

## **Crisis Management Unit**

**Lisa A Sprague, Associate Chief of Police  
Florida State University Police Department**

## **Abstract**

*Florida State University recognized that the stress of college life can be overwhelming and students find themselves in crisis, away from their usual support systems. Thus, a Crisis Management Unit (CMU) was created to respond to students, faculty and staff in crisis. The CMU consists of one doctoral level psychology student and one specially trained Florida State University police officer who are on call 24 hours. This team's goal is to protect life, limb, and property. These team members are dealing with individuals suffering from distress due to mental, emotional, and/or substance abuse problems, such individuals are treated with as much courtesy and consideration as feasible. However, any reasoned belief by the officer that an impaired individual is posing an immediate threat to life, limb, or property causes the officer to affect mental health custody holds. Team members provide on-scene crisis management and may also refer and transport the individual to appropriate University or community agencies.*

## **Introduction of the Organization**

The Florida State University, one of the largest and oldest of the ten institutions of higher learning in the State University System of Florida, had its beginning as early as 1823 when the Territorial Legislature began to plan a higher education system. In each succeeding decade, Florida State University has added to its academic organization and presently is comprised of seventeen independent schools and colleges. It has expanded from the original few acres and buildings to 513 buildings on 1,432.2 acres, including the downtown Tallahassee main campus of 463.4 acres, a farm which for many decades supplied the Florida State College for Women with food, the Seminole Reservation—a recreational facility, the Marine Laboratory on the Gulf Coast, the FAMU/FSU College of Engineering facility, the National High Magnetic Field Laboratory and Division of Research at Innovation Park, and the branch campus in Panama City, Florida. One hundred fifty-two years after its founding Florida State University started the 2003-2004 academic year with a student population of almost 38,000 and recognition as a major graduate research institution with an established international reputation.

Florida State University is a comprehensive degree granting university, offering baccalaureate degrees in 94 programs, master's degrees in 107 programs, advanced master's/specialist degrees in 28 programs, doctorates in 73 programs and two professional degrees. The university offers fully accredited programs in both law (J.D.) and medicine (M.D.).

Degree programs at branch campuses in Panama City, Sarasota and the Republic of Panama are also available. The Ringling Museum in Sarasota, affiliated with Florida

State University, is the largest museum/university complex in the U.S. and houses one of the most significant collections of fine art in North America.

In addition to the branch campuses, the university offers a variety of overseas study opportunities for students during the regular academic year, as well as in special summer programs. Florida State University study centers are located in Florence, Italy; Panama City, Republic of Panama; Valencia, Spain; and London, England.

During the Fall 2007 semester, Florida State University had 55 National Merit Scholars, 12 National Achievement Scholars, and 15 Hispanic Scholars enrolled at Florida State University. The middle 50 percent SAT score for freshmen entering in Fall 2007 is 1140-1280.

With a total of 41,065 students enrolled in Fall 2007, the student body is comprised of 76.7% undergraduate, 20.8% graduate and 2.5% unclassified. Women account for 55.7% of the enrollment, and minorities comprise 25.1% of total enrollment. Students from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, as well as dozens of countries, are represented.

### **Statement of the Problem/Initiative**

A mental health /emotional crisis can happen at any time. College student mental health concerns are becoming more common place, more demanding, and a much larger focus on college and university campuses. Faculty and staff spend countless hours each year addressing the needs of students with mental health issues that range from anxiety and depression to autism and Asperser's Disorder. Furthermore, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students and the third leading cause of death among all youth 15- 24 years old. When a teen or college student commits suicide everyone is

affected. Florida State University recognized that a campus wide support network, mental health services and crisis response unit that can intervene and offer the resources needed would improve the overall improvement in student performance, graduation and retention.

## **Design**

The design/methodology of the Florida State University Crisis Management Unit (CMU) involves five distinct and sequential steps. The accomplishment of the goals and activities within each step was essential in order to develop and implement this exceptional best practice.

### **Identification of the Need**

Crises that threaten life, limb, and property have occurred at our colleges and universities long before the Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois mass murders. As deplorable as these incidents are, there have been innumerable crisis involving individual students that are microcosms of the larger events that make news headlines. These microcosms—individual-based events involving severe mental/emotional stress and their resolution—are the focus and purpose of the CMU.

Specifically, as a result of an incident on this campus that occurred some thirty years, and anecdotal information received from other colleges and universities, Florida State University realized that there was a significant need to respond adequately to individual students suffering from inordinate stress that, in turn, might lead to actual or potential threats to life, limb, property, and/or disruptions. Specifically, such inordinate

stress, unable to be coped with by the student, could very well result in suicide, homicide, personal injury, and/or disruptions to the normal day-to-day life of the University.

Hence, the need was identified, i.e., the requirement that this University establish an organizational unit and systematic approach to intervening in situations wherein a student in severe emotional crisis presents a threat to himself, herself, and/or others.

### **Current Resources Addressing the Need**

Once the need is identified, a type of “audit” is required. That is, what does the University currently do or what resources does it currently have to address such crises. The University Health Center certainly had counselors available on an “8 to 5” basis, and the members of the University Police Department were certainly trained to respond—in *traditional* fashion—to situations involving actual or potential violence.

However, upon analysis of current resources, and in recognition of the requirement that the University provide a more holistic and humanistic approach to crisis intervention, it was determined that current resources were inadequate.

### **Filling in the Gaps**

The next distinct step in the design/methodology of this project involves specific identification of the gaps that exist between what is required and what is on-hand. First and foremost, the University realized that it had no planned, trained, multi-organizational unit available to deal with individual student crises. This recognition, in turn, led to insights concerning unfilled gaps, including:

- ' Composition of the Unit (Answer: mental health professionals, police, other individuals or agency representatives)
  
- ' Achievable mission and goals of the unit. (Answer: appropriate response and prevention of escalation).
  
- ' Resource Requirements. (Answer: Trained psychologists and trained police officers; appropriate training; budget; communication/informational channels to members of the University community, particularly students; regular scheduling of on-call personnel).

### **Eliminating the Gaps**

Once the gaps were identified and basic resources identified, certain actions had to be undertaken to gain approval of the project, obtain the required resources, and actually implement the availability and utility of the CMU. These actions included:

- ' Approval from higher authority (Chief of Police, Dean of College of Arts and Sciences, and Chair of the Department of Psychology)
  
- ' Identification of required personnel (doctoral students in Psychology, police officers, and trainers).

- ' Budget (pay for doctoral student in psychology, on-call pay for police officers, and training expenses)
  
- ' Communications/informational channels (*Student Handbook*; Police Department general orders, i.e., policies and procedures; various media such as cable, campus newspapers, and web pages; orientations; and printed materials.)
  
- ' Other individual or agency liaisons (Thagard Student Health Center, local hospitals and mental health facilities, and other law enforcement agencies should crisis escalate into hostage/barricaded person situation)
  
- ' SOP Development (set of procedures designed to handle general and specific crisis situations)
  
- ' Scheduling (ensuring that there is “24/7” availability of personnel comprising CMU unit, i.e., 1 doctoral student in psychology and 1 police officer)

### **Monitoring and Evaluating**

After the gaps are eliminated and the CMU unit formed/personnel assigned, it is only a matter of time until the unit is called into action in response to a crisis situation.

This monitoring basically includes:

- ' Number of successful interventions, whereby student is calmed down, referred to appropriate assistance, or transported to hospital or mental health facility.
  
- ' Number of unsuccessful interventions, whereby student is not calmed down and is forcibly transported to other facility, or when situation escalates to violence (inflicted on self or others) or disruption of normal campus activities.
  
- ' Identification of service or resource gaps not originally identified and resolved.
  
- ' Identification of deficiencies in relationship to SOPs and/or training.
  
- ' Survey responses from students experiencing CMU intervention; survey responses from general student or University community population.
  
- ' Development and implementation of new plans, SOPs, training requirements, scheduling, information/communications, etc.—based on monitoring and evaluation.

### **Implementation**

Students' overall mental health and personal crises resulting from emotional / mental health problems are not static or predictable situations. The entire CMU concept, although based on solid needs and appropriate resources, is fluid. Hence, once the CMU

unit was established and operating, perhaps the most important element of the design/methodology rubric is the constant monitoring/evaluating that must be done.

Selection and training of personnel is paramount to the success of the program. Some time should be spent interviewing and counseling officers and students selected. Additional time is spent in advanced training.

The initial proposal called for the response teams to be activated by a phone call from any person to a main dispatch center. This procedure was somewhat dangerous for both plain clothes officers and civilian Doctoral students. The procedure was modified to require a uniformed officer respond prior to the activation of the CMU Unit.

When officer(s) from the police department confront a mentally or emotionally disturbed individual, and the officer after evaluating and assessing the situation, ***do not*** believe that there is ***immediate threat*** of harm to the individual or others requests the presence of the CMU.

Another issue that surfaced involved transportation of students to and from the hospital or counseling centers. Police procedures involve those being transported under a custody situation be handcuffed. Mental health professional advocated the use of no restraints.. For the safety of the officers and the student it was determined that handcuffs would be utilized however, transportation would be provide in an unmarked police car.

## **Benefits**

A crisis can occur any hour of any day to anyone. It can be caused by things in a person's control or well out of reach. The Crisis Management unit benefits anyone going through a crisis, or having difficulty coping with personal situations twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year.

The goal is to provide immediate intervention to people experiencing emotional crisis. Early intervention in a time of need can prevent hospitalization and stabilize acute situations. Our Response Teams provide: immediate on-site assessment, crisis intervention and counseling; linkage and referral; follow-up to promote crisis resolution; and evaluation and arrangement for inpatient hospitalization as necessary

The timely, appropriate, and humane response by CMU team members to situations involving emotionally or mentally disturbed persons, or to situations involving persons significantly impaired by alcohol or substance abuse, is of critical importance to the overall well being of the University community. Team members and officers must respond in such a way as to ensure the health and well being of the individual, while simultaneously ensuring the safety of all others.