Prevention through Awareness

Last week's incident in Chattanooga that killed 4 marines and one sailor was the latest example of a problem that is likely to grow: individuals that go out to kill without communicating with others or being part of an elaborate plot. For too long we have depended on "specific and credible threats" or "connecting the dots" and have not focused enough on our best information collection asset…individuals. See Something-Say Something programs, tip-lines, Crime-Stoppers and other citizen/employee based programs are an example of what works. The FBI leads a law enforcement community that is outstanding at pulling a string to get to the root of a plot, uncover a terror cell or track a suspicious individual. We need citizens and employees to be the ones that help find that string and get the information to law enforcement so they can pull it.

In the very first few days of DHS being in existence I had a discussion with Tom Ridge, a great leader and someone that focused on local communities. We were talking about how to do domestic protection and support local law enforcement. The outcome of that talk was basically this: "there are 800,000 law enforcement officers in the US, they know when there is something wrong in their neighborhood…we need to get them the information and tools to know what's wrong."

That approach is even more important today but it's not limited to law enforcement, there are **3.4 million teachers in the US,** they know their schools and when something is wrong, they should have a tool in their hand to communicate that concern and training to know what to look for, and have the ability to communicate during a crisis. I'm Safe for Schools is a Smartphone based system designed for teachers to report concerns and speed response in a crisis. There are other products that can help including training programs that increase awareness and enhance procedures.

The cost per teacher or student is lower when we focus on awareness, training and individual tools than when we buy elaborate camera systems and other devices. While cameras are a great tool for access control/alarm systems (buzzing a visitor into a building or validating an alarm) or for post incident investigation it has been proven time and again that they don't prevent acts of violence (London Underground, Boston Marathon).

If prevention is our true aim, as it should be we need to get back to basics and focus on the people, every Smartphone is a computer and a communication device and everybody has one. By adding those individual devices into a security program we get better coverage, better awareness and will be more likely to prevent loss of lives. Real time situational awareness in a crisis, suspicious activity reporting, medical emergency reporting, evacuation and fire drill reporting can be done without any hardware purchase by using a Smartphone based system. One school district just spent about $500K to update hardware for 9 schools…cameras and access control. That same district could have deployed a tool that was in every teacher's hand for a small fraction of the cost. **That $500K would have paid for the Smartphone solution for fifty years.** Some hardware is important, locks and visitor access control make a lot of sense but it's time to balance spending…hardware alone won't solve the problem because the cost is unsustainable and it leaves out the most important piece of the puzzle…people.