

Utah Disaster Crisis Counselor

April 2023 Newsletter

Emergency response planning in Utah schools

When a crisis happens in our schools, the impact is often deeply felt within the larger community. We all want to do everything possible to make sure our kids and school staff are safe—and feel safe—at school. Crisis prevention should be at the center of every school's emergency planning efforts. Schools must be prepared to respond to a crisis or emergency in an organized and thoughtful way.



In Utah, each Local Education Authority (LEA) is required to have a comprehensive emergency response plan. The plan should meet the specific needs of the school and school community to make sure students and school staff have a safe place to learn and work. The plan should include each of the 4 phases of emergency management planning recommended by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA):

1. Mitigation (also called prevention)
2. Preparation
3. Response
4. Recovery

The Utah State Board of Education (USBE) provides [guidance](#) to help LEAs develop a comprehensive emergency response plan. The following is a brief look into each of the 4 phases as it relates to school emergency preparedness efforts.

Mitigation (prevention):

The goal of mitigation is to be aware of potential hazards and prevent a crisis before it happens. Utah is a national leader in helping students and community members report potential threats at school through the [SafeUT](#) app. Positive school climates play a significant role in improving school safety.

- LEAs are required to maintain safety standards according to state statute ([53G-4-402\(18\)](#) and [R277-400](#)).
- Many schools conduct a safety audit each year to make sure school facilities, programs, policies, and procedures are in compliance with safety requirements. This includes working with local fire marshals and other community partners to inspect and verify that physical facilities are up to code and in proper working condition.
- Schools should also teach and promote healthy behaviors by implementing the [Utah Core Standards for Health Education](#).
- LEAs are required to participate in the School Climate Survey provided by the USBE. This survey gives school administrators data that informs their efforts in improving the school climate.
- LEAs are also required to have procedures in place, such as the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines, when a threat is made or reported to prevent violence and resolve conflict.

Preparation

Conducting emergency drills is the primary way schools prepare for a crisis. For example, LEAs are required to practice routine drills such as fire, earthquake, lockdown/lockout, and shelter in place.

- Practice drills should be done in a developmentally and age appropriate manner.
- School administrators should also consider the level of preparedness necessary for the population of students participating.
- Newly passed [legislation](#) requires each LEA to have a School Safety Specialist. This person will work with school administrators to implement school safety initiatives, training, and programs. They will also act as a point of contact for community partners and state leaders to improve the flow of communication between a school and professionals working in the various aspects of school safety. More information on this program will be sent out in the coming months.

Response

It's critical that school staff know what is expected of them in a crisis and how other agencies might be involved in the moments, days, and weeks after the crisis.

- The type of crisis will dictate the tactics used during the response period. Crisis planning should follow a timeline, starting with the immediate response and then including what will be done in the hours, days, or even weeks after the immediate crisis is resolved, until it is safe to return to school.
- A crisis response plan must consider situations when the needs of the crisis response are beyond the capacity of school personnel to successfully manage on their own. In these situations, LEAs should have established memorandum of agreements with other agencies so that additional response personnel and resources can be easily and quickly mobilized.
- The [Standard Response Protocol](#) (SRP) from the I Love You Guys foundation is widely seen as the gold standard for school crisis response training. Most LEAs in Utah have adopted this training method. It offers a uniform, planned, and practiced response to any incident that might happen. This helps students, parents, school personnel, and community responders know what to expect and how to act in a crisis situation. SRP materials are easily recognizable and can be seen in hallways and on doors throughout Utah schools.

Recovery

Recovery for an LEA or school means going back to a safe learning environment. However, personal recovery is more about healing and often happens slowly over time. Effective crisis response can help reduce the traumatic impact felt by an individual as well as the larger school community. It's important that crisis responders working in schools and in the community understand how they can help with recovery efforts.

- LEAs are encouraged to share their emergency response plan with students and parents/guardians, and school staff.
- Information about how to connect with services and resources at local mental health agencies, emergency management and relief agencies, and national hotlines should be provided. These can all help with different aspects of recovery.

Community members, families, and volunteers working in crisis response are encouraged to become familiar with their LEA emergency response plan. Plans can be found by visiting the school website or contacting the local school administration.

Other helpful resources:

[FEMA training: Emergency Management in the United States](#)

[USBE School Climate Survey](#)

[The Role of Districts in Preparing Emergency Response Plans: A Companion to the School Guide](#)

[Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines](#)

[Healing Our Schools After a Loss](#)

Upcoming training opportunity April 27, 2023 (Online via Zoom):

Seeds of Change: Growing what we need to know, do, and who we need to be as a crisis renewal leaders. Learn more & [Register](#)