash. He was there helping.”

Casey also does educator training on compassion fatigue, which can happen to people who regularly work with highly-distressed or traumatized persons.

“You don’t want people to burn out,” Skogen said. “I sometimes suffer from compassion fatigue, as do a lot of people. So you learn that you have to take care of yourself even when you’re helping others.”

Since starting the SCRT in 2011, Skogen says team members follow a distinct plan of action.

“Instead of coming together and doing the best we could, like we did at Lakeview, now we have a process we follow,” he said. “It’s about defusing the first day and then debriefing, which is a seven-step process, a couple days later. Debriefing is the same concept used for emergency responders who have dealt with trauma.”

The debriefing has to take place at least 24 or more hours after the death or traumatic event.

“That’s because it takes a couple days for our bodies to come back down,” Skogen said. “When we’re faced with trauma or tragedy, our body puts out chemicals so we can deal with it. So that’s why we wait to have that conversation, so they can begin to identify their thoughts and feelings. It’s a process to help them work through that grief — to file it and make sense of it.”

Crisis Management Briefings (CMB) are also involved in the process.

“It’s very important you have one before school, so staff have the true facts that happened,” Skogen said. “It’s important so everyone is hearing the same thing. You can help them create scripts that they can share with students, like ‘We have some bad news for you.’”

Skogen said CMB could also occur with staff after school.

“It allows us to give all the facts of what happened, give tips on self help and how to talk to the students,” he said.

The crisis team teaches school personnel to build *“rings of worry.”*

“It’s anybody who has mental health issues or who has lost anybody in the past,” Skogen said. “If we’re truly worried about someone, we will refer them out (to get more help). We also follow up with resources to parents. So we have several different layers of support happening.”

One of the most important components is communication.

“Communication is huge when there is a crisis,” Skogen said. “The more information you share, the more you put people at ease. So it’s good to get them the facts in a way they can understand.”

Obviously, students at various ages process trauma differently, so communication can be delivered in a variety of ways.

“For younger students, it takes time and repetition and letting their brains absorb it,” Skogen said. “You’re helping them move on with the absence – that new normal –and it’s going to be different.”

Skogen added that the *“new normal”* is oftentimes called post-traumatic growth. Oftentimes, it involves undergoing life-changing psychological shifts in thinking, such as a new appreciation for life or finding profound meaning in relationships with others.

“It’s the growth that comes out of a really traumatic event,” Skogen said.

For some, the growth can reveal itself as personal strength or a spiritual change. For others, the new normal might have something to do with

identifying new possibilities in life.

“Now for Lakeview 10 years later, it’s about what is there that wouldn’t have been if (the bus crash) hadn’t happened,” Skogen said. “It was a huge loss, but there are definitely some blessings that occurred afterward.”

Skogen said the SCRT is designed to serve school in crisis within an 18-county area, though the Team may be able to reach out even further should the need arise. He hopes schools know the Team is there to help when they need it.

“Reaching out for support sometimes is hard,” he said.

“It doesn’t mean that a person or a school can’t handle it. A lot of administrators out there might not understand our purpose. We’re there to support what they’re already doing. I’m very proud of what we do, but it’s a reflection on the school — that they’re doing what’s best for their students and staff.”

Not only are SCRT members qualified professionally, Skogen said they’re also familiar with school protocol.

“Everybody we bring in knows schools,” Skogen said. “Everyone is licensed through their school and falls under a code of ethics. They’ve already had background checks and all that. It adds an extra security factor.”
