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## LESSON LEARNED

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### School Emergency Response Operations: Using a Safe Word during Lockdowns

#### SUMMARY

School officials should consider establishing a “safe word” to communicate an “all clear” message that can be delivered following an emergency lockdown.

#### DESCRIPTION

On October 31, 2008, a man carrying a handgun entered the Stockton Springs Elementary School in Stockton Springs, Maine, before classes began for the day. The gunman approached students in the gymnasium, followed the fifth grade class of 11 students into their classroom, and then forced the teacher out of the room at gunpoint. School officials initiated lockdown procedures, contacted 9-1-1 dispatch, and began evacuating students by bus. However, fourth grade students in a classroom adjacent to the one held by the gunman were unable to evacuate and remained in lockdown. Within 17 minutes of the initial call to 9-1-1 dispatch, law enforcement officers apprehended the gunman and secured the scene without firing any shots or suffering any injuries.

The town of Stockton Springs is located along the Maine coast. Stockton Springs Elementary School has approximately 90 students from kindergarten to the fifth grade.

The fourth grade classroom followed the Stockton Springs Elementary School lockdown procedures and stayed completely hidden and quiet during the hostage situation. The teacher barricaded students with bookshelves so they would not be visible to the gunman. After securing the scene, law enforcement officers attempted to deliver an “all clear” message on three occasions. However, neither the teacher nor the students responded to these messages because the person was unfamiliar to them. The teacher waited to release the students until a school official whose voice was familiar entered the classroom and confirmed that the emergency was over. The after-action report (AAR) recommended that school officials identify a password or “safe word” to be delivered following a school lockdown. Additionally, the AAR noted that the message should be delivered by a person who is familiar to students and teachers.

School officials should consider establishing a “safe word” to communicate an “all clear” message that can be delivered following an emergency lockdown.

#### CITATIONS

Leibowitz, Rayna. Preparedness Specialist, Maine Emergency Management Agency. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 13 Aug 2009.

Maine Emergency Management Agency. *Lessons Learned: Hostage Situation in Stockton Springs*. 13 Feb 2009.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=35504>

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