

Officers hear insight gained from Amish school shooting

By John Futtu
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Law-enforcement officers from across Ohio came to Columbus yesterday to hear about the lessons of Lancaster County, Pa., where a gunman shot 10 girls at an Amish school.

But the topic took on added urgency nine days after a gunman took 32 lives on the Virginia Tech campus.

"I think it makes it more poignant," said Col. Jeffrey B. Miller, the Pennsylvania State Police commander who addressed about 400 officers at the Columbus Police Training Academy.

"To look out at my peers and see their faces, they're definitely taking this very seriously."

The three-hour gathering was closed to the public because it included information described by organizers as "law-enforcement sensitive." Miller, who was invited several months ago to speak to the group, said afterward that it was a detailed presentation of how his agency responded when an armed man took over the West Nickel Mines Amish

School on Oct. 2.

"The biggest lesson," he said, "is that an incident like this can happen anywhere and we need to prepare in advance for how we'll react if it does."

School districts, college campuses and law-enforcement agencies must work together in creating those plans, he said.

The Virginia Tech shooting revealed the need for better communication.

"I'm not second-guessing how that was handled, but because of what happened, you will see universities developing communication protocols to get information out right away when an act of extreme violence occurs," he said.

Virginia Tech officials were criticized because they waited more than two hours after the first shootings in a campus dormitory before alerting students and staff through an e-mail. Minutes later, the shooter went on a second rampage in an academic building on the other side of campus.

Schools likely will consider the fastest ways to alert students of violence on campus, including the use of instant

messaging to cell phones and PDAs, Miller said.

Capt. Richard H. Collins, superintendent of the Ohio State Highway Patrol, said Miller "is a very articulate person who went through something horrific. He offered a lot of information that was beneficial for us. Hopefully, we'll never have to use it."

In the Lancaster County case, a neighborhood milk-tanker operator barricaded himself in the Amish school and planned on a long siege with the young girls inside, but his plans were interrupted after a teacher who escaped alerted troopers. He eventually shot 10 girls, killing five, then took his own life.

While stressing the need for planning and vigilance by schools and law enforcement, Miller said the threat should be kept in perspective.

"We're so bombarded with information about these incidents that we begin to perceive that school is a dangerous place to be," he said. "In fact, there is a one-in-1-million chance of a child being harmed in a school setting."

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