

Back to School: Make Safety a Top Priority

SPRINGFIELD – Safety in our schools and on our college campuses is a right every student and family should expect. As students from pre-kindergarten to college prepare to head back to school, the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) and local emergency management agencies across the state are reminding educators about the recent recommendations of the Illinois Terrorism Task Force School Safety Working Group. The group's 13 recommendations are designed to help make Illinois schools safer. These recommendations were presented to Governor Bruce Rauner in May 2018, and are available online for the public to review.

"There is no single answer to achieving school safety," said Mike Chamness, Chairman of the Illinois Terrorism Taskforce. "No individual has all of the answers, but the experience and expertise found within the members of the School Safety Working Group illustrate the state's commitment to offer practical recommendations for our schools to implement into their policies and procedures."

In addition to the recommendations of the School Safety Working Group, there are additional resources available to help increase the level of preparedness of our schools and campuses. The Illinois School and Campus Safety Resource Center provides a variety of training programs to help public and private K-12 schools and higher education institutions plan for, respond to, and recover from an emergency or disaster. Training opportunities, which are provided free of charge, include traditional classroom courses, workshops, webinars and online training.

The Statewide Terrorism & Intelligence Center's (STIC) School Safety Information Sharing Program is designed to identify the information needs of school and campus safety officials and ensure timely and wide dissemination of actionable intelligence that is tailored to the protection of these communities. The goal of the program is to aid in school safety efforts through sharing information from local, state and federal agencies with at least one person in every school and campus in the state of Illinois.

Parents can also play a crucial role in protecting our students. As students head back to the classroom this fall, be sure to include emergency preparedness in your back-to-school plans. Here are some planning tips for parents to consider:

- Find out where children will be taken in the event of an evacuation during school hours;
- Ensure your current emergency contact information is on file at your child's school;
- Pre-authorize a friend or relative to pick up your children in an emergency and make sure the school knows who that designated person is; and,
- Teach children with cell phones about 'Text First, Talk Later.' Short, simple text messages, such as "R U OK?" and "I'm OK," are more likely to get through than a phone call if phone service is disrupted following an emergency. As phone congestion eases, you can follow up with a phone call to relay more information.

For parents of college-aged students, a little research can provide peace of mind. Many college campuses offer email and text messages to alert students of potential dangers, such as severe weather and other threats. Encourage your college student to sign-up for such alerts. Some colleges also provide alert messages for parents so they also are aware of potential dangers on campus. In addition, make sure your student knows the emergency plans for their dorm or apartment building.

Parents and educators alike are encouraged to take a moment to review the information available on the ready.illinois.gov website. Whether you are a parent, school administrator or school resource officer, there is helpful information and training available – many times at little to no cost – to help you keep our youngest citizens and future leaders safe.

