

CITIZEN GREEN: NC SBI tries to head off the next mass shooter

April 24, 2019

Feverishly plotting the narrative of his short story "The Minority Report" in 1956, with its team of mutant precogs feeding information to the Precrime Division allowing agents to arrest suspects based on a prediction that they will commit crimes in the future, science fiction writer Philip K. Dick might have instead imagined the BeTA Unit, which was unveiled at the UNCG Police headquarters on Gate City Boulevard in Greensboro in the year 2019.

Dozens of law enforcement personnel, including an undercover officer the head of the FBI Behavioral Analysis Unit, members of the Florida Department of Law Enforcement and NC State Bureau of Investigation, as well as officers from agencies across the state from the Elizabeth City Police Department to Appalachian State University Police, including a handful of undercover officers, sat at long tables on Tuesday drinking coffee and absorbing a fast-paced lecture from Gregory Glod and Clem Hourican, security consultants with Aegis Threat Management.

The instructors discussed the behaviors of Adam Lanza, who carried out the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary mass shooting, and Dylann Roof, who perpetrated the 2015 massacre at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, SC, as case studies.

A former supervisor with the protective intelligence division of the US Secret Service, Hourican told the students that in addition to grappling with mental health issues, anger and social isolation, Lanza became immersed in violent, first-person shooter online video games, in which players can chat with each other in real time.

“That’s a little too technical for me — I couldn’t figure it out,” Hourican joked. “But I understand there’s more technically astute people in law enforcement these days, thank God.” If one gained access to the game chats, Hourican said, they would have found Lanza talked frankly “about what he thought about young children, thought about other people, his very carefree attitude about violence.” If they could have seen him in his home life, they would found that “he ended up staying in his room, which was covered in tinfoil literally for about three months without coming out and having contact with another human. These are all very odd behaviors, I think we can all agree on that.”

BeTA, short for the Behavioral Threat Assessment Unit, part of the NC State Bureau of Investigation, was conceived by agency Director Robert Schurmeier and Brent Herron, the associate vice president for safety &

emergency operations at the UNC System, shortly after the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. in February 2018. Herron, himself a former Secret Service agent, brought the idea to Schurmeier. SBI personnel traveled to Washington DC to study the approach taken by the Protective Intelligence Division of Secret Service to targeted violence, and then to Quantico, Va. to meet with the behavioral analysis unit of the FBI. As of Tuesday, when the model program was officially rolled out, Schurmeier said the SBI analysts and an agency psychologist are working with local law enforcement partners on 30 cases, "some in various stages of inactivity, and others... being actively pursued."

"We took back best practices of both [Secret Service and the FBI] and created a unique — and we think it's the first of its kind program to identify and mitigate people on the path to targeted violence," Schurmeier told reporters at a press conference on the first floor of UNCG Police headquarters on Tuesday.

To be fair, the BeTA Unit and its local law enforcement partners are focusing on behavior as a predictor of violence, not a "hydrocephalic idiot" that generates reports for analysis by a computer, as Dick envisioned it. But the analogy is not completely off: Rather than working backwards from a crime to develop evidence establishing probable cause to arrest a suspect, officers are attempting to build intelligence needed to anticipate an attack before it's carried out.

The behavioral based threat assessment management model was developed by the Secret Service in 1995, said Russell Palarea, president of the Association of Threat Assessment Professionals. While federal agencies have been using the model for more than two decades, he said "by and large" the model "has not been incorporated into the fabric of [local] law enforcement culture."

“Instead of conducting a criminal investigation, we conduct an investigation into risk factors for violence, identifying those risk factors, looking for behaviors of concern and specifically looking at behavior,” Palarea said.

“What is someone doing to prepare for an attack? Once we see movement toward the attack, then a variety of strategies can be conducted that may involve arrest, but it also may involve hospitalization. Or it may involve talking with someone to tell them not to commit the attack. Find pro-social ways to solve their problems. Get inside their head.”

Schurmeier anticipated a concern that BeTA will compromise civil liberties, even though no reporters raised the issue.

“I would tell you one of the things we understood is that potential critics would say that this is an effort by government to violate the constitutional rights or privacy interests of certain people,” he said. To assuage any worries, Schurmeier told reporters that the SBI’s general counsel has played an active role in designing the program to ensure that the constitutional rights and privacy interests of potential targets are protected.

Behavioral threat assessment, vertically integrated from the federal government down to local law enforcement, could be the future.

Schurmeier noted with satisfaction that the SBI’s counterparts from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement traveled to North Carolina to attend the weeklong training.

“It’s going to result in a long-term partnership between the two agencies,” he predicted.

And both Herron and Palarea talked up bipartisan legislation called the TAPS Act, short for Threat Assessment, Prevention and Safety, of which Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina is a cosponsor. Palarea said federal grants would be available to not only local law enforcement agencies, but also

tribal authorities, schools, houses of worship and corporations.

“Any entity can apply for these grants and set up a threat-management unit,” Palarea said. “Using these funds, they can bring in training. They can set up an investigative process and a collaboration across their communities to identify concerning behavior, conduct investigations into it, determine if there is a violence risk, and then mitigate that risk using community-based strategies.”