

[MUSIC PLAYING]

TIM NELSON: Welcome back to *Minnesota Now*. I'm Tim Nelson. Calls at 15 different Minnesota schools last week reported an active shooter or a gun on campus. They were in Saint Paul, Austin, Mankato, Rochester, and Cloquet, among others.

State officials investigated and say the calls were a hoax, that no threat was found, and no one was in danger. Those kind of hoax calls intended to provoke a police response are called swatting. The Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension is investigating who's responsible for those calls. Drew Evans is Superintendent of the BCA, and he's on the line.

Welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

DREW EVANS: Thanks for having me, Tim.

TIM NELSON: So tell me a little bit about the status here of your investigation and who's working on it.

DREW EVANS: Well, as you noted, the number's up to 17 confirmed incidents across the state of Minnesota that we've been able to confirm so far, and we think that there certainly could be more that were not reported in. Our Minnesota Fusion Center tracks this type of information and works to be an information sharing hub with the local jurisdictions that receive these calls and are investigating. And the FBI is investigating the matter, as well, because, unfortunately, we've seen this type of activity occur in different states across the United States.

TIM NELSON: So, obviously, one of these hoax calls can be really alarming for students and staff and families. But, I mean, just the sheer scale here feels alarming. I know local authorities are the one that show up in the parking lot and go in to look. But is there a critical mass here where there's enough chaos that it starts to have a wider impact on state or regional resources? You mentioned the Fusion Center there.

DREW EVANS: Yeah. So, as you noted, I don't think there's anything that would create the level of fear of a call like this in a parent if you have a child in one of the schools across Minnesota. And this happened now in at least 17 different communities across Minnesota. Law enforcement showed up, armed, trying to determine whether or not something happened.

As we say, this is a hoax. But this is a really disturbing hoax. This is one that's designed to create fear in our communities. So as we've tracked this particular threat-- and we saw similar but different types of threats in the past year when individuals were calling in bomb threats, you may recall, in some of our colleges and universities-- the individual or entity that's doing this certainly is trying to create fear in our communities.

TIM NELSON: You also mentioned some other places in the country. I've heard of these fake shooting calls in Arkansas, California, and Texas. I would suspect you're talking to your colleagues around the country. Are there any indications these are connected or have some wider purpose?

DREW EVANS: We're trying to uncover the purpose. But we do believe they're connected, or at least some of them are connected, and that one individual or entity is responsible for making the bulk of these calls, which, obviously, creates great concern as to what their purpose and what their motivation may be.

TIM NELSON: Now, I know your agency is no stranger to internet crimes. You have the Internet Crime Against Children Task Force that does digital forensics and investigations. Is that know-how helping you address this? I can imagine there's some Voice over Internet Protocol and virtual private networks that make these hoax calls harder to track down and sort of an internet phenomenon, right?

DREW EVANS: That's exactly right. They are challenging. We have both our Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force and we also have some cyber capabilities, but we also rely heavily on our federal partners such as the FBI who have the most robust capabilities to really peel back the onion and work through, just as you noted, Voice over Internet Protocol and try to determine where a call like this may have originated. And then we can start to identify who may be responsible for the calls.

TIM NELSON: And we heard some reports that these may have been originating or may have bounced in from overseas last week.

DREW EVANS: There's some indications that this did start from overseas, and we'll continue to work on that. People do have the ability to mask where a call may have originated from. So that's part of the process, and it's really a tedious process, often, to really go through all the logs, all the information and evidence available to try to determine exactly where it was. But indications are it may have originated from overseas.

TIM NELSON: And turning back to Minnesota, I can imagine law enforcement agencies and officers, they have some of the same weaknesses as all of us do. They may get lulled by false alarms. And now, as you said, we had the bomb threats earlier, and now these shooting calls. How does law enforcement stay ready to respond and really take all these seriously? We saw the deadly results of delay in Uvalde earlier this year.

DREW EVANS: Yeah, I think that's the most important message for everybody. In law enforcement, we talk with our partners, and I know they stand at the ready to address these issues across Minnesota, is that every threat is taken seriously until we know it's not. That's the most simple way to think about this.

And we also tell all of your listeners, parents, administrators, students that if something seems suspicious, even if they don't know if it's real or not, that that either gets reported to local law enforcement, or they can report it through our See it, Say it, Send it app so that we can address every potential threat to ensure that there isn't a threat to the safety of our children across Minnesota.

TIM NELSON: You talked a little bit about the parents and students respond-- seeing these and doing something about it. What about when they happen? I know that there's-- we saw the shooting incident at the Richfield High School on Friday. This seems to be more alarming all the time. In the moment, do you have suggestions for what parents and students can do to help?

DREW EVANS: Well, again, before anything happens, if we know a particular threat, if you know a student's bringing a gun to school, if you think somebody's a threat, report that. It can be to a trusted adult in the school. It can be to law enforcement. It can be through our app, for example. But we need to follow up on that.

When it is happening, in the incident, follow the directions that have been provided. All of our schools work with our children for these unfortunate events, and they need to follow the directions that are provided. And then law enforcement needs to have that robust response, which is drilled throughout the state, ongoing. And it's really important for our school districts to have ongoing relationships with the law enforcement so both sides know what's going to happen if one of these events ever were to occur.

TIM NELSON: Great advice. Well, thank you so much, Drew. Drew Evans is the Superintendent for the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. And we'll have continuing coverage of these swatting incidents throughout the state on our website at nprnews.org.