

Guest Commentary

Va. Tech lessons seen in DSU response

By Marty Ficke

The lessons learned from Virginia Tech shootings were put into action on the Delaware State University campus in the early hours of Friday.

As police responded to a double shooting near a campus building at DSU and struggled with how to notify students of the safety concerns, it was difficult to ignore parallels to the April 16 killings in Blacksburg, Va.

There's no denying that Virginia Tech University officials made mistakes. The panel commissioned by Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine made that much clear in a comprehensive report released late last month that evaluated each stage of the University's actions before, during and after the shooting.

The report incited a new flurry of activity in the blame game that began in the days following the shootings. Many criticized the failure by Virginia Tech administrators to address warning signs that gunman Seung-Hui Cho suffered from severe mental disturbances. Others focused their attacks more narrowly on University President Charles Steger by calling for his resignation.

A need to place blame for such a tragedy is only natural. Yet to really move forward with improving security and making our campuses safer, the answers won't be found by pointing the finger at a single person or identifying the flaws in Virginia's privacy and mental health laws. Instead, our focus should be on correcting the fundamental problems with campus security.

At a law enforcement summit held in the wake of the Virginia

"In order to protect the safety of students during campus shootings and the well-being of the public during an emergency situation, law enforcement officials must be able to act quickly and decisively."

— Marty Ficke

Tech shootings, New York officials at the local, state and federal levels gathered to discuss what university officials had — and perhaps more importantly, had not done — after Cho began his killing spree at West Ambler Johnston residence hall.

One of the clear messages that emerged from this meeting was that the Virginia Tech and Blacksburg police departments misjudged the initial shootings in which Cho killed two victims by treating it as a routine police matter rather than a public emergency. Officers at the scene believed that the crime was committed by a single shooter who had left campus — a conclusion that proved to be tragically wrong.

However, law enforcement officers also had their hands tied: neither the Virginia Tech police nor the Blacksburg police had the unilateral authority necessary to order campus closures and block off classroom buildings. They were also unable to send out a warning to the student body after the first set of shootings. Instead, Virginia Tech's emergency management procedure dictated that the police could only make recommendations to a committee of university officials who had the final call. In this case, the ultimate decision not to err on the side of caution and send an emergency alert to students was a failure that likely made

Cho's subsequent classroom rampage even deadlier.

The police's inability to blast out an e-mail to a campus listserv, post an announcement on the Virginia Tech Web site or prevent students from entering a classroom is likely attributable to nothing more than a bureaucratic oversight. But it is an important one that is often overlooked by universities across the country. Virginia Tech's police chief was not directly represented on any of the university's campus safety committees and did not have an active role in developing its emergency management plans — an oversight that made the emergency notification process unnecessarily complicated.

This is just one example of the kind of multi-layered, complex bureaucracy that reflects the misguided approach many universities have taken to campus safety. Security officials have become bogged down in attempts to follow chains of command and adhere to ever-present privacy concerns to a point that student safety, campus security and common-sense law enforcement procedures are ignored. As a result, their ability to respond to emergencies in a timely and effective manner has suffered — ultimately making campuses and students more vulnerable.

Since 9/11, law enforcement officers in New York City have

been trained to be on guard in preparation for a terrorist attack at all times. Officers treat every emergency situation as a potential attack, capable of mass casualties and chaos. Public safety takes precedent even when facts are blurry — meaning that an isolated rogue shooter is treated just as seriously as a report of a bomb.

In order to protect the safety of students during campus shootings and the well-being of the public during an emergency situation, law enforcement officials must be able to act quickly and decisively. Schools would be much better positioned to deal with emergencies if they trained officers to anticipate the worst rather than underestimate the seriousness of a situation. Emergency management plans should facilitate — not hinder — this ability. The planning process is useless if it does not involve the law enforcement officials who are charged with making critical decisions in the face of an emergency.

While it is still too early to fully evaluate Delaware State's response, the preventive approach it appears to have taken is a solid sign that campuses have become more willing to give law enforcement officials the power they need to act and help prevent a repeat of Virginia Tech.

Editor's note: Marty Ficke is the director of investigations for SES Resources International, and is the former special agent in charge of the New York Office of Investigations for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in the Department of Homeland Security.