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NSU seminar helps schools make emergency plans

At the anniversary of the Virginia Tech shootings, NSU conducted an emergency preparedness seminar geared to campuses.

BY JULIE LEVIN

Special to The Miami Herald

A year after the nation's deadliest school shooting, an effort has been launched in South Florida to focus on the safety and security of school campuses.

More than 100 school administrators, law enforcement officers, faculty members and legal experts from across the nation gathered at Nova Southeastern University in Davie on April 25 and 26 for a seminar on preventing and responding to a range of hazards.

Hosted by the NSU Center for Bioterrorism and All-Hazards Preparedness, one of seven facilities nationwide for emergency training in both man-made and natural disasters, the seminar was in the spring to give participants a head start on having a plan in place by the next school year.

"Given what has happened in Northern Illinois and Virginia Tech, it has reinforced the need to focus on campuses to really gather up and consolidate information and present it in a national forum," said Cecelia Rokusek, the center's program manager.

32 KILLED

At Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., on April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people before committing suicide.

Campus Safety and Security: A Call to Action for Higher Education was geared toward college and university administrators. But the message of campus safety is a critical one for all levels, Rokusek said.

"Schools everywhere need to make sure they are prepared for the worst-case scenarios. This seminar will provide the tools necessary to help make campuses safer and prepared for all emergencies," she said.

The conference featured experts from the National School Safety Center, Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Miami-Dade Police Department and Florida Department of Health.

Their topics included legal issues, impact of the media, changing campus and societal environments, crisis intervention, emergency planning, communications and risk assessment.

PARTNERSHIP

While it begins on campus, Rokusek said true emergency preparedness has to involve a partnership between campus and community, including area hospitals, churches and organizations.

"Emergency preparedness is an interdisciplinary, multifaceted issue that we can't operate in isolation," she said.

The seminar was the first of its kind in Florida. Participants had a chance to show what they had learned the second day by running through a series of exercises involving potential disaster scenarios.

Center Director Leonard Levy said the No. 1 goal is a plan of prevention -- but knowing no plan is foolproof, everyone must know their role in the event of an emergency.

AVOID CHAOS

"You can succeed by having people know how to respond in an organized way that avoids as much chaos as possible," he said.

The center was created in response to the 9/11 attacks. Two years ago, it received a grant to expand nationwide for training healthcare professionals, first responders and students in case of a large-scale public health emergency or mass casualty incidents.

Six other centers across the country also were chosen, and all seven centers have joined to form a group known as the National Education Strategy Team, or NEST, which is financed by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

For information on the Center for Bioterrorism and All-Hazards Preparedness, visit www.nova.edu/allhazards