

EP.23 Emergency Manager

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Welcome to episode number 23 of the What's Up, APS? podcast I'm your host Frank Bellavia. Thanks for joining us today. We're going to talk with our new emergency manager Zach Pope about this brand new position. So I thought I'd bring him on and talk about what this position is and where he's from his background and. Some of the things that he's working on for the school system.

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So thanks for joining us. Thanks Frank. Talk to us about your background where you're from.

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How you got here. Sure. So originally I am from the actual area of North Carolina. But I've lived and worked in North Carolina South Carolina Texas and Virginia. The last position that I had before I was the Director of Safety and Emergency Management at George Mason University for the past eight years and so I have lots of different kind of hats that I wore there and kind of served all of their campuses across Northern Virginia and South Korea. So kind of how I got into this as I started in graduate school. I have a Master's of Education organizational psychology and leadership. And I did graduate assistantship for two years with the police department and around that particular time is when higher education started really kind of focusing in on threat prevention. All hazard mitigation and all threats approach. And typically what happens is you see with police departments are singularly focused on a law enforcement kind of perspective. And so as a grad student. Most of them were like well you can do this and you can do this. So in grad school I just kind of fell into this opportunity in this role and a sense works predominantly in the education environment doing the emergency manager at work to help better kind of make our communities more resilient.

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So the emergency manager position here is a new position. Talk a little bit about that position and why it's important for Arlington public schools to have someone in this capacity.

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Sure. So you're right the the emergency manager position is a brand new position for Arlington public schools.

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You see all across the country there is more and more of a focus of having a dedicated expert in managing and collaborating across the board around what we would call an all hazards approach. And what that generally means is that we're looking at natural hazards which could be tornadoes it could be hurricanes it could be earthquakes too are more human based threats cyber security threats of violence in the community etc. and there's a standardised framework in which we operate from that kind of approach things in a four phase approach. We first look at how do we mitigate our risk. So some of that is working with folks like Terry Carson our risk manager to purchase particular insurance to transfer our liability some of it may be working with like Jeff Chambers and the design and construction world to modify existing structures or the way we build structures to be more resilient. And then the other part of that on the human side is working with our staff around particular's around training how do we identify concerning behavior concerning communication and then how do we address that as a group. The next

kind of bucket that we kind of put the work in is around preparedness and what that what that means is that we are working towards a common set of understandings and our plans our policies our procedures and how we do things before an emergency during and after emergency. And how do we work together as a team and operate on that kind of common playbook. The next you know this is where I like to say that if I were to develop one of those mediums that says what other people think I do what I think I do what my mom thinks I do. Most folks think that the work of an emergency manager is really in the response area and it's the flashing lights it's Lucire and it's the I'm showing up and I'm supporting and managing particular things. It's usually less than 10 percent of my job. It really is hopefully never the focus and more than that as we're probably not focusing in on the areas that we need to to prevent those things from happening. But there is that component to it. How do we support our schools and how do we support the communities in the time of an emergency. And then last but not least is typically around the thoughts around or returning the community to a sense of normalcy which we call recovery that could be focused very specifically in behavioral mental health capacity and that someone is is having traumatic triggering experiences as a result of the emergency or maybe physically structure has been damaged or destroyed. And we need to rebuild that particular structure. So that's the framework of which we're approaching things and what the position really is focused on if you distill all that down I say emergency manager Murchie Mandarin is a misnomer it's really emergency collaboration. That's what we're really trying to do as we're trying to pull everybody together before during and after an emergency to best address the needs of the community.

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You've been here right around a month or so and it pretty much hit the ground running ever since you got here. What are some of the things that you're doing on a daily basis.

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Yeah sure. So we're lucky in the sense that we're given a lot of guidance and the K to 12 world around the concepts of emergency management and kind of what are the things that we need to do. So a lot of the good work has been done already and really what I'm trying to do is get a sense of what the organization is about understanding idea idiosyncrasies of each school the school division as a whole. Our relationship with public safety partners and then it's to provide. How can we fine tune those things and how can we do better some of those things that I look like as I presented to the admin council for the first time this morning. I am specifically and singularly focused around threat assessment. A lot of folks are are wanting target hardening meaning bulletproof windows and structures to be changed to prevent violence. And a lot of the reports that are coming out unfortunately and the data is because of incidents that have happened really show that there is a behavioral health component to this and that we're not working as a community as a whole and a collaborative way to really prevent violence from happening. And so what my goal right now I'm kind of singularly focusing on threat assessment as a methodology to prevent violence is really to kind of help us get to that next level around our stuff. We've been doing really well. We've been addressing the concerns that people have had. We can do better. And I think that's that's the important piece to understand. All this is emergency management is a continuous cycle of improvement it's taking where we are kind of moving on on that particular piece. And so a threat assessment is kind of risen to the top as I'm hearing more and more from the community that there are concerns around active threat post Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School's incident in Parkland Florida. There are particulars that continue to show up and I want it to be less about the politics of things and how we best support individuals in where they're at and using that whole child framework and talk a little bit about them.

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What are some of the things they were looking for when you look at students and behavioral issues. What are you looking at.

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Sure. So I'm really excited we're we're going to be partnering with the Curry School of Education with the University of Virginia. They are providing some of the best gold standard training around threat assessment not only for our students but for parents and for employees of school districts. And so through that partnership we'll be able to really kind of hone in with folks were really looking at what we call behavioral indicators that are that are concerning so someone who may be out there and kind of researching school shootings. That's a concern. It's not saying that they're going to commit a school shooting but it's a concerning behavior it's not it's not normal or average person behavior. Other things kind of show up in terms of depression loneliness. And as we start to see. Individual instances over the past 13 years of active threat incidents happening in schools we see that the people who most likely are to notice these issues are teachers and peers. And so if we can get the information out about what behaviors are concerning and we start to see these things we can provide intervention methods to best support and redirect and deescalate potential past violence. And so what that will look like is we'll start to continue to partner with individual teachers with individual schools in addressing individualized behavior and individual intervention methods. Will start to look at it from a more systems based objective approach and using some of the national best standards in behavioral mental health and law enforcement and emergency management practices to really kind of combat this as a team based approach so that we are helping our students be able to get to the point where they need to be some of those interventions do not include involving law enforcement or is it strictly working with counselors and behavioral mental health specialists and things like that Luli so what happens as we take a very much a team based approach that talked about collaboration a lot. Law enforcement is very much a center point in that threat assessment teams in Virginia are able to access criminal histories using the Code of Virginia able to access health records that may be behavioral or physical because all of those things will help us start to paint a very clear picture of what the stressors may be and to be able to help kind of deescalate or remove those stressors that may be putting that person on a path to violence and so Arlington County Police Department is a key stakeholder in that. Our Office of Student Services on the employee side our employee assistance program we all operate as a team to kind of address and look at a case so we can individualize the approach that we want because we know not one person is like another aside from the threat assessments.

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You also the school system is also involved in doing monthly drills and this is part of it has come down you from the Virginia Department of Education you have to do lockdown drills and fire drills and we participate in earthquake drill. Why are these drills important and how do you kind of fitting in overseeing helping the schools with those drills.

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Sure. So drills spun into a framework around training and exercise right. Muscle memory is very important in an emergency. Typically the adrenaline starts to pump and people lose those fine motor skills. And so once we create muscle memory in our students and our teachers and our employees we're able to just kind of rely on that muscle memory some drills are very important in order to create those pieces professionally. I think we've kind of gotten to a place in this country where drills have just become a check the box methodology and they really are lacking the intent behind the code that requires us to do

drills. And so in my conversations with School Resource Officers with principals with assistant principals is start a conversation about what best works for you.

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Are we are we meeting what the law is and what the intent of the law is and do we want to do a lockdown drill during a different time of the day during a different period and really kind of get a full assessment as to where our gaps. And how do we best work as a team to close those gaps. So drills really have become kind of a commonplace methodology to check the box but I'm really hoping that with some renewed conversation with everyone that we really had to shift away from that check the box mentality and we can get to a point where it's creating opportunities to understand where our weaknesses and our gaps are and give us those opportunities to create better and safer environments.

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And you say that having a fire service background you're taught to drill and build that muscle memory like you mentioned. But there are. I can see your point about ways to improve and not that it's just we're doing the job because the stations we have to do drill today.

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Right. Yeah. I mean it's it's very interesting one of the things that I that I've used and I've heard several different principals that have reached out to me. Something as simple as going and standing in front of a door and saying this door is blocked please don't use an alternate exit. Really tends to throw people off right now especially if they anticipate a drill coming or they are kind of in that mindset. Like what do you mean. I can't go to the store. Five fires happen for instance. Why we do fire drills. Fires can happen when it's raining when it's snowing. When a hurricane is bearing down there is no parameters that prevent fire from happening. So it is quite possible that your muscle memory in terms of walking out of that door and that same door that door may not be available and so throwing in a very small challenge element helps us to provide that level of critical thinking application and what we're really trying to do and it meets what the intent is the intent of fire drills really came out of the Station Nightclub fire where there were six exits that people could have used. And hundreds of people died because everybody wanted to go out the door they came in which was the front door. And so if we are consistently just trying to check the box and going out our door and knowing all those things we're not actually doing ourselves a service and trying to build safer communities.

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We used to joke that fires never happened when it's sunny and 72.

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That's absolutely. My experience they happen when it's nice weather.

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Yes. Who are some of the partners that you are working with outside of Arlington public schools.

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Yeah so pretty consistently. We work with a lot of different public safety partners that can range from Arlington County Police Department range from Arlington County Fire Department of Public Safety Communications and emergency management. All Arlington county departments and the regionally we work with a lot of different partners like the Virginia Department of Transportation the Region 7 Virginia

Department of Emergency Management public health. It's definitely an all hazards based approach so we're not trying to develop plans and relationships for particular issues or particular incidents. We really want to look at. Here's our playbook for all emergencies and here's how we're going to address it. There may be individual particulars related to an epidemic or a communicable disease that we're worried about at a particular school or across the school division. But I don't want to create plans just to create plans they typically sit on shelves and gather dust and nobody looks out and they're not usable. So when we take this more all hazards whole community approach we tend to be more inclusive. We tend to be more collaborative and more flexible to address the needs of what's actually happening.

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You mentioned some of the things you're doing like Threat Assessment things that when you when you look across and once you've gotten your feet establish in your hair what are some of the other things that you want to look at doing to help the school system in terms of emergency management getting all of these different things that could pop up.

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Yes so one of the things that I have been in conversation with with Cynthia Johnson and John Chadwick and Dr. Murphy is in the emergency management world there's a voluntary accreditation process. And for so long it's been focused specifically on state or local government. Over the past I'll say five or six years it's really kind of been pushed and prodded and poked by the educational sector to really kind of start focusing so we see that six initial institutions were accredited under the Emergency Management Accreditation Program. And all it is is it's a it's a best practices standard and so as as I continue to go about looking at all these things I'm using that framework to say where we are meeting this partial standard and how can we fine tune where are we not where are we and we're doing really great. And ultimately I'd love for us to be the first school district that's K to 12 to be be emerge from answering accreditation or IMAP accredited. It takes a whole village to raise a kid. It takes a whole village to get accreditation and so I think when we look down the line and kind of long term planning that that would ultimately be my goal is for us to say Arlington public schools is the gold standard for what what emergency management is and K to 12. And we really could say we commit ourselves to a continuous improvement cycle and and here school division across the country. Here's how we do it here.

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Here's what the commitment looks like and I imagine a lot of stuff involved in that it's not just like a checklist that you go down the back and say we do this we do this maybe we don't do this but we have to. There's a lot involved in that.

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There is it. It looks very much academic background and doing emergency management has been it has been a godsend and kind of looking at organizations from that perspective and how to how they intersect and all the overlapping pieces. What I'd say is that it definitely takes a systems based approach. And so there's lots of processes there's lots of plans there's lots of procedures there's lots of commitments that we have to kind of way against where we are and where we want to be as it relates to the work as it relates to the school division as a whole. There are implications kind of across the board all of it being voluntary in that process. And the standard doesn't tell us how to do it. And so that's the beauty of going through a map accreditation versus some other types of accreditation and different disciplines or sectors is they just want you to have something that addresses this they're not going to tell you it needs to look like an apple.

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So you produce an apple we can show an orange and show that yes this is still fruit and we want it to be addressed and it's addressed this way and they'll accept it. They just want to make sure that we're addressing the standards in a way that best suits our needs.

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And know you've got a lot of things going you've been monitoring the hurricane Florence you've got a committee of 100 you've got a bunch of different things going on. So I want to respect your time because I know you've got to get to other things. I want to thank you for joining us. And welcome to Arlington public schools look forward to working with you and experience and knowledge you bring to the school system also. Thanks Frank. Thanks very much for joining us. Few of the questions you can e-mail us at. apsnews@apsva.us or on Twitter @APSVirginia. You can find us on Apple podcast. Google Play and on Stitcher and tune in. Thanks a lot for joining us and we'll talk to you next time.