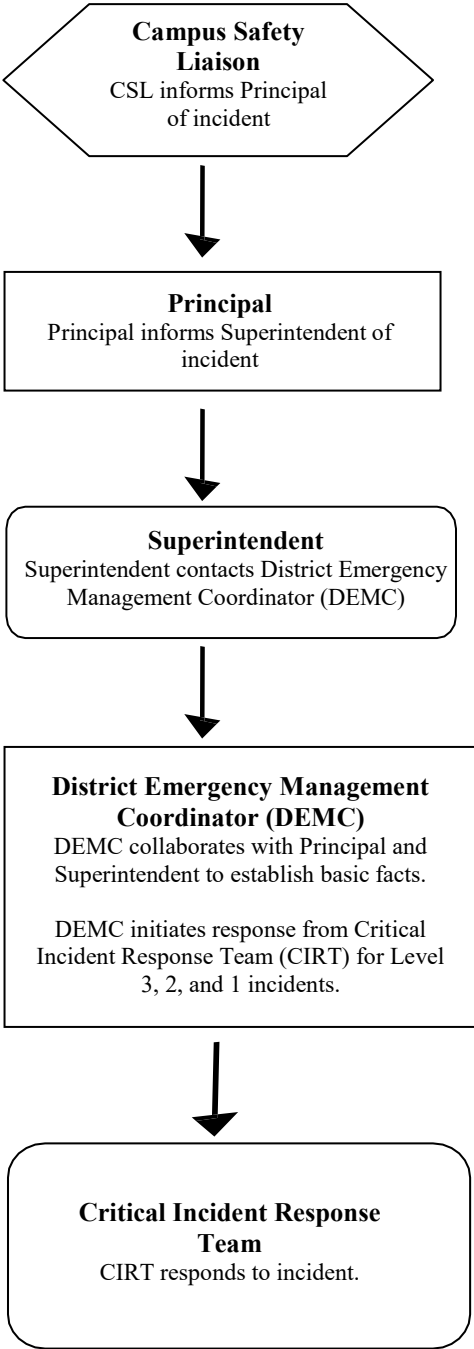
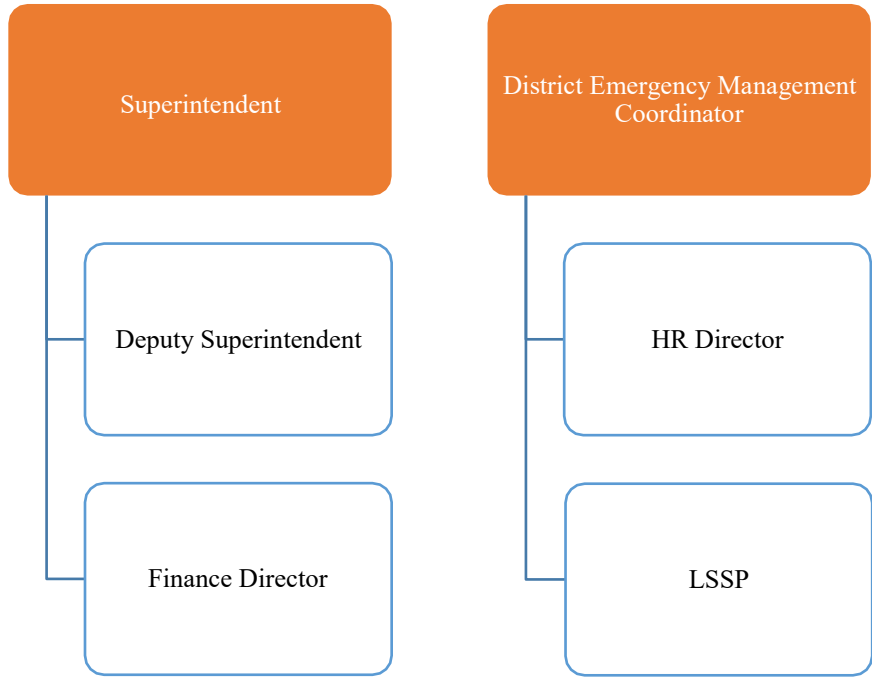


**COMMUNICATION FLOW CHART**



# SUCCESSION PLAN



## **ADMINISTRATOR'S GENERAL CHECKLIST FOR EACH CRITICAL INCIDENT**

- Verify incident.
- Notify Superintendent's Office. (If critical call 911)
- Initiate campus phone tree to inform of early meeting before school.
- Communicate with family members of child involved in incident. Get as much information from family and ask permission to share with teachers & students. Ask if funeral will be private or open.
- Assemble and brief SAFETY TEAM at onset of each critical incident to clarify facts and avoid rumors.
- Request your campus safety liaison (CSL), who is a member of the District Critical Incident Response Team, to attend SAFETY TEAM meeting.
- Assess LEVEL of Critical Incident & Determine LEVEL of response needed:**
  - Campus Level = handled by campus
  - District Level / Community Level = Inform Superintendent
- Contact your campus safety liaison. The CSL is a trained member of the District's Critical Incident Response Team.
- At briefing, request core campus team members to carry out pre-planned responsibilities.
- Designate rooms/space for individual & large group counseling.
- Determine what and how INFORMATION will be shared.**
  - Mandatory faculty meeting to provide facts as known.
  - Provide teachers with prepared statement to be read to students.
  - Prepare statement for media collaborating with UTCSS Communication Dept. Letter to parents. (sample letters in Counselor Crisis Handbook & Share Drive)
  - Classroom discussions with students should be limited to facts.
  - Direct teachers to send students to counseling area if student needs additional counseling.
  - Assign one office person to answer phone and disseminate facts from fact sheet and direct calls.
  - Provide office staff with a written statement to respond to parent inquiries, and any pertinent information.
  - Assess need for evening meeting with parents/ community.
- In case of death, student or teacher's desk should NOT be removed immediately. Leaving it for a few days may help acknowledge the death.
- At the end of day schedule an operational debriefing with staff after school to review events of the day.
- Provide information about UTCSS's EAP/Employee Assistance Program. (Detailed information on UTCSS Website.)

## **DEATH OF STUDENT OR STAFF**

### **SUGGESTED GUIDELINES**

#### **Day of Notification of Death/Crisis**

#### **Faculty**

1. Campus principal initiates “Crisis Phone Tree” to all faculty/staff informing them of the crisis and requesting their arrival at school at 7:30 a.m. to attend a special faculty meeting.
2. Meeting with crisis team members is held to plan tentative activities for the next day.

#### **DAY ONE**

1. Campus principal reviews the facts of the case with all the faculty/staff to dispel rumors, to discuss the plan of the day, to establish the procedures for coordinated review of information, and to allow the faculty members to express their feelings. Faculty/staff are encouraged to lend support to one another.
2. A member of the crisis team describes some of the feelings the students may be experiencing following the death/crisis...disbelief, anger, denial, sadness, loss.
3. Teachers are encouraged to allow the expression of grief in their classes in whatever way and to whatever extent they are comfortable. The guiding principle is to return to the normal routine as soon as possible within each class and within the school.
4. The teachers are asked to dispel rumors wherever possible, and to discourage any “glorification” of the event. For example, if a student is heard to say, “I wouldn’t have the guts to kill myself!” the teacher can respond, “Suicide is not a brave act! It is far more courageous to go on living and to face your problems each day as you and I do.”
5. The guidance office establishes a crisis control center. Additional support personnel may be drawn from the building, other buildings, neighboring districts, and community resources.
6. In dealing with suicide, a Crisis Response member should be designated to occupy the “empty chair.” When deemed appropriate, the teacher should remove the chair or rearrange the seats.
7. The staff is asked to attend a faculty meeting immediately after school to review the events of the day.

8. The principal meets with campus staff to:
  - a. Review the known facts and to dispel rumors.
  - b. De-mythologize the act. (This is not heroism!)
  - c. Inform them of the crisis center.
  - d. Encourage them to express their reactions in whatever way is appropriate for them. (All responses are acceptable, from severe upset to no reaction whatsoever.)
  - e. Discuss possible guilt or feelings of responsibility.
  - f. Discuss possible fears for their own safety and that of their siblings and peers.
  - g. Ask them to be supportive of one another and to encourage any friend whom is upset to ask to go to the crisis center.
  - h. Reassure them that any adult in the building is available to help.
  - i. Encourage them to discuss their feelings with their parents.
9. Phone calls are made to parents of individual students who are unusually upset during the day. This is ideally handled by the support staff who can explain the student's reactions to the parents and give appropriate advice as to how the parents should handle their son/daughter. It may be necessary for parents to come to school and take the youth home for the day or for the youth to receive immediate professional help.
10. All building staff are assembled after school to:
  - a. Allow for the expression of feeling and mutual support. (After a full day of dealing with their own emotional responses and that of their students, the teachers are generally quite drained.)
  - b. Review the events of the day.
  - c. Review the characteristics of high-risk students (those who seem especially upset or depressed or show other signs of not dealing well), and compile a list based on staff observations of individual student reactions during the day.
  - d. Announce the wake and funeral arrangements and encourage staff, in accordance with the district guidelines, to attend and provide support to students and their families. (The building principal will designate which staff members will attend to represent the district.)
11. When appropriate, have a designated area open in the building, with supervision provided, so students/parents may meet or gather.
12. Everyone should return to a normal schedule as soon as possible.

## **DAY TWO**

1. If deemed necessary, the Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) continues counseling students and meeting with concerned staff.
2. CIRT continues meeting with individual students and small groups to provide support and to identify further “high risk” students. Develop the idea of a continuing support group.
3. If deemed necessary, outside consultants (i.e. crisis counselors) are called upon to help conduct meetings for all parents, students, and staff. The consultants, making use of their professional expertise, urge the families of those students who are not coping well to pursue evaluations at one of the public or private mental health agencies listed in their area.
4. If a community meeting is necessary, an announcement is made to all concerned community members.
5. When appropriate, have a designated area open in the building, with supervision provided, so students/parents may meet or gather.

## **DAY THREE**

1. As deemed necessary, the CIRT continues counseling students and meeting with concerned staff.
2. The principal writes follow-up letters to all parents of “high risk” students, indicating the school’s fear and concern for the student’s health and safety, and encouraging them to seek professional evaluation.
3. Community leaders are encouraged to form a steering committee to discuss a community-wide response to the needs of the teenagers.
4. “Front-line” staff members who have been dealing directly with the crisis meet with a consultant for expression of feelings and mutual support. (This is a very necessary ingredient.)
5. When appropriate, have a designated area open in the building, with supervision provided, so students/parents may meet or gather.

## **Needs of Students**

The largest number of students will be seen in the morning. Some students may tend to stay for long periods of time and dwell on their grief. While it is important to be sensitive to the students' needs, especially those who may be high risk, getting the students back into a routine may serve as a useful therapeutic tool.

By the afternoon encourage students to return to class. This allows more time to be spent with students who have serious or special concerns.

It may happen that students strongly resist the notion of going back to class and may again come down to the counseling area. Unless these students are felt to have serious concerns, take time to listen to them, but at least by the last class period encourage them to go back to class. This may need to be done by someone in a position of authority in that school building.

For those students with more serious and special concerns several things may be done:

1. Talk through with the student, "When you leave school, who will be at home?" If no one will be at home, what are other options so that the student will not be at home alone? Do some brainstorming. If the student is upset, do not send them to an empty house alone.
2. Contracting may be useful in getting students to commit themselves to follow-up contacts with the counselor, etc.
3. If a student is felt to be a high risk, notify the parent before that student is released from school. It may be appropriate to keep that child at school until the parent picks him/her up from school. This allows the opportunity to offer recommendations for follow-up.

## **Needs of the Staff**

Because of the high demands placed on the crisis team by the students, it may be difficult to meet the needs of the staff. However, some ways may assist:

1. Make the faculty aware in advance of the CIRT team's presence. Let them know that if they would like, someone can be available in their classroom. Considerations may be given to having a crisis team member circulate in the halls to be readily available if a teacher is having difficulty conducting class.
2. If possible, spend some time with teachers being a listening ear.
3. Provide time after school with the staff to talk about the day's events.
4. Compliment them frequently about how well they did under a very stressful time.

## **RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **Administrators**

1. Move quickly. Control information. Stay in charge. Superintendent is contact person for media. Principal must be proactive, not reactive. Determine who does what. Gather personal belongings and records of deceased for safekeeping.
2. Arrange a meeting with campus staff.
3. Notify all staff of meeting prior to students' arrival.
4. Inform students about the crisis as designated in Day One of the Crisis Plan.
5. Contact relatives of the deceased. Determine if a personal meeting is appropriate.
6. Schedule a meeting with staff at the close of the day to review the day's events.
7. Explain to parents who request a memorial service at school that this is not recommended and propose alternatives.



## Crisis Team

The Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) for any given building is responsible for implementing a response plan for all crises that may affect the school. It is to act as quickly as possible.

The CIRT Team will provide the following services:

1. Serve as a resource to teachers who may need assistance in conducting their classroom discussions or who have questions of their own.
2. Respond to the needs of high-risk students and staff who may need immediate intense support.
3. Provide assistance and referrals for students and staff who experience personal trauma relating to the loss.
4. Follow up on key individuals (friend, family) of those who were close to the situation or victim.
5. Work with small group counseling when appropriate.
6. Work individually with students/staff.
7. Request further assistance from appropriate outside agencies.
8. Offer parents in the affected building an opportunity to discuss their concerns and needs.
9. Coordinate information and response with family of the victim.
10. Lead or give support at staff meeting to announce the crisis.
11. Coordinate activities of response to the crisis.
12. Consider follow-up parent/student meetings on stress, self-esteem, etc. with help from outside agencies.

## Do's and Don'ts

- 1 **DO** remain calm. **DON'T** panic.
- 2 **DON'T** delay sharing information with faculty/students, but make sure you are sharing facts.
- 3 **DO** allow students to be excused from school (with proper supervision) to attend funeral/memorial services.
- 4 **DON'T** make a martyr out of a student that committed suicide.
- 5 **DON'T** dismiss school.
- 6 **DO** allow students to make some type of expression of remembrance in the student's memory such as a living memorial tree planting on school grounds, etc.
- 7 **DON'T** allow the media to have free reign. **DON'T** bluff, ad-lib, or talk "off the record".
- 8 **DO** have only one spokesperson to the media, i.e. superintendent or her designee. After initial interview with the press, the use of releases may be a more appropriate and effective use of time.
- 9 **DON'T** deviate from communication policy and agreed upon statements.
- 10 **DO** announce and instruct teachers to keep students in the classroom until otherwise notified if there is someone posing a serious threat in the building.

Working in a crisis situation is draining and exhausting. It is important during this day to take care of yourself.

## **SAMPLE INFORMATION**

### **To All Staff**

The following announcement may be read or paraphrased by staff in their classrooms:

As stated, we have suffered a loss of one of our students. Mark, an eleventh grader, took his life yesterday. According to the information we have, Mark killed himself at his home, dying of carbon monoxide poisoning. He died yesterday afternoon. Funeral arrangements will be announced as soon as the family makes them available.

Mark has a brother, Tom who is in tenth grade. As (designee) stated, we are all affected by this loss. We all have feelings anytime there is a death. For some of us we are reminded of previous losses and for others, this is the first loss that may have touched our lives. Be respectful of your own feelings. If you feel you need to talk with a counselor or need a place to gather your own thoughts, use the designated space as a safe place for doing so at some time during the day.

#### **More information for staff:**

- A. For those students who feel they need to talk further with someone, the designated space will be available and counseling staff will be present throughout the day. Tell students they need to get a pass from the teacher prior to reporting to the designated space.
- B. Please do not send large groups to the designated space. Another student should escort any student who appears especially affected to the designated space. Students will be expected to sign in and out of the designated location.
- C. If you have a large group that wants to go to the designation location, and you feel comfortable doing so, you may want to conduct a classroom discussion.
- D. For all staff there will be a brief staff meeting today. The purpose of this meeting is to provide staff with any additional information, as well as to give all a chance to talk about our own feelings.
- E. A number of community resources and counseling agencies could be notified should the need for further service and support become necessary. Please be aware that patience and understanding for staff and students will go a long way to helping us cope with this loss.

## **Being Prepared for the Unexpected**

Having access to a few basic supplies can help the crisis day flow. Supplies may include:

- Facial tissues  
Have an ample supply.
  
- Paper and pencil --- for students and yourself  
Frequently it helps the students to be able to express their feelings through writing or drawing. It is helpful for you to keep a list of students you have seen, especially noting the high-risk students.
  
- Clay  
This may be used as a tool for students unable to express themselves through writing, drawing or talking.
  
- Cards with the crisis phone numbers

## Managing the Students in Crisis

Here are suggestions that will help in working with students in crisis:

- It is important to have someone direct the flow of activities. This allows for efficient use of the team.
- The team should meet before the students arrive and after they leave at the end of the day.
- A member of the crisis team should be trained in helping students confront the “Empty Chair(s)”.
- When working with a group of students, pass around a sheet of paper and gather all of the students’ names.
- Make note of students whom you feel may be high risk and give those names to the school counselor.
- Some team members may want to work in pairs with a group of students.
- Allowing students to write a letter or draw a picture provides a helpful avenue in addressing some of the feelings the student may be harboring. When allowed to share these thoughts, most students will do so in the larger group. Interesting and helpful discussion usually develops. (The same thing could be done with drawings.) If appropriate, ask the student if his comments can be shared with the family and possibly used in the memorial service.
- Be as informed as possible about the tragedy and be willing to share what you know about the arrangements when questions arise.
- Students want something tangible such as newspaper articles, a memorial card, etc. to carry around with them. If appropriate, make something available.
- When meeting with students, it is helpful to have private or semi-private areas available. If students are being seen in more than one room, it is useful to have the rooms within close proximity.
- Periodically check the halls and restrooms for students who may be alone, upset, etc.
- Be aware that other issues, especially those related to loss, will surface. This time of crisis gives students an opportunity to grieve and deal with other painful events in their lives, which may not have been adequately addressed in the past.
- If the death was caused by suicide, steer the group discussion away from talking about methods of killing oneself or glamorizing the death. (See issues to address with the students.)

## Issues to Address with the Students

When the death was a suicide, some of the issues you may want to address are:

1. The death was not the other students' fault. It was the decision of that individual. Young people often have an inflated view of the power they have over the lives of others. Students may blame themselves for things they either did or did not do that led to the suicide.
2. That individual made a *bad* choice.
3. Problems are temporary. Suicide is permanent. Exciting things will happen in all of their lives in the future. The deceased will not be here to experience those things.
4. This is a good opportunity to talk about problem-solving skills. Address the fact that the individual may have been hurting, but he/she handled his/her problem poorly. Emphasize it is important to reach out and try to talk with someone about problems instead of keeping them inside. There are options that are far better than killing oneself.
5. Give permission to be angry with the victim. His/her poor choice is causing pain to many people.
6. Discourage any glorification of the death. If a student says, "he was so brave to kill himself," you can respond by saying, "Suicide is not a brave act. It is far more courageous to go on living and to face your problems each day as you and I do."
7. When a death occurs, students also express anger at inappropriate responses by other students, such as students who make jokes or inappropriate comments about the deceased. Explain that a variety of behaviors may be caused by the pain of grief and that an acting-out, quiet, or laughing student may be experiencing pain.
8. Talk about the pain of grief. One way to describe it may be through an analogy such as this: If I get a deep cut on my hand, I will feel the sharpest and deepest pain on the day that it happens. It will be very painful tomorrow and the next day. In a week, it will still hurt, but not as intensely as the first day. In a month, if it was a deep cut, it still may ache, but not as intensely as the first day. If it was a very deep cut, a year from now, I may have a scar to always remind me of that hurt, but I am able to go on. I will never forget what happened, but I can go on. An emotional hurt is very similar. You may hurt the most today; tomorrow you will still hurt, but perhaps not as intensely as today. In a week you may be going through your normal routine, but your mind is still on the events of today. With time, your emotions will heal. You may always have a scar to remind you of this tragedy, but your life will go on and eventually the pain will not hurt as much as it does today.

## Identifying High Risk Students After a Death

A problem with classroom discussions of a recent death centers on bringing closure to the discussion. Bringing closure means that feelings have been ventilated and students have reached some degree of understanding and acceptance and have pulled themselves together to “return to work.” Not all students will have accomplished this within the school period. The issue then becomes identifying students who need to be referred for further help. Wide variations in how people deal with feelings will make referral problematic. The following general considerations should be evaluated to determine a need for follow-up.

1. It should be expected that some students will cry. Students who have been unable to control crying by the end of the day are obvious choices for referral.
2. At the other end of the continuum will be students who are showing no visible emotion. “Expected reaction” is a function of the degree of closeness between the victim and the student. In the cases where it is known that a student was close to the victim, yet is showing no reaction, follow-up is recommended. This category is the most difficult to assess. Many students who were not close to the victim will feel very little. In addition, a numb, dumbfounded response is a common response to tragedy. Finding the emotional over-controlled among this group will depend primarily on a teacher’s knowledge of social relationships.
3. Anger as well as grief is a normal response to suicide. However, if a classroom is responding predominantly by grieving, then an angry student may feel compelled to remain silent. This student may be a good candidate for follow-up.
4. Any student who is expressing feelings of hopelessness and despair should be taken seriously. This student should be seen individually to assess the degree of risk further and provide appropriate follow-up service.
5. A close friend or girlfriend/boyfriend, brother/sister, may assume a heavy burden of guilt. Special time with these individuals also may be significant.

## **SUICIDE**

In the event that a student has committed suicide, the following procedure is suggested but may vary due to circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

1. CIRT team will meet prior to the start of school day at designated time or in the evening, if possible.
2. Activate phone tree as soon as possible to report suicide.
3. Mandatory all-staff meeting prior to the start of school day at designated time. The following will occur:
  - a. Accurate information regarding the suicide will be given.
  - b. Available resources where students and staff can go for help will be provided.
  - c. Identification of students/staff who may be “at risk” or strongly affected.
  - d. Provide teachers with guidelines for handling distressed students.
  - e. Prepare formal announcement of death to be read to students and staff.
4. Media should be directed to the Superintendent.
5. Announce death to students and staff.
6. Have crisis center available for students and staff to go attend.
7. Mandatory staff meeting at the end of the day.
8. Remember – do not glorify a suicide in any way:
  - Do not fly the flag at half-mast.
  - Do not observe a moment of silence in the school.
  - Do not have a memorial service.
9. Principal or designee will maintain contact with the family to verify facts and respect their privacy.



## **SUICIDE ATTEMPT**

### **Suicide Attempt in School:**

- Verify information
- Call 911, if person requires medical attention, has weapon or needs to be restrained
- Administrator will work with residential facility therapist
- Principal calls Superintendent and parent(s)
- Calm suicidal person
- Try to isolate suicidal person from other students
- Stay with person until counselor, psychologist, suicide intervention arrives. **Do NOT leave suicidal person alone.**
- Determine method of notifying staff, students and parents. Hold daily staff debriefings before and after normal operating hours as needed.
- Activate school crisis team to implement post-crisis intervention.
- Determine level of intervention.

### **Suicidal Death/Serious Injury:**

- Verify information
- Activate school crisis team
- Principal notifies Superintendent
- Notify staff in advance of next school day following suicide or attempted suicide
- Determine method of notifying students and parents. Do not mention “suicide” or details about death in notification. Do not hold memorials or make death appear heroic. Protect privacy of family.
- Implement post-crisis intervention

### **Post-crisis intervention:**

- Meet with school counseling staff and community services personnel to determine level of intervention for staff and students
- Designate rooms as private counseling areas
- Escort siblings and close friends and other “highly stressed” students to counselors
- Assess stress level of staff. Recommend counseling to overly stressed staff
- Refer media to Superintendent. Do not let media question students or staff.
- Follow-up with students and staff who received counseling
- Resume normal routines as soon as possible

## RECOVERY FROM LARGE SCALE CRISES

The United States has recently experienced numerous large-scale crises that resulted in high death tolls and extensive property damage. Critical incidents such as natural disasters, suicide contagions, community-wide bomb threats, and mass casualty events have the potential to cause traumatic reactions, and significantly affect children's sense of safety and security.

### IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH: THE FIRST DAYS AND WEEKS

The response immediately following a crisis or disaster is critical because it has the potential to greatly decrease the likelihood of further trauma; therefore, administrators and crisis teams must be prepared to engage in effective crisis response and intervention as soon as the danger has passed.

#### What to Expect: Challenges and Needs

1. *Identifying and assessing traumatized individuals.* It is critical to understand the relationship between crisis event variables and increased risk of developing trauma reactions as not everyone will react the same way. Processes and procedures for assessing the impact on children and youth must be in place; this ensures appropriate decisions are made regarding interventions and supports.
2. *Timing the return to school.* If the incident resulted in an interruption to students attending school, making the decision as to when to have them return can be a bit tricky. Staff supports must be provided before students can return to schools. Consideration also needs to be given to modifying the daily schedule, at least in the short-term. An alternate location may also need to be considered, depending on the extent of the damage to the school building.
3. *Helping adults manage their own reactions.* Often, the adults who are expected to provide support to affected children are experiencing difficulties themselves. These adults will need support in learning to manage their own reactions and stress.

#### Recommendations to Address Challenges

1. *Conduct psychological triage to assess level of impact.* Psychological triage involves determining who is at risk for psychological trauma following a crisis. It is vital to estimate the number of individuals who will need mental health support and to determine what services may need to be provided. Research indicates that proximity—both physical and emotional, is one of the greatest risk factors for more severe reactions and subsequent posttraumatic stress disorder. Consequently, immediate intervention priorities are directed to individuals who were directly exposed to the incident and those who are closest to these individuals.
2. *Use of an off-site location such as another school, a rec center, or a church to offer crisis intervention supports if the school is unavailable immediately following a crisis.* This site allows affected individuals to come together and be reunited with social supports prior to school resuming. Social supports aid in reaffirming physical health and safety, as well as promoting a sense of psychological safety and security. In addition, a range of crisis interventions can be provided as needed, including

psychoeducational groups and group crisis intervention. Trained school mental health crisis responders must be available to provide multitiered group and individual crisis interventions, and rooms will be needed to offer these services. Attending to basic needs is also important, so having food and water available is important.

3. *Return students to school and familiar routines as soon as possible.* Getting students back to school helps establish stability and continuity and is associated with reduced traumatic stress. It also allows staff to continue triage and monitor the needs of the school community. It is generally best to ease students back into academics, perhaps starting out with a shortened day or somewhat lighter expectations in terms of assignments and performance. If the extent of the damage prevents a return to the school building, alternative placements for all students must be determined as part of planning and preparedness.
4. *Provide caregiver trainings and facilitate access to employee assistance programs and outside resources.* This can include victim's assistance, community mental health supports, the Red Cross, and state disaster response and management agencies. This can go a long way in supporting parents and school personnel who have been impacted by the incident.

## **ONE MONTH AFTER THE CRISIS**

**What to Expect: Challenges and Needs** Some of the same needs and challenges listed above will continue

1. *Ensuring access to ongoing care for those most affected and those who have had previous incidents of trauma.* This may be needed for several weeks after an incident. Challenges often include dwindling support from outside resources and the emotional and physical impact on crisis response work has on school-based professionals and crisis team members.
2. *Monitoring continuing trauma reactions.* Ongoing monitoring and follow-up is required in order to ensure that individuals with delayed or longer-term reactions have the support they need. The challenge relates to both decreasing outside support and the need for school-based personnel to get back to their day jobs.
3. *Protection from subsequent trauma.* Often, the potential for trauma from a large-scale crisis or disaster does not end once the physical danger has passed. Continued exposure to property damage and devastation, media exposure, and legal proceedings can result in further psychological pain.
4. *Maintaining connections to community based mental health, health, and other service providers.* As time passes, it becomes more difficult to maintain communications and relationships with outside providers and resources. These connections are critical to ensuring that ongoing crisis-related needs are met for those most affected by the crisis.
5. *Addressing the needs of students who are now ready and able to process the event.* With time, the adaptive initial responses of shock and denial begin to dissipate, and some students will want to discuss and process their experience a month or so after the event. This often comes as a surprise to school personnel who may not be equipped to address this.

**Recommendations to Address Challenges** The above suggestions continue to be relevant for those ongoing challenges and needs. Also, acknowledge that some additional time may be needed to reclaim some sense of normalcy.

1. *Use an easily accessible electronic tracking form and train classroom teachers to assist in monitoring trauma reactions and the need for mental health services.* Logging information for individual students who were affected and required crisis intervention allows for easy tracking and follow-up. In addition, ensuring that teachers know what to look for and how to refer students they are concerned about can aid in continued monitoring of trauma reactions.
2. *Prepare and educate students and parents for potential continued trauma,* as this can help mitigate some of the secondary wounds. This should include information regarding the dangers of exposure via the media and social media. Also, facilitate activities that build community and reinforce the notion that “we are in this together.” Plan for and imbed mental wellness and stress-reducing activities in school programming. Ensure complications of disrupted schedules are addressed when planning future activities and engage student leaders in developing activities that will promote normal routines, when possible.
3. *Coordinate with FEMA, local and state Offices of Victim Assistance.* Red Cross rescue centers/shelters, pet shelters, and other community groups can facilitate recovery and healing from continued stressors. The school should publicize local support services such as housing, health, mental wellness, financial, and legal. Also, open schools as soon as possible since schools are places most people feel comfortable in times of crisis.
4. *Continue to provide both individual and group crisis interventions* and opportunities for students to process and share their experiences in an appropriate and supportive context. School mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, counselors) should take the lead in providing these interventions as they are familiar with the school community; however, enlisting carefully screened outside mental health professionals to assist with any ongoing needs is crucial if school resources are exceeded.

## HELPING ADULTS MANAGE CRISES

Parents, teachers, and other caregivers play a critical role in helping children cope with crises. Following a crisis, teachers are often required to provide additional support to the students in their classes. While teachers provide daily care and support for their students, after a tragedy these demands may go well beyond their training or expertise. In addition, crisis responders and mental health professionals are tasked with providing crisis intervention and additional mental health support to the school community following a crisis event. Consequently, it is extremely important for caregivers to monitor their own reactions and take care of their own needs as failure to do so can result in stress and burnout. Therefore, schools must be prepared to support all the adults in the school setting following a crisis.

### **Risks and Stressors for School Staff**

Most students and school personnel will be able to get back to the typical school routine quickly and without formal mental health treatment; however, some individuals will require additional intervention and support. There are a variety of factors that increase the likelihood that a crisis event will have a traumatizing impact on both those who experience the event, as well as those who respond to it. One of those factors is the existence of personal vulnerabilities including preexisting risk factors. These include mental illness and a history of psychological trauma and/or loss. Preexisting mental health conditions can increase the vulnerability to traumatic stressors. This is true for both initial trauma symptomatology and longer-term difficulties. Other factors that can influence a person's individual reactions include witnessing or being otherwise personally affected by the trauma.

In addition, it is known that certain crisis variables can interact and influence reactions to it. Events that are somewhat predicable or have a gradual onset (for instance, a death after a long illness) are generally less traumatic than those with a sudden onset (such as an accident or shooting death). Natural disasters (such as floods or earthquakes) are typically less traumatic than violent man-made assaults. Those situations with fatalities will certainly be more traumatizing than those without fatal injury. Finally, as might be expected, those crisis situations with a high intensity and long duration (such as a hostage situation), and those with many individuals involved, will provide the most challenges with regard to traumatic aftermath.

### **Burnout and Secondary Trauma**

Secondary trauma is the stress that results from learning about another's traumatic experience and helping or wanting to help another person who has been directly affected by such tragedy. This secondary trauma shows itself with the same general range of symptoms as those who have been personally victimized by the event. School administrators, teachers, crisis responders, and mental health personnel who assist children and other adults in the school community are at risk for such stressors as they take on crisis intervention work to assist in times of tragedy.

### **Warning Signs**

The signs and symptoms of stress and secondary trauma can sometimes be observed by others and sometimes are only known to the individual who is affected. Some are common stress reactions, often seen or experienced after a crisis, and others may warrant seeking professional support or monitoring. They can come in the form of physical reactions, emotional symptoms and

social or interpersonal signs.

**Physical reactions**, such as chronic fatigue and exhaustion are the most frequently reported. However, other signs may also be evident, such as trouble paying attention, confusion, constantly being on the “lookout” for danger, or startling easily. Sleeping and eating problems, headaches, stomachaches, or muscle tension may also be experienced. When these reactions significantly interfere with their jobs or personal functioning, additional support and intervention will likely be needed.

**Emotional symptoms** can include excessive worry or anxiety about the crisis victims, disconnection or numbing, extreme anger at the situation, or feelings of compassion fatigue, demoralization or resignation. Individuals may also find they have recurrent crisis thoughts or distressing dreams, or a constant replaying of the events, and even some confusion and difficulty making everyday decisions. Some may even experience extreme depression with hopelessness or suicidal thoughts. Some may self-medicate their emotional symptoms by increased drug or alcohol use.

Finally, **social or interpersonal signs** can include serious difficulties in relationships at home or work. Irritability, outbursts of anger, social withdrawal or isolation can sometimes be seen as extreme stress reactions. Attempts to over-control at work, compulsion to be a “rescuer” or part of every crisis situation. These social issues may increase absenteeism, may result in an increase in staff arguments, or may shorten adults’ patience with students.

### **Care for the Caregiver**

Previous research suggests that school personnel are at risk for multiple long-term consequences including illness and burnout and often feel their needs are neglected following acts of violence and other crises. In addition, teachers may be expected to and/or feel responsible for meeting the mental health needs of students when they lack the necessary training and expertise to do so. It is important immediate reactions to a traumatic event be acknowledged and normalized by both school leadership and mental health staff. This includes having some awareness of their own reactions and limitations and taking care of themselves as needed.

Opportunities for school personnel to access assistance from crisis responders and/or mental health professionals must be planned for and provided. For example, the plan may call for substitute staff to come to the building to allow teaching staff to leave the classroom and receive support. Immediate support and action from administration in reducing posttraumatic stress in school personnel following a crisis is critical in terms of a quicker recovery. One of the best ways that administrators can support their staff is by ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of responders and mental health staff to both carry out the crisis plan effectively and to provide needed interventions in the days and weeks after the crisis. Administrators should promote a culture in which the adults in the building feel comfortable asking for help and/or to take a break. At the same time, school leadership needs to ensure that this is not perceived as an inability to do their jobs. Encouraging staff to meet their own mental health needs is an important first step in ensuring that staff are adequately supported.

In addition to mental health intervention, there are a variety of informal strategies that can be helpful in supporting school staff following a school-based crisis. Such tactics include a back-to-school visit for school staff prior to the students returning and/or some type of open house where staff and students can return to the school in a safe and supportive context. It is important to have

mental health professions/crisis responders present at these gatherings so that individuals who are impacted have the opportunity to discuss their feelings and reactions. This will also allow staff to receive appropriate support to address the stress and fatigue involved when caring for and teaching impacted students. Ongoing support should also be made available. Another way to assist staff following a crisis is to use a classroom buddy system. Giving teachers the option of having a school mental health professional assigned to their classroom for the first day or two that classes resume can provide them, as well as their students, the extra support they need to get through what is often the most difficult time. The “buddy” is there to help facilitate conversations about the crisis, provide large group/classroom interventions, offer mini breaks for the teacher, and to identify those students—and teachers—who have severe crisis reactions and escort them to where more intensive interventions are provided. Substitute teachers can also be arranged for those educators who have been significantly impacted (e.g., death of one of their students, witnessing a crisis in their classroom, etc.).

Finally, it is important to keep in mind the exhausting nature of crisis response work and the impact on those individuals who serve on the crisis team, especially those who provide mental health interventions to trauma victims. Participating as a crisis responder is a risk factor for burnout and invariably, crisis responders will experience some personal impact subsequent to their involvement in the response and this should be anticipated. The need for social support and the opportunity to debrief with other responders following the response are important to recognize, as often these folks will put their own needs on the back burner while tending to the needs of everyone else. These professionals can be supported in a variety of ways including allowing for shorter work shifts of crisis team members and allowing them to rotate between more intensive and less intensive crisis response activities. Providing coverage of day-to-day duties of crisis response team members can also be helpful, so that there is not a big backlog of work once the response has wrapped up.

### **Strategies for Self-Care**

A diminished ability to function professionally may place students or the caregiver at risk. It is important that all school staff be encouraged to engage in self-care strategies and to ask for help as needed. Self-care strategies can come in many forms which interrelate, and can be thought of as preventing or addressing the signs and symptoms mentioned above.

*Physical self-care* includes maintaining a healthy diet, getting adequate sleep and taking some breaks during the workday. Exercise can be very effective for stress reduction. Even taking walks or riding bikes, can help calm the physical body. Limited use of alcohol or other substances is also important as this can interfere with sleep and should not be relied upon to help cope or relax. Other stress management techniques such as using relaxation or deep breathing can be helpful.

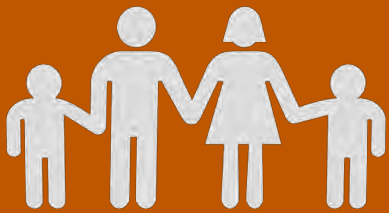
To care for *emotional health*, school staff should recognize that many reactions are normal and occur frequently among caregivers, but they should also be aware of and watch for the signs of secondary trauma. Knowing one’s limitations and giving oneself permission to take on fewer responsibilities can be helpful.

Similarly, the use of good time-management skills and priority setting can be beneficial, as they can help people focus on something practical to do right now to manage the situation. Practicing one’s spiritual or religious faith can provide comfort and calming, as can engaging in hobbies and creative activities. Other strategies include using calming self-talk, soothing music, and/or

visualization.

*Social care and connection* is also important to self-care during times of stress. Maintaining normal daily routines and staying connected with trusted friends or family can be helpful. Stress can actually be reduced when people can turn to action, by engaging in activism or advocacy work. Debriefing the events with other caregivers or colleagues at the end of each day and when crisis response and recovery efforts wrap up is especially important for crisis responders.





**University of Texas Charter School System  
Family Reunification Plan  
2021-2022**



**The University of Texas at Austin  
Emergency Preparedness**

## RECORD OF CHANGES

Description of Change	Entered By	Date Entered
Reviewed annually by EMC.	Autumn Leal	2/12/21
Reviewed annually by EMC in preparation for committee meeting on 6/24/21; updated school year	Autumn Leal	6/15/21

**Approvals**

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Melissa Chavez Ph.D., Associate Vice President and Superintendent  
 The University of Texas Charter School System

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Autumn Leal-Shopp, Emergency Management Coordinator  
 The University of Texas Charter School System

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Nicole Whetstone, Ph.D., Deputy Superintendent  
 The University of Texas Charter School System

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Scope

This plan describes the coordination steps and implementation procedures necessary to enable The University of Texas Charter School System (UTCSS) to respond to the reunification needs of the population of children in its custody and their families who are affected by an emergency or disaster occurring on campus.

This plan also describes:

- Response capabilities and strategy of the family reunification plan participants to implement reunification services and meet the needs of the affected children;
- Responsibilities, roles, and tasks of the various organizations participating in reunification operations; and
- Methods for scaling up operations and integration of state and national agencies and organizations into the response if the scale of an emergency warrants it.

## 1.2. Purpose

This plan describes the reunification services that will be provided by The University of Texas Charter School System to assist children in its custody, who have been separated from their parents/legal guardians, to re-establish contact with their families under circumstances that are strictly controlled. The plan provides guidance and procedures to manage resources at the district level. It is important to note that organizations serving children exist at the local, state, and federal level that can provide vital support and resources for reunification services before, during, and after a disaster in the impacted areas. Sharing this plan and conducting regular drills and exercises in accordance with the district's Multi-hazard Emergency Operation Plan will ensure that coordination occurs with local and state partners when UTCSS's resources are overwhelmed.

Incidents that can occur requiring reunification of children and families may be either "notice" or "no-notice" events resulting from natural, man-made, or technological incidents. "Notice" events are those that can be predicted in advance and provide time to plan and prepare for the emergency response, such as an impending storm. "No-notice" events are those that happen without warning and immediate response is required with little or no time to prepare, such as an active shooter. It is important to note that with "notice" events, action can be taken to evacuate children that are in UTCSS's custody prior to the incident so that reunification efforts are less likely to be needed following the incident.

## 1.3. Assumptions

Certain basic assumptions will serve as the foundation for the coordination of reunification efforts during an emergency:

- Planning efforts should include children with disabilities and others with access and functional needs and must identify adequate accommodations and services required for the timely provision of reunification services to these populations.
- Reunification activities are dependent upon adequate communication and technology infrastructure, including telephone, cellular phones, and/or internet to connect with email, and social media.

- A streamlined process for parent/guardian access to reunification systems, as well as coordinated public messaging about availability and accessibility of reunification services to children and their families, will lessen public confusion and result in more effective reunification outcomes.

## 2. PLAN ACTIVATION

The Reunification Plan should be activated as soon as possible following notification of an incident that impacts the UTCSS and leads to the need for family reunification. Initiating reunification can be a result of any abnormal occurrence at UTCSS or the surrounding area, including power outages, weather events, hazmat incidents, bomb threats, criminal activity in the area, or active violence on campus.

Once a credible threat of an incident has occurred requiring reunification support to children in UTCSS's custody and their families (or a no-notice event), the response phase begins with the activation of the Reunification Plan by the designated authority and the mobilization of the staff.

### 2.1. Designation of Authority

During an emergency at UTCSS, the Superintendent or their designee have the authority to activate the Reunification Plan and carry out reunification operations as described in this Plan. Secondary and tertiary alternates for this and all positions are also identified to ensure efficient activation of the Plan in an emergency. (*See Appendix B for a list of Reunification Team Members and their contact information.*)

### 2.2. Assess the Situation

The Superintendent/Emergency Management Coordinator assesses the situation and determines the need for activating the Reunification Plan.

Situations which may require an activation of the Plan include, but are not limited to:

- Fire to a building associated with the children's activity
- Natural disaster
- Act of violence on campus
- Bomb threat
- Hazmat situation

Prior to the activation of the Reunification Plan, all children and associated staff should take all immediate actions communicated during the emergency to ensure the safety of the children and staff until an "all clear" is given.

### 2.3. Take Immediate Action

When the Superintendent/Emergency Management Coordinator determines that the situation warrants the activation of the Reunification Plan, the University of Texas at Austin Police Department should be notified and the following actions should be taken to secure the safety of the children in the custody of the UTCSS:

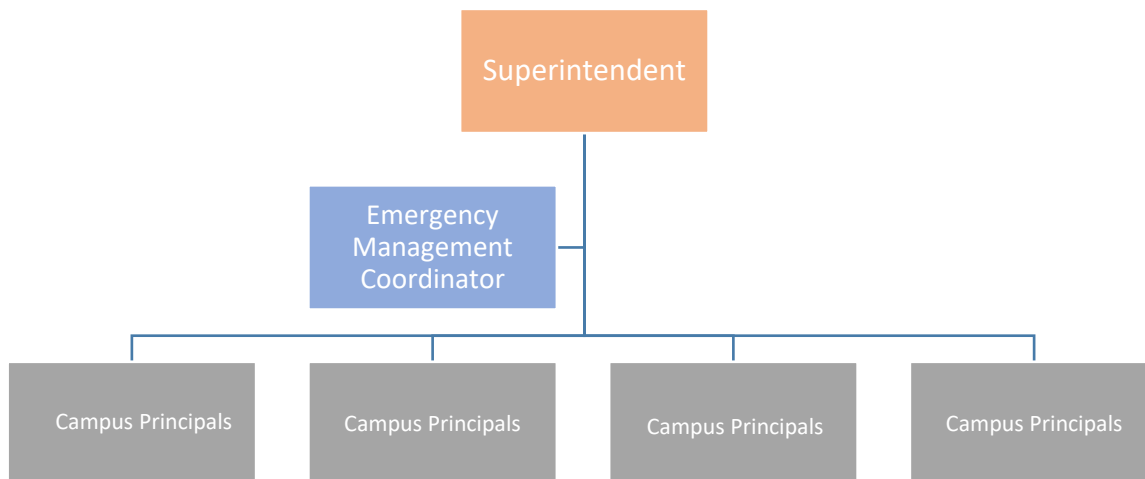
1. **Children's Safe Area:** Immediately gather the children in a safe, secure, restricted space with restroom access if available. Do a head count and compare with roster of children expected to be in attendance. If children must be moved to a secondary location for reunification, contact

the Superintendent, if activated, or the Emergency Management Coordinator to arrange access to the alternate facility.

2. **Command and Control:** Establish communication and coordination with the Superintendent and Emergency Management Coordinator to establish command and control and information sharing with response partners.
3. **Security/Evacuation:** Secure the area or evacuate to a separate safe area located on the campus or another pre-identified location.
4. **Public Information:** Coordinate with the Superintendent to issue messaging regarding the children’s safety and the protocols for parents/guardians to be re-united with their children. Details should be included on when, how, and where further instructions will be provided or webpages where they can go for more information. Families, media, and interested members of the public should be encouraged to wait for further details to be released and avoid overwhelming communication lines by attempting to contact the UTCSS.
5. **Parent/Guardian Notifications:** Orderly parent/guardian notifications should begin as soon as possible. Children with cell phones should be given explicit instructions on what to say or text to their parents/guardians, for example: *“I am OK, please wait for further instructions on how and where to pick me up and do not call me back as we have to keep the phone lines open.”*

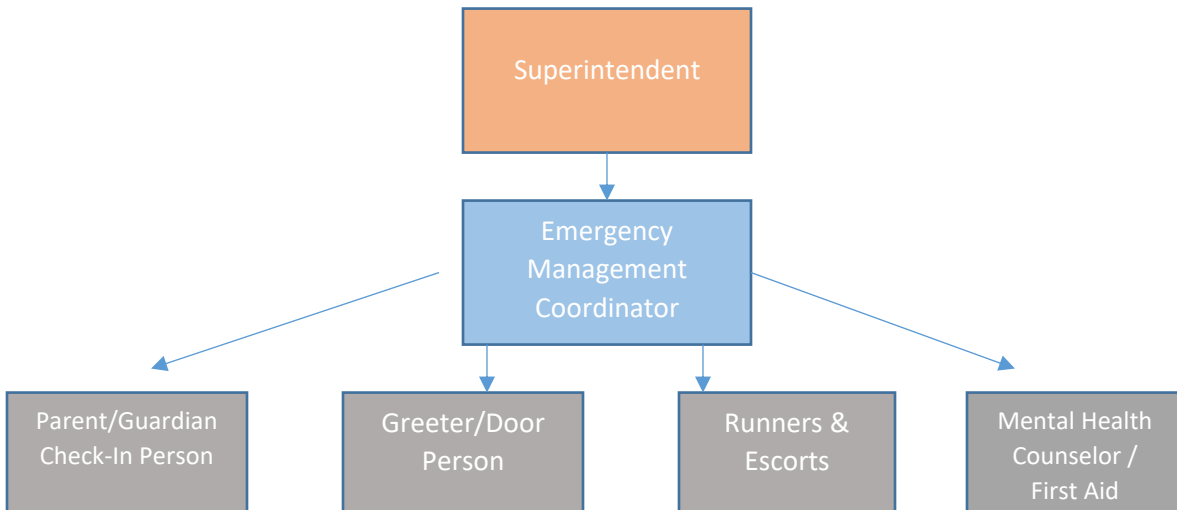
#### 2.4. Follow MEOP Procedures

The Reunification Plan activation and escalation are conducted in compliance with UTCSS’s Multi-Hazard Emergency Operations Plan (MEOP) procedures. The reunification operations will fall under the direction of the Superintendent and Emergency Management Coordinator of UTCSS’s emergency operations. The following chart shows a typical chart for an incident on campus that would include reunification.



## 2.5. Mobilize Staff

Initial activation should include minimum staffing for reunification functions and provide for escalation of staffing as required. The Superintendent should review the following reunification organizational chart and make adjustments to it as necessary to reflect the emergency circumstances dictating which trusted staff and volunteers may be available to staff the reunification location.



The Superintendent and Emergency Management Coordinator should determine staffing needs for full operations of the reunification center, based on the number of children that would need to be reunified, the nature of the incident, the school's proximity to the incident, the expected length of the emergency, etc. Based on anticipated staffing needs, sufficient copies of the Job Action Sheet should be prepared for distribution to the staff when they arrive at the reunification center. The Superintendent and Emergency Management Coordinator should review site plans for the pre-determined location(s) for the establishment of a Children's Safe Area and delegate a responsible staff person to organize childcare staff and resources immediately upon activation.

Staff for the Reunification Team may come from one of the following sources, or a combination of sources, all whom should have had background checks completed in advance.

- **Existing UTCSS Staff.** These persons will be known and already vetted by normal standard operating procedures and will have appropriate badges and/or identification.
- **Pre-credentialed volunteer staff.** These persons have a known history with the UTCSS; however, if assigned to the reunification center, they should be issued an identification badge authorizing entry.
- **Staff from "trusted sources."** This would include, for example, mental health staff provided by University Health Services.

Depending on the nature of the incident and available resources, individual staff persons may be assigned to fulfill more than one role in the reunification process. (See Appendix C for Job Action Sheets for the key staff roles to be fulfilled during a reunification process.) Due to the sensitivity of the reunification operations, it is recommended that staff be from these trusted sources only. **No “spontaneous” volunteers should be permitted in the reunification center (RC).**

The Superintendent and Emergency Management Coordinator should work to implement pre-determined mechanisms for notifying staff of the reunification center mobilization and for issuing alerts to staff as the incident unfolds over time.

## 2.6. Set up the Reunification Center – Coordinate Supplies and Equipment

Upon activation of the RC, the Emergency Management Coordinator should immediately coordinate with the Superintendent and Campus Principal to ensure that the setup of the RC occurs in an efficient and timely manner. The Emergency Management Coordinator in collaboration with the Campus Principal, should initiate a review of the interior and exterior site plans that identify the areas within the facility to be used for the various activities associated with the RC and work with staff to execute a set-up strategy for each area. Supplies should be set up first in the following areas to facilitate an efficient activation of the reunification services.

- Children’s Safe Area (with secure restroom access)
- Parent/Guardian Check-in Area (out of the line of sight where the children will be located)
- Counseling Area (with restroom access separate from the children)
- Accessible Medical/First Aid Area with resources for children and parents/guardians with special or medical needs if necessary, ideally near a door with outside access

Once these key areas are equipped and staffed, supplies and equipment can then be set up in the areas designated for reunification, law enforcement interviews, media staging, etc. Logistics should work with UTPD Officers or local police department to set up signage and traffic controls both outside and inside the RC to maintain physical separation between the public, parents/guardians, and children.

## 2.7. Conduct Staff Registration

The Emergency Management Coordinator should establish the standard procedures for staff registration/credentialing and sign-in and ensure that these protocols are consistently followed. All volunteers or non-organization staff should also be issued badges or other identification authorizing entry into the RC consistent with facility policies. Unique apparel such as hats or vests would assist staff and family members in identifying the family reunification staff and pre-credentialed volunteers.

## 2.8. Conduct Training

Training should be conducted by the Emergency Management Coordinator for the Reunification Center (Check-In, Child Support, Medical) for all staff at the beginning of each shift and/or when any new staff member is assigned. This is important not only for staff unfamiliar with RC operations, but also for previously trained staff who may need refresher training. Training should address the overall mission and objectives of the Reunification Center. Training for specific positions should address:

- Need to document everything
- Basic protocols: who they report to and who reports to them
- Job Action Sheet(s) (See Appendix C)



- Code of Conduct (*See Appendix D*)
- Organization chart with names, positions, and missions, to include who reports to whom (*See Appendix E*)
- Fact Sheet regarding Reunification Center operations (*See Appendix F*)
- Reunification Center Layout (interior and exterior site plans)
- Documents and forms that will be utilized by the position (*See Appendix A*)

## 2.9. Establish Ongoing Public Messaging Procedures

The Superintendent will approve and coordinate all public messages before release. The Superintendent should coordinate outgoing messaging procedures, supervise the set-up of a Media Area separate from the children and families, and prepare emergency notifications/press releases for use throughout the incident. Public messaging procedures and sample notifications should be shared with all staff at the initial training and updated over the course of the emergency event. All staff should be reminded that all media inquiries should be referred to the Superintendent and sensitive information should **NOT** be broadcast over emergency radios and should be shared only on an as-needed basis using phones or escorts to protect the privacy of the children and families involved.

Some incidents may require a separate overflow waiting area for other concerned family members or interested parties, located out of the sight of the RC. Only parents or legal guardians with appropriate identification would be allowed into the RC. However, many other family members may be concerned for the welfare of the children in question and they will naturally flock to the campus when an incident is occurring. Estimates of the numbers of concerned relatives expected to show up can vary and a potential need for crowd control may exist when large numbers of interested individuals show up at the RC. Crowd control assistance should be coordinated with UTPD and/or the University's Fire Prevention Services or local police department for campuses outside of the Austin area.

## 3. OPERATIONS

### 3.1. Family Notification

In the event of a reunification operation, parent/guardian notification is the priority first step. It is imperative that accurate, factual information be delivered, starting with a crucial First Message. While it may seem comforting to tell parents/guardians that everyone is okay, or to minimize the number of injuries, this First Message not only begins the recovery process, it may be evidentiary for purposes of liability. Rather than saying, "all children are safe", it is probably more accurate to report, "we are in the process of establishing the safety status of all children and staff". Notifications to parents/guardians should include a reminder to bring photo identification with them to the reunification site and have it out and ready to show reunification staff at the Check-in Area. Notification will be coordinated through the Emergency Management Coordinator.

With the number of cell phones available to ever-younger populations, parents/guardians will likely be the first to arrive at the impacted facility. Prepare for the fact that this may occur prior to the transmission of any official notification by UTCSS. Children will call or text their parents/guardians immediately during a crisis, even if there are policies prohibiting mobile phone use. It may be possible during a crisis to leverage this to UTCSS's advantage by writing out reunification information for the children to text to their parents/guardians.

Pre-developed notification messages are vital. While anything written in advance may not exactly fit the circumstances of any given crisis, it will save time in the initial phase of a crisis. These statements should be vetted by the Superintendent as part of the planning process.

### 3.2. Family Registration

For parents/guardians, there are a couple of steps in the reunification process. Parents/guardians are asked to go to the Reunification Parent/Guardian Check-In Area and form lines based on the first letter of their child's last name. While in line, parents/guardians are asked to fill out a Reunification Card. Some of the same information is repeated on both the top and separated bottom of the card. Parents/guardians are asked to complete all parts of the card (*See Appendix A, Forms, for a copy of the Reunification Card*).

If a parent or guardian is notified that reunification is needed, there are some expectations that parents or guardians should be aware of. First, they should be notified to bring identification. That will streamline things during reunification. Second, be patient and do not pick up your child without checking in. Reunification is a process that protects both the safety of the child and provides for an accountable change of custody from UTCSS to a recognized custodial parent or guardian. The Parent/Guardian Check-In Area should be staffed by administrative staff of the youth activity, if possible, as they will be the most familiar with (and familiar to) the family members of the children under their care and custody.

There are several strategies for identifying custodial privilege during a reunification. The "Whitelist method" confirms the parent/guardian via photo identification and confirming the person's authority by comparing the ID to the student registration/enrollment documents. The benefit of this method is absolute accountability. The cost is greater time and greater human resource needs to check the identification against enrollment records. The "Blacklist method" relies on a pre-determined list of persons with custodial restrictions. Identification is used, in this case, to determine if preventing student release to the non-custodial parent/guardian is necessary.

In some cases, parents/guardians may not have photo identification. Sometimes, staff can verify ID of parent/guardian. Another option is to solicit little known information about the student. The Standard Reunification Card has a space for the child's birthday. The area for this is on the Escort's part of the card, which can be verified against the demographic/enrollment card during a Whitelist custody verification. Alternatively, the child can confirm it when the Escort retrieves them from the Children's Safe Area.

### 3.3. Reunification

The following is a description of the operations of the Reunification Center:

- Establish a Parent/Guardian Check-In Location
- Deliver the children to the Safe Area, beyond the field of vision of parents/guardians. "Greeters" direct parents/guardians to the Parent Check-In Location, and help them understand the process.
- Establish an accountability list of all children within the Safe Area
- Instruct parents/guardians on how to complete Reunification Cards.
- Establish procedure for parents/guardians to self-sort during check in, streamlining the process.

- Escorts bring children from the Safe Area
- Control lines of sight to allow for communication and other issues to be handled with diminished drama or anxiety.
- Anticipate medical or investigative contingencies.
- Document EVERYTHING.

A demographic card is beneficial to retain information on each child, which may be kept in binders or files. Ideally, it is beneficial to separate the cards into multiple, thinner binders separated alphabetically to be distributed to staff dealing with families whose children’s names begin with particular letters. During a reunification, an organization may experience dozens or even hundreds of family members arriving at the site, seeking their child or family member. By separating demographic cards into smaller groups, the process tends to move faster and the goal of reunification is greatly accelerated. The system should be focused on the ease-of-use for stress-filled incoming parents/guardians and the RC staff assisting them.

### 3.4. Support Services

In addition to facilitating family reunification, the mission of the RC includes the facilitation of support services to family members. The provision of psychological first aid and mental health/behavioral health services provided to children, family members and RC staff is a key element in organizing the RC to respond to the short and long-term health consequences of disasters for children, family members, and staff.

### 3.5. Communications

Communications is a key element of managing an emergency requiring family reunification services. Communications includes information sharing among responders and staff as well as public information and risk communications. Once the initial notifications are sent out to the community and to children’s families, there will be an ongoing need to monitor the evolving situation and keep everyone informed of the status of both the emergency incident and the family reunification process as well as control rumors. There are several aspects of this ongoing effort, including general public messaging procedures for media and social media, communications with staff, and information sharing with emergency personnel.

#### **General Communication Procedures**

Once initial notification has been made and the reunification process is underway, there will be ongoing needs for continued information sharing with all of UTCSS’s key partners. Because of the extreme sensitivity of information concerning children, HIPAA and FERPA policies, and the damage that can occur as a result of inaccurate or premature release of information, RC staff should exercise great care in safeguarding information and disseminating it appropriately only under the supervision of the Superintendent and Emergency Management Coordinator.

A few general rules apply to information handling and dissemination:

- Disseminate information only to persons with a “need to know”.
- Disseminate information about children only when authorized by proper authority.

- Sensitive information should NOT be transmitted by radio, landline or cellular telephone if it can be avoided.
- Only transmit sensitive information on the Internet via a University approved and password-protected system.
- Conduct verbal communications in a location and manner that ensure that unauthorized individuals do not overhear them.
- Use plain language. Speak clearly and slowly; avoid codes, abbreviations, acronyms, and jargon.
- Be concise and be brief.
- Obtain pre-approval from the Superintendent before releasing any public messaging.
- Assume that all written communications could be made public.

### **Communications with Staff**

This Reunification Plan outlines a communication policy aimed at keeping RC staff informed of key decisions and updates. Internal staff communications may include:

- RC staff meetings. Generally, these will occur at the beginning of each operational period or shift change, or because of an occurrence of an event that must be conveyed to all staff.
- Unit, Team, and Group meetings. Called at the discretion of their supervisors/coordinators.
- One-on-One and informal communications.
- When communicating with other staff not in your unit, or in another physical location, verify and document the name, unit, and position title of the person you are communicating with. Document communications with persons outside your Group using ICS Form 213 or equivalent (hard copy or electronic).

### **Communications with Emergency Personnel**

Local Emergency Personnel, such as the University Police Department and/or local police department should be notified when:

- The RC is being activated.
- The RC is ready to receive family members.
- Additional assistance or security is needed at the RC.
- The RC is being demobilized.

In addition, during the course of the emergency incident, emergency personnel should be kept apprised of the status of the family reunification process and any changes in the situation. If there is a law enforcement element to the situation, RC staff should maintain similar contact with UTPD officials and/or local police department, so that everyone is operating with the same situational awareness.

### **Communications with Public Media**

The Superintendent should handle all communications with the media. All staff should be cautioned not to provide information to any media representative without specific authorization from the Superintendent. A Media Center or area for media contacts, interviews, and briefings should be designated away from the reunification activities in the RC. All communications with the media require pre-approval by the Superintendent.