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Sandy Hook Elementary School Shooting - Newtown...



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Newtown officers share lessons with Maine responders

By [Craig Crosby](mailto:Craig.Crosby@centralmaine.com)
Staff Writer

AUGUSTA — Schools in Newtown, Conn., have improved security since the deadly shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School; but the top change has been the addition of a fully trained school resource officer in every building.



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Staff photo by Andy Molloy FIRST RESPONDERS: Newtown, CT, Police Lt. Christopher

Vanghele, right, and Officer Jeff Silver discuss responding to the Sandy Hook Elementary School during the December 2012 shooting that claimed the lives of 20 children and six adults during a conference in Augusta on Tuesday April 23, 2013.

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"That is the single most important thing you can do to safeguard a school," Newtown police Lt. Christopher Vanghele said.

Vanghele and Newtown police Officer Jeff Silver spoke to hundreds of rapt emergency responders gathered Tuesday at the Augusta Civic Center for the 5th Annual Maine Partners in Emergency Preparedness Conference.

Their keynote address touched on lessons learned since the Dec. 14 school shooting and delved into the chaos and terror responders encountered.

Vanghele said one thought raced through his mind as he sped toward Sandy Hook: It can't be real. There had been many reports of shots being fired during Vanghele's 19-year career with the Newtown, Conn., Police Department, and they always ended with someone target practicing or some other ultimately harmless activity.

Those hopes ended with the radio transmissions of the first officers on scene — recordings that were replayed at the Civic Center on Tuesday.

"I heard my officer come over the air and say, 'He's coming at me,'" Vanghele said.

Vanghele entered the school through a side door with two other officers with a single mission: eliminating the threat.

"You could smell the gunpowder immediately," Vanghele said. "We saw rounds on the ground. We started seeing bodies."

There were 26 killed in all, including 20 children, all age 7 or younger, and six adult staff members. Adam Lanza, the 20-year-old shooter who police say shot and killed his mother at his nearby house before going to the school, shot and killed himself in a classroom as police closed in on him.

"We call this 'the event,'" said Vanghele, who still wears a horizontal stripe across his badge in Sandy Hook green. "We call it 12/14. It's always going to be 12/14. We're always going to be thinking of ourselves in terms of before Sandy Hook and after Sandy Hook."

Winthrop High School Principal Keith Morin said hearing Vanghele talk about the events at Sandy Hook brought a human element to the event that a written report never could.

He said it is important during such an event to let parents and the community know what is going on as quickly as possible. Morin said he heard from a number of concerned parents after the school shooting in Newtown.

Since then, schools in the district have made several changes. All doors are now locked and visitors must be buzzed in. Winthrop police make regular appearances in the town's schools, he said. Deputies also visit schools throughout the county.

"It creates an environment of ease," Morin said.

Morin said school administrators in Alternative Organizational Structure 97, which includes Winthrop and Fayette, have trained with emergency management and first responders to unify terminology as well.

"So when I hear someone over dispatch, I know the language I'm using, the language EMS is using, is relatable," Morin said.

The lessons from Sandy Hook go beyond the emergency response, Vanghele said. He remembers carrying a child from the school who later died, and then telling the parents the news.

"I remember the mother being very appreciative and saying how proud she was of me," he said. "One of the things I saw early on was the strength of the parents. You can see some of the best of humanity in something like this."

The grief from the shooting is still raw for Vanghele and Silver, an instructor who had led active shooter training many officers before they went into the school that day. The police veterans at times hesitated as they regained composure during their talk.

Despite the difficulty, the men say they decided to attend the two-day conference to share with emergency responders important lessons from Sandy Hook. Those lessons covered a wide range of topics, from the pragmatic — such as properly establishing an emergency operations center — to the more ephemeral — such as handling the chaos and surging adrenaline one feels when responding to a report of an active shooter.

"If there's anything we can do that will help save someone, we're on board," Silver said.

Vanghele was a school resource officer in 1999 when two students shot and killed 12 students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Colorado. Officers in that case delayed entering the school to coordinate the effort.

Vanghele determined long before the Sandy Hook killings that he would rush into the building and do whatever it took to eliminate the threat.

"One of the things that came out of Columbine is how we respond to active shooters," he said. "We don't wait anymore. When you have a scene like that, it's chaotic. Sometimes you feel like you're by yourself. You just need to get the job done. Your job isn't to hide. Your job is to stop the shooter from shooting and make the scene safe."

Vanghele said it had been a couple years since he had undergone active shooter training — during which officers are placed in scenarios designed to make the situation as realistic as possible — but he instinctively returned to what he had learned.

"The active shooter training helped me put aside the fear," Vanghele said. "I had something to do."

"Having that training helps," Silver said. "Training is still really important. They need to know how to work together."

The training worked in 2008 when Randall Hofland entered Stockton Springs Elementary School in Maine with a gun and held several students hostage, said Maine State Police Col. Robert

Williams. Every law enforcement officer in the state gets the same training, which helped coordinate efforts to disarm Hofland, who eventually was arrested before injuring anyone. Hofland is serving a 35-year-sentence for kidnapping and hostage-taking.

"We're a small state and small community," Williams said. "Everyone needs to work together to get things done."

Williams said a Sandy Hook-style shooting could happen anywhere, so it's important that responders be prepared as much as possible.

"The reality is anything could happen," Williams said. "It could be something nobody has been through before. You never know until you get there."

*Craig Crosby — 621-5642
ccrosby@centralmaine.com*

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