

NINA MOINI: Minnesota has a state agency dedicated to helping schools prepare, respond, and recover from all kinds of threats and emergencies from school shooting threats to a cyber attack. The Minnesota School Safety Center's mission is to keep schools safe, and the agency has a new leader. Connie Forster recently became director, and she joins me on the line now. Thanks for being with us, Connie.

CONNIE Thank you for having me.

FORSTER:

NINA MOINI: A lot of people may not yet that this state agency even exists, the Minnesota School Safety Center. Broadly speaking, could you tell us what the role of the agency is?

CONNIE The role of the agency, the School Safety Center is really, like you said, to help schools plan for, respond, and
FORSTER: recover from any type of emergency they might face.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, I listed some of them there. It's just it's a broad range of things, school shootings, cyber attacks. And unfortunately, I think these are things that parents and students alike are increasingly worried about when they're being dropped off at school, especially, of course, after the tragedy that we had here in Minnesota with the mass shooting at Annunciation Church and School. After that happened, did you feel like the role of the office came more into the forefront? Because I know it's been around for a while.

CONNIE Yeah, I really think it did. It just reminded people that we need to continue to think about it. It's not a once and
FORSTER: done. It's an ongoing-- it's an ongoing process. We always need to be thinking about it, training to our plan, just revisiting and seeing if things are still working. Are there things that need to be improved in the buildings, added to the buildings? Are there other things that we need to do to help support students and staff so they feel welcome, supported, connected, and safe once they're inside the building as well? Those are all really key pieces to school safety initiatives.

NINA MOINI: I think sometimes people would say, where do you begin with something like this, because there's so many different stakeholders and different parts. And I was reading a bit about the history of your career and all the time that you've spent thinking about things like this. And I just wonder how you bring that experience into this role with you?

CONNIE My passion has always been education. And then I moved into the fire service, so I started in education, moved
FORSTER: into the fire service, and really focused not only on response, but as well as community risk reduction. And this position brings it full circle. It's a community approach. There's not one single solution. We all need to work together to create the solution.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and I--

CONNIE And we have to look at it-- oh.

FORSTER:

NINA MOINI: Yeah, I was just going to say, and obviously, everyone could always use more funding and always desires more funding. But I also think I read a quote of yours that says you can't really spend your way out of something like this or have one type fix-it. Everybody sort of has to be involved in terms of just the culture and the training. And your office is a resource for individual school districts. What would you say you're working on the hardest right now with districts, or new challenges coming up?

CONNIE FORSTER: I think the challenges really are unique to the school. All schools are unique. All districts are unique. So we really try to meet schools where they're at. Some schools might be ready to come up with some robust communication systems between buildings within the district, where some of them are just working on the very basics. How do we communicate with people in the building? So we just really try to meet people where they're at, the school where it's at, to help them build on systems they already have in place.

NINA MOINI: But also, though, one of the laws passed in the aftermath of Annunciation, this past legislative session is the adoption of this anonymous threat reporting system. The law goes into effect next week, requiring schools to adopt a policy to implement a system by June 30. So is that kind of what you're talking about, where schools, depending on where they are, they might have different types of resources, but working with them to make sure that they're doing the best with what they have or is part of it trying to get them more resources, too?

CONNIE FORSTER: I think part of the legislation is to help build on what they have, as well as to get them more resources. There is a grant, part of that legislation. We were very excited about the legislation, because the anonymous tip line is really a critical piece in the behavioral threat assessment and management process. So we'll be working collaboratively with the other state agencies to assist schools in meeting the requirement of the anonymous tip line, whether they decide to implement their own system or adopt the free "See It, Say It, Send It," the state's free, "See It, Say It, Send It," application.

NINA MOINI: Can you just say a little bit more about why threat reporting needs assistance, and what some of the gaps may have been in the past that are troubling?

CONNIE FORSTER: Well, oftentimes people who commit acts of violence have shared some of their thoughts prior to the event. So ideally, people should report it to another person or local law enforcement. If you think about a school setting, ideally, a student would report it to a trusted adult in the building. But that's not the case sometimes, for a variety of reasons. So having a tip line is a key piece so that it can be investigated as quickly as possible and hopefully prevent the act of violence from taking place.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. So those types of threats, also cyber attacks. We're hearing more and more about those in all types of agencies and departments and school districts as well. How is your office addressing that or what are you kind of looking forward to implementing during your time?

CONNIE FORSTER: Our office-- well, the School Safety Center doesn't focus totally on cyber. We don't have a lot of cyber resources, but we connect them. There are several federal resources we can connect them to. There are some other state agencies that provide resources. So that's one of the things that we're doing to assist schools is connecting them to those other agencies that do have the resources and the expertise in the cyber realm.

NINA MOINI: What are some of the other areas that you would work with schools on? Do you work with them on things weather related types of things and drills like that, or how far out does the umbrella extend?

CONNIE FORSTER: Well, we really work with schools on, like I said, any type of emergency they might face. So a lot of some of the key services we offer, we provide training on a variety of topics, from behavioral threat assessment to the importance of standard emergency response protocols. We provide school resource officer training. We provide emergency operation plan reviews. Sometimes we walk through the buildings with staff members, point out vulnerabilities, try to help them find low-cost or no-cost solutions.

Sometimes we do things as simple as connecting them to other resources that are available to them, and making the connections also between the schools and their public safety partners. So the services we provide for schools really are dependent on what they need.

NINA MOINI: Sure.

CONNIE FORSTER: And again, just on that all-hazard realm.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. What is one thing, if you could think of one thing that you are hoping would come legislatively or funding-wise that you think is going to be really critical to help you do the school safety work that you all are doing?

CONNIE FORSTER: I think through the last several legislations, the school safety account and just providing money for schools to do the safety initiatives they need, whether that is to hire more mental health support or do some of those building upgrades like standardized locking mechanisms or to hire an SRO. So I think, again, providing the funding to the schools so they can do the work that they need in their unique context--

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

CONNIE FORSTER: --would be the ideal.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, because they all have individual needs, and it's important to take that into account. Connie, thank you very much for your time. Really appreciate your perspective.

CONNIE FORSTER: Thank you so much for having me. Have a great day.

NINA MOINI: You too. Connie Forster is the director of the Minnesota School Safety Center.