DEEP DIVE INTO URBAN SECURITY

→ UNIONTOWN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT USES X-RAY SCANNERS

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BACKGROUND

In January 2018, a high school student in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, was overheard making threats on the bus on the way home from school. Another student told her parents, who called 911, which alerted the school police, the city police and the state police.

The Pennsylvania State Police conducted an investigation and recovered weapons from the home of the student making the threats. The Uniontown Area School District reacted swiftly, putting new security measures in place to prevent students and visitors from bringing weapons into the schools.

After a serious threat by a student was thwarted, the Uniontown Area School District in Pennsylvania quickly adopted new security measures at the high school, including X-ray screening of all backpacks and bags, to prevent students and visitors from bringing weapons into the school.

Donald Gmitter is Chief of Police for the school district, as well as the School Safety and Security Coordinator. Retired from the Uniontown City Police, he leads a team of 15, including five school police officers, who provide security for roughly 2,200 students districtwide, with just under 900 at the high school (grades 9-12).

Chief Gmitter spoke about the changes made at Uniontown Area High School after the incident; in particular, the installation of X-ray machines to scan students' belongings. The information he shared was used to develop this case study.

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES FOR SCHOOL SAFETY

The morning after a serious threat was thwarted brought the first preventative measures.

"That morning a state trooper rode that bus from the bus garage through all the morning bus routes to school [with the students]," said Gmitter. "We had a large police presence here at the high school, and there was an additional police presence at all of our schools that day."

But that was only a temporary measure. January in Pennsylvania means freezing temperatures, and Gmitter and his team needed a way to screen students more efficiently and thoroughly than by manually searching the bags of randomly selected individuals stopped on their way into the building.

"We had a mathematically random number that was chosen, so every single school day somebody would literally stand at the door to count every eighth kid, every 13th kid," said Gmitter. "The number changed every day.

X-RAY MARKS THE SPOT

Gmitter and his team met with the Uniontown City Police and the Pennsylvania State Police to discuss what they could do to ensure that a future threat didn't become a tragedy. The school superintendent, Dr. Charles Machesky, suggested that they install X-ray machines to screen students' belongings and found room in the budget to cover the purchase.

"It has worked tremendously well. Now every kid gets searched. They know what to do, and it's a smooth process," said Gmitter, "With the machines, it actually takes less time to search every kid versus the mathematically random number."

Gmitter came across Smiths Detection, a manufacture of X-ray screening solutions through a quick internet search. He found a dealer (Access Control Systems based on Milford, NH) that was able to provide a quote within days, based on a questionnaire covering the dimensions of the doors and other facility information. Following two Smiths Detection HI-SCAN 6046si X-ray scanners were delivered and installed at the high school within a month.

The HI-SCAN 6046si X-ray scanners are freestanding and able to accommodate backpacks and many instrument cases (for band and orchestra students). School security personnel monitor the X-ray images at the machines as the bags go through.

"We didn't get something big enough that you could put a suitcase through because we're not going to see those. We're typically talking about backpacks, book bags," said Gmitter. "If it's something that doesn't fit through the X-ray machine, we visually inspect it, and if we see something suspicious, we open the case and look through it."

BEST PRACTICE: ONLY ONE ENTRANCE

All the high school students now enter through one entrance, where the two Smiths Detection X-ray scanners are located. They also have two walk-through metal detectors to screen students and visitors.

Making the school a one-entry facility was a priority, says Gmitter, and they chose the entrance most students typically used already because it was closest to the parking lot and the bus lanes.

"The best practice is to have one entrance. We actually cut out the other entrance for anybody who was getting dropped off or kids who are walking to school," he said. "That way, we ensured that every kid who comes into the building comes in through the same doors and goes through the same process."

The space also allows for enough room for emergency egress, which would likely not have worked in another part of the building without some construction or modification, he added.

X-RAY MAKES BAG SEARCHES MORE EFFICIENT, EFFECTIVE

Gmitter estimates that his team is able to scan about 800 articles per half hour with the X-ray machines so that all the students can get in between 7 a.m. when the doors open and before the first homeroom bell sounds at 7:40a.m.

He says they find illicit items, like vapes, "all the time," but fortunately not many weapons have been found in students' bags. "A handful of knives and a homemade dagger, but no guns."

The school buildings are also used by community groups and other outside organizations, and all those visitors are subject to the same process. School officers have found three loaded handguns on visitors over the past year in screening during after hour uses for other groups. These searches of non-school visitors are done to ensure that no one is placing something somewhere in the school where a student can access it later.

All Uniontown Area High School students now enter through one entrance, where two Smiths Detection HI-SCAN 6046si X-ray machines are located, and every bag is searched. Donald Gmitter, Chief of Police for the school district, says these tools have expedited the student screening process and improved overall safety.

(image courtesy of Donald Gmitter/Uniontown Area School District)

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"For the most part, we've got a lot of positive reaction from parents and visitors. They don't mind the little extra time to get into the school versus walking right in," said Gmitter. "The parents are very appreciative and accepting of the processes that we have implemented to keep the kids safe. We have had very few complaints."

Gmitter says the X-ray machines have been a deterrent against multiple illicit items, including tobacco and vapes. Those students are referred to the principal and the items are seized and packaged into evidence. Anything they think may include a controlled substance is sent to the State Police Crime Lab for analysis.

Overall, the X-ray machines have been an asset that makes a huge improvement in the school's safety and security, says Gmitter.

"Prior to this, we would have had to hand search every bag for weapons, and we can only do a certain number per day, where now every single bag is searched," he said. "It has expedited the entrance process and has greatly improved the safety overall. Again, not just for us, for any of the outside organizations that utilize the high school."

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