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Every time a school shooting happens, 'it rips the Band-Aids off' in the Parkland community

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A shooting at an elementary school in Texas has left the country reeling, and has scarred South Floridians reliving their own tragedy from four years ago as if it was yesterday.

Students should be celebrating the carefree final days of the school year, but instead they're on edge with the news of another school shooting. School officials are reminding students and their families that schools are safe and secure due to measures taken after the Parkland shooting.

At a news conference Wednesday morning, Broward Sheriff Gregory Tony stressed the same point, and offered his condolences to those in Texas. "Here in Broward County we know precisely what that feels like," he said. "We've been down that path."

To make matters worse, schools experienced an uptick in threats this year, many of which were made on social media.

The police have been on high alert: On Wednesday, Coral Springs Middle School went on a Code Red lockdown after students reported overhearing one student threatening to shoot another, said Officer Chris Swinson, a spokesperson for Coral Springs Police.

Police searched students' bags and there turned out to be no threat. The student was threatening to hit another with rubber bands and a piece of

plastic. But Swinson said the Code Red came out of “an abundance of caution” after the mass shooting Tuesday.

“The kids were on edge, so they told school administrators and locked it down just to make sure,” Swinson said.



Broward Schools Superintendent Vickie Cartwright and Broward Sheriff Gregory Tony on Wednesday discussed the tragedy that unfolded in Uvalde, Texas. “Our hearts are broken for that community — the Uvalde community,” Cartwright said. “And I pray for strength and unity as they pick up the pieces of this

horrific event that they are now facing.” (Mike Stocker / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Broward Schools superintendent Vickie Cartwright joined Tony at the news conference, and reiterated that there was no credible viable threat to Broward schools Wednesday.

“However, we know that unfortunately this is the place where we had our own tragic murders and as a result of that we do have people from across the county and unfortunately from across the world who will make senseless and baseless threats,” she said. “My message is we will take every one of those seriously and we address every one of those to the fullest of our abilities.”

Cartwright said Tuesday’s massacre was the 30th kindergarten-through-high-school tragedy this year alone.

“The 30th,” she said, pausing. “Our hearts are broken for that community — the Uvalde community. And I pray for strength and unity as they pick up the pieces of this horrific event that they are now facing.”

She stressed that there are resources available for those who are struggling that are free of charge to any family that has a child enrolled in Broward County Public Schools.

“To my Broward community, we are here,” she said. “I want you to know that Broward County Public Schools is committed to providing a safe environment for our children and our staff.”



Safety at school

Broward County sheriff's deputies are monitoring cameras and beefing up law enforcement at schools, Tony said.

Students who survived the Valentine's Day 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, and the parents whose children were killed, have advocated for safety measures that would help prevent another school shooting. Schools in Broward and around the state installed single points of entry in recent years, which are fences or barriers that limit outsiders' access to the front office.

Lori Alhadeff, who lost her daughter Alyssa in the shooting, successfully lobbied for Alyssa's Law, which requires a mobile panic button inside Florida schools.

Some schools are attempting to calm parents' and students' nerves by reminding them of campus security measures.

At Manatee Bay Elementary in Weston, Principal Heather DeVaughn told parents she would meet with her administrative team and campus monitors on Thursday for a full review of school safety procedures and protocols. The city of Weston reached out to other school principals to urge them to do the same, she said.

“Nothing is ever foolproof, but there are always proactive measures we can take and procedures that can be tightened or implemented,” she said in a statement.

DeVaughn shared links on how to talk to children about mass shootings for parents who may want to broach the subject with their kids.

Old wounds reopened

Teams of therapy dogs from Canine Assisted Therapy and their handlers visited Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on Wednesday morning, the way they’ve done multiple times over the past four years.

On Wednesday, they helped brighten up the day for arriving students. The heavy lift was to comfort staff, many of whom were visibly shaken, according to program manager Elise Samet.

“It hits so close to home for them, especially the teachers who were huddled in classrooms with their students in 2018,” Samet said. “It kind of brings you right back to that day.”

One of those teachers was Diana Haneski, who brings her therapy dog River to school with her every day. River was there Wednesday with fellow therapy dogs: the two goldendoodles Douglas and Theo, and Rowan the golden retriever.



Diana Haneski brings River, a therapy dog, to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. River was there Thursday with fellow therapy dogs: the two goldendoodles Douglas and Theo, and Rowan the golden retriever. Haneski is seen with River in this 2018 photo. (Ray Haneski / AP)

Eagles' Haven, a wellness center set up for the MSD community, offers a support group every Sunday at 10:30 a.m. Program director Rebecca Jarquin runs the group, and aims to help participants with different strategies to deal with the stress and anxiety of mass grief, the pandemic, the sentencing trial for the Parkland shooter, or just daily life.

This weekend, she'll focus on how to reduce anxiety resulting from multiple shootings around the country, including recent mass shootings at a grocery store in Buffalo and at the elementary school in Uvalde, Texas.

"Every time it happens in another community, it rips the Band-Aids off this community," she said. "We've been through it."

Eagles' Haven is open to provide support to anyone in the community who is in crisis. Walk-ins, calls, and referrals are welcome, she said. And staff will also hold support groups elsewhere in the community as needed.

'So many opportunities' for change

Sheriff Tony acknowledged how each mass shooting causes a flood of emotions to surface and "creates a level of fear and uncertainty in our community," he said.

On Tuesday night, he says he received about 100 text messages and phone calls from law enforcement officials, teachers, friends, and family asking if they should send their children to school on Wednesday and the days after.

He said he assured them that kids should be in school, and he feels confident that in the years since Parkland, schools are safer and law enforcement is able to respond more quickly and with better tools to stop a shooter.

But he also stressed the need for legislation to prevent mass shootings, rather than focusing only on law enforcement response.

He remarked that there were "so many opportunities" to offer change since Sandy Hook, since Columbine, since Parkland, and yet nothing has changed substantially enough to stop mass shootings, especially in schools.

Tony voiced his support of universal background checks and called out AR-style weapons as being a "combat-ready weapon designed to destroy" when in the hands of someone who is mentally unwell.

“We are not the only country that is dealing with mentally ill people, but we are the only one that is having a high-volume [of mass violence],” he said. “How many more of these incidents need to take place before we put our political differences aside and stop looking at this as a red issue or a blue issue — it’s an American issue.”

In the last two years or so since the Threat Management Unit launched, the Sheriff’s Office has conducted some 1,600 investigations of people of interest. Those investigations resulted in more than 200 arrests, he said.

In more than 550 of those cases, the Sheriff’s Office referred the people they investigated to mental health care facilities “so they can get the care that they need,” he said. Of that group, close to 200 of them have continued with mental health care. “So that is telling me that they want it and we just have to give them access to it.”