



State Department official educates workforce on insider threats

By Dianne Ryder
DLA Public Affairs



Fort Belvoir, Virginia, Sept. 25, 2019 — Mass shootings in the U.S. date back to the late 1800s, but an unprecedented surge of attacks in recent years culminated in a solid week of back-to-back shootings in August. This was the sobering statistic presented to McNamara Headquarters Complex employees at the beginning of a Sept. 23 Defense Logistics Agency presentation about mass shootings and how to avoid them.

The DLA Insider Threat Program Office hosted speaker Russell Palarea, an expert on threat assessment, insider threats and counterterrorism. He is the consulting operational psychologist for the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security. Palarea said anyone's behavior can escalate into violence and told employees how to recognize and report a potential insider threat.

Palarea's presentation focused primarily on mass shootings, especially in the workplace, but he said mass stabbings, bombings, vehicle attacks, arson and other forms of targeted violence are increasing as well.

"While we realize that while this is Insider Threat Awareness Month, threats are internal and external and we want to be mindful of preventing all violence," he said.

The State Department deals with many external threats concerning frustrated passport and visa customers, people who are angry with agency policies or personnel, or those who are coming to the building to attack estranged or current spouses.

Palarea referred to the "the seven days of devastation," reminding the audience of the attacks in Gilroy, California, and those in the Walmart stores in El Paso, Texas, and Southaven, Mississippi, as well as an attack in Dayton, Ohio. "One you probably didn't hear about was a woman who had an ongoing feud with a co-worker in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. She went into the workplace and shot and killed that co-worker," Palarea said.

Many such attacks don't receive national news coverage because they lack the extreme element of mass casualties or injuries, but it's important for people to dig deep into the incidents to discover how they can increase vigilance in the workplace, Palarea added.

"People think this is a way to address their anger, to use violence to resolve their grievances, to seek notoriety or infamy — because it's part of our popular culture," he said. "It is possible to change popular culture and public mindset. We did it with anti-litter campaigns; we did it with Mothers Against Drunk Drivers."

Educating the public on ways to redirect anger and frustration can be a valuable tool, he explained.

"If you are struggling, seek help from family, friends and counselors. Don't use violence as a solution to your problem," he said.

Palarea also addressed recent examples of what has not worked to empower potential victims. Providing students and teachers buckets of rocks, mini baseball bats and even hockey pucks to throw at shooters who come into schools are reactive methods, not proactive, he said.

"If someone's throwing rocks at you, you're going to turn your attention toward them. And if you're talking about a firearm versus skipping stones — the firearm wins that battle," he said. "It doesn't prevent the attack from happening. We want to get into the subject's head and prevent them

from ever going to the location and opening fire in the first place.”

Ballistic wear such as bulletproof backpacks and hooded sweat jackets with built-in body armor are also marketed to the public, which Palarea calls “heartbreaking” and indicative of the fear people have about being victims of a mass shooting.

Another concern is that the perpetrators of violent acts also have access to the sales of these items, which makes it more challenging to neutralize the threat.

“The idea of implementing behavioral threat assessment and management is a three-tiered process,” he said. Training the public on what to report is the first tier; deciding how to interview someone who’s been identified as a threat is the second tier; and the third tier is engaging with threat management partners such as those in the criminal justice and mental health systems.

“If [people from partner agencies] aren’t talking to each other, they’re going to miss a threat. Many times when programs are set up, the people are operating in silos. They’re not communicating,” he said.

Palarea stressed the importance of recognizing and reporting behavior of potential insider threats. Everyone has some level of stress, but not everyone allows those stressors to drive them to harm themselves or others.

“The challenge is when stress increases in our lives, coping skills decrease,” Palarea said, describing the cycle as a vortex that can lead to a down-spiral ending in despair when coping skills are depleted.

The speaker also described what makes someone a credible threat and motives. Attacks, even if motivated by impulse or passion, are usually well-planned and involve a decision to kill. The subject usually has significant stress that results in anger being projected onto a perceived adversary.

Palarea referred employees to Defense Department guidance put out by the Insider Threat Management and Analysis Center, which provides enterprise-level consolidation and information sharing to identify potential insider threats and coordinates actions to mitigate those risks across DoD.

“I can’t tell you exactly what to report because there are so many types of behavior to report. I can’t give you a list, but if you have a concern, report it. Let the investigative authorities look into it to determine if there is a violence risk,” he said.

Employees shouldn’t attempt to “predict” concerning behavior, he said, but work to prevent it.

“We’re not predicting, we’re assessing violence risk. Prediction is fallible. You can never 100% accurately predict what someone’s going to do.”

DLA employees can report concerning behavior by sending an email to insiderthreat@dla.mil.

Employees can view the video of Palarea’s presentation [here](#).