

# Family Reunification

## Task One: Research

### Final Report

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission  
Western Region Homeland Security Council



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## **I. Introduction**

The Western Region Homeland Security Council (WRHSAC) is engaged in a multi-phase project to address the needs of children in disasters, natural or human-made. The project seeks to address gaps regarding children's needs in emergency preparedness planning, disaster response, and disaster recovery in the region.

Children have unique needs when disaster occurs, and when compared with adults, have a higher likelihood of experiencing the physical and psychological impacts of trauma after a disaster (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002). Children are susceptible to experiencing long-term behavioral problems, post traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, confusion, and academic failure due to experiencing traumatic events (National Commission of Children and Disasters, 2010). Children are away from their families for dozens of hours per week if they are enrolled in day care centers or schools, and more people gather in schools than anywhere else in the community on a given weekday (Graham et al., 2006). Approximately 12 million infants and toddlers attend pre-school on a regular basis (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2009). If school districts and states do not adequately prepare for crisis management, it's possible that they could be liable for actions of negligence (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010) and the impact on affected children will be higher than it might otherwise need to be. To minimize psychological impacts that disasters have on children, it is imperative to return them as soon as possible to the safety and security of their homes and families (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010).

Currently, there are no federal requirements for schools and other organizations that host children on a daily basis to have family reunification plans as part of their emergency preparedness preparation (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). However, the majority of school districts nation wide have mandatory fire drills, and evacuation and lock down drills (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, 2007). Graham et al. surveyed 3,670 school superintendents in 2006 and found that about 87% of them had emergency plans in place, but only 30% of them had ever run a drill (Graham et al, 2006). The U.S. Accountability Office estimates that over half of all schools do not collaborate with partners in their community, and about 25% have never run a drill that included first responders. Fourteen states in the U.S. (not including Massachusetts) require that school emergency plans include protocols for family reunification (Save the Children, 2010), and the U.S. Dept. of Education highly suggests that schools and daycare facilities have emergency preparedness plans in place (Schools and Terrorism, 2004). In addition, clinical care settings are not required to have emergency plans that incorporate family reunification, and are often ill-equipped to handle family reunification efforts (Nager, 2009).

## Project Objective

WRHSAC will develop a Family Reunification Plan Checklist and Template which any department or organization can adapt to meet their reunification needs. Additionally, WRHSAC will determine whether equipment, including hardware and software would assist with the successful implementation of the reunification plan. WRHSAC will also develop a training model that recommends a training schedule and suggested training and exercise formats for organizations to successfully implement the Family Reunification Template and Checklist.

## Task 1: Family Reunification Plan Research

Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) conducted research between May 2016 and September 2016. Included in the research was the collection of existing family reunification plans (local/regional schools, head starts, hospitals, and national and international plans) to gather applied best practices and guidelines for developing plans. Sources consulted included FEMA, MEMA, U.S. Department of Education and the National Commission on Children in Disasters

## **II. Research Methods**

Outreach was conducted to local, regional, and state organizations. Email was used as the first method of outreach to organizations. Superintendents, managers, administrators, emergency planners or persons holding another appropriate position were the points of contact at the organizations. Interview questions were emailed, and asked participants to include information such as how many staff/faculty/student/patients were at the organization, how many of these people were children ages 0-18, if the organization currently has a family reunification plan in place, who developed or helped develop the plan and if there was an individual outside of the organization who helped develop the plan, how many individuals were covered or considered in the plan, the date the plan was developed, how often the plan is updated, if drills were run and how often and whether or not there was a plan for improvement, if staff are provided a specific training to administer the plan, and where the plan is stored. Participants were also asked to provide lessons learned, special techniques, and best practices that were included in their plans. Research questions were slightly different for organizations such as bus companies, YMCAs, hospitals, etc. to appropriately assess the status of their plans.

### **III. Results and Findings**

#### **Requirements under State Law**

Section 363 of MGL Chapter 159 of the Acts of 2000

##### **Schools:**

Taken from Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 159 of the Acts of 2000 **\*\*SECTION 363\*\***

"Notwithstanding any general or special law to the contrary, the superintendent of each school district shall, prior to the beginning of the school year, meet with the fire chief and police chief of the city, town or district to formulate a school specific "Multihazard evacuation plan" for each school under the superintendent's supervision. Said multihazard evacuation plan shall encompass, but not be limited to, evacuations for fires, hurricanes and other hazardous storms or disasters in which serious bodily injury might occur, shootings and other terrorist activities, and bomb threats. Said plan shall be designed for each school building after a review of each building. Said plan shall include, but not be limited to: (1) establishment of a crisis response team; (2) a designation as to who is in charge of said team and designated substitutes; (3) a communication plan; (4) crisis procedures for safe entrance to and exit from the school by students, parents and employees; and (5) policies for enforcing school discipline and maintaining a safe and orderly environment during the crisis. Each district, with the assistance of the local police and fire departments, shall annually review and update as appropriate said plan. At the beginning of each school year, students at each school shall be instructed as to the plan that is developed."

Massachusetts General Law requires that the superintendent of every school district in the Commonwealth meet with public safety professionals to create a "Multi Hazard Evacuation Plan" for each school under the superintendent's district. The Hazard Evacuation plan must include hazards such as hurricanes, shooting and terrorist activities, and bomb threats, but may go beyond that. A crisis Response team, a designee in charge of that team, a communication plan, procedures for "safe entrance and exit of the school by students, parents, and employees", and policies for enforcing school discipline and maintaining a safe and orderly environment during the crisis must be implemented. Each district's plan must be reviewed with the help of local law enforcement on a yearly basis, and the students must be informed of emergency procedures as they are developed.

##### **Residential and Day Camps:**

Section 430.210:

Plans Required to Deal with Natural Disasters or other Emergencies (Residential and Day Camps)

The operator of each residential camp and each day camp shall develop written contingency plans and related procedures dealing with circumstances such as natural disasters and other emergencies and shall develop a written fire evacuation plan.

- (A) Fire Drills. Fire drills shall be held within the first 24-hours of the beginning of each camping session. The fire evacuation plan shall be in writing and approved by the local fire department. The plan shall indicate the frequency of fire drills to be held during the camping season.
- (B) Disaster Plan. Each camp shall have at the campsite a written disaster plan. All campers and staff shall be advised of the procedures contained in the plan. Arrangements for transporting individuals from the camp to emergency facilities shall be included in the plan.
- (C) Lost Camper and Swimmers Plan. Lost camper and lost swimmer plans shall be formulated and kept on file. All staff shall be trained in the procedures contained in these plans. These plans shall be in writing.
- (D) Traffic Control. A written plan relating to the control of the movement of vehicular traffic through the camp shall be on file

### Available Resources

The Federal Emergency Management Agency assembled a school crisis plan template that is appropriate for use in K-12 schools (FEMA, 2011). Emergency plans should be developed in unison with first responders, local emergency management agencies, parents, and other community stakeholders (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010), and FEMA recommends that any updates to plans, including trainings and exercises conducted should involve all stakeholders (2011).

Among 85 local schools and other organizations contacted by BRPC and FRCOG, 22 responded with detailed information on emergency preparedness plans, and three organizations, including the Massachusetts State Police, North Adams School District, and Berkshire Head Start Program agreed to detailed interviews on Family Reunification Plans. Seventy-two percent of respondents said they had reunification plans in place, and the majority of existing family reunification plans were developed in-house (82%). Four respondents said that they had sought outside help from public safety officials or other outside entities.

The Massachusetts Emergency Management Association (MEMA) does not have a recommended reunification plan, however, MEMA is meeting with officials in New Hampshire to review their plan on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Information and outcomes from this meeting will be relayed to BRPC and FRCOG when they are available.

FEMA partnered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the American Red Cross, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to create a comprehensive overview of the coordination plans necessary to reunify children who have been displaced from their parents or legal guardians in large scale disasters. This document is extensive, and recommends that all community partners, including schools, child care, medical, juvenile justice facilities, local, state, and federal organizations, as well as faith based group coordinate in reunification efforts. This document is Title Post-Disaster Reunification of Children: A

Nationwide Approach, and was published in 2013. Certain aspects of this document can be translated to smaller disasters.

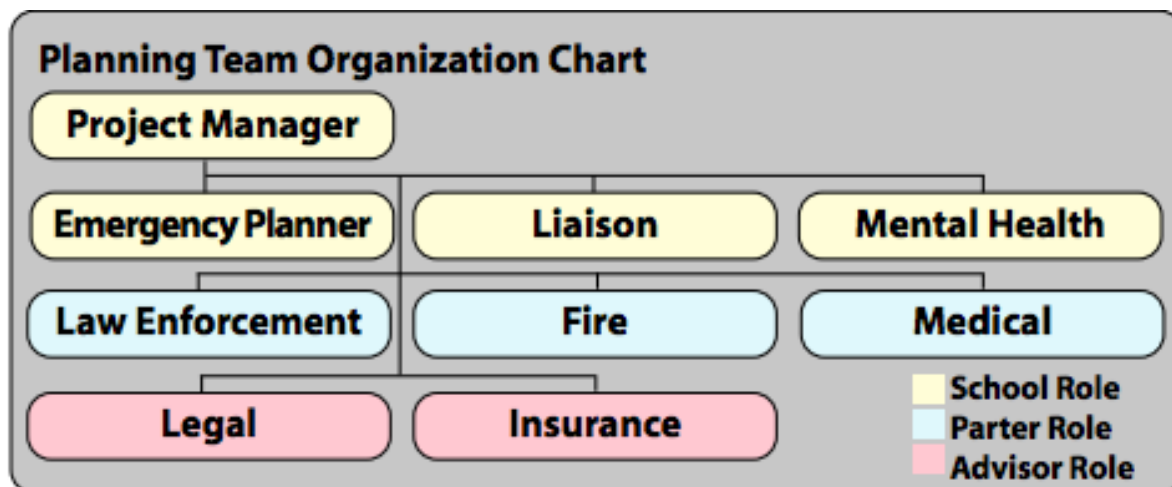
“I Love U guys” is an organization created by Ellen and John-Michael Keyes, whose child was killed in a school at Platte Canyon High School in Colorado in 2006, focuses on school safety. “I Love U Guys” developed a manual (Standard Reunification Method) to assist schools and organizations to implement reunification plans into their current emergency preparedness plans. The Massachusetts State Police (MSP) refers to these documents and modifies documents from this manual to assist organizations around Massachusetts in implementing reunifications plans. An important point emphasized by the MSP and the Standard Reunification Method is for schools and organizations to partner with local public safety officials in the development and planning, drilling, and review of their reunification practices. This manual includes methods to develop a planning team and develop a district wide reunification plan, student education procedures, parent education procedures, tabletop exercise schedule, and a live drill schedule. However, it does not exhaustively address details of each step of the procedure in real-life scenarios, requiring drilling and evaluations to occur regularly. This document makes the important recommendation that staff, especially those on the Crisis Response Team (also referred to as a reunification team), take IS-100 SCA Introduction to Incident Management for Schools course to understand and share vocabulary with responders and to follow and implement complimentary procedures. The roles (detailed below) are listed in the following chart to show the flow of Crisis Team Staff in coordination with responders.



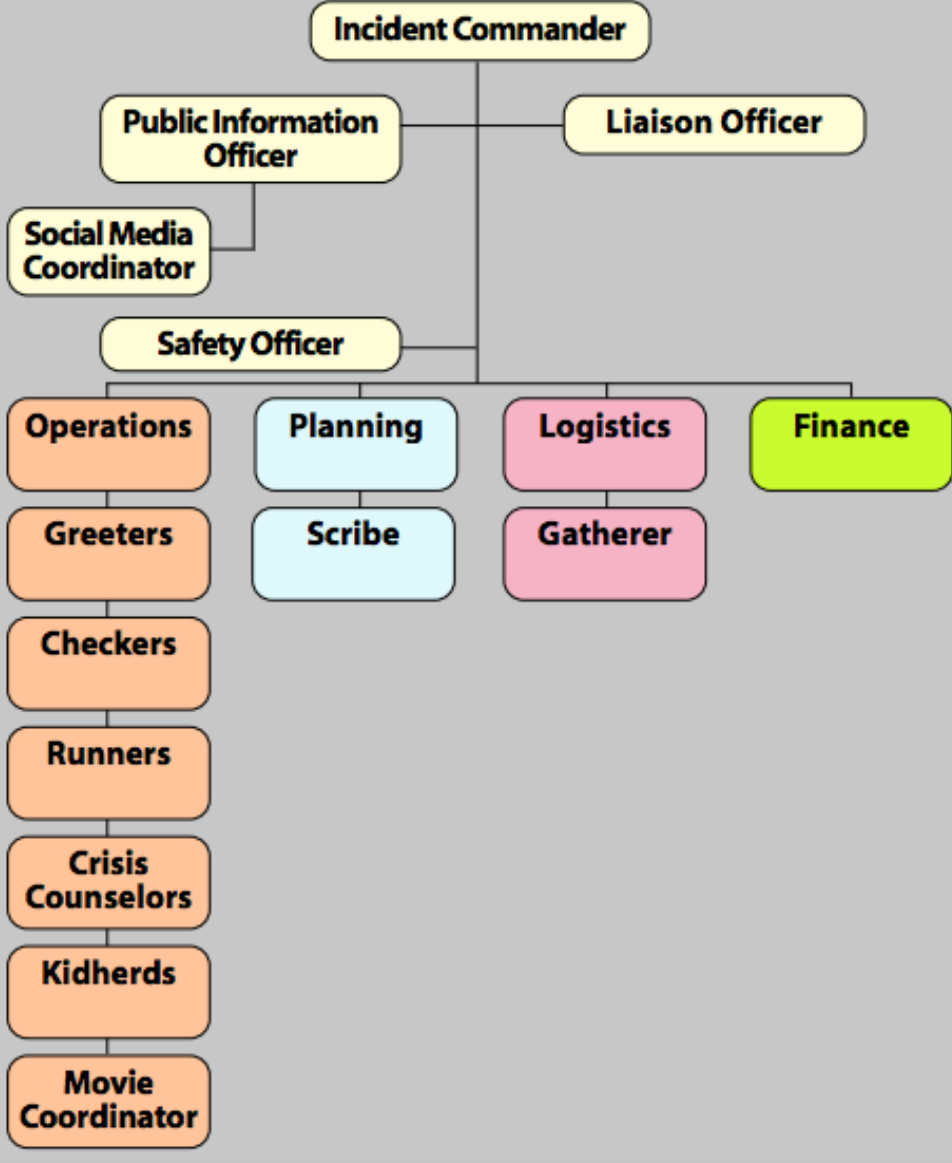
## Student and Family Reunification Teams in Schools

Reunifications teams at organizations and schools should be established and trained to operate family reunification sites, including the ability to set up and maintain the area, complete and track release paperwork, and ensure safety for students (FEMA 2011, Trump, 2011). This team can include staff members, counselors, and must include at least one member of the school administration with decision-making authority. At each reunification section, there must be at least two staff members available to ensure adequate security for the students (Trump, 2011). Volunteers from the Red Cross or other organizations active in disasters may be called in to assist the school staff. The designated Runners on the Reunification Team will shepherd students and parents or guardians to appropriate zones of the reunification site, and other staff will be required to verify parent and guardian identities and assist with required paperwork (Trump, 2011). At every point of reunification, staff members and volunteers must be equipped with a list of students assigned to him or her, and in addition, a list of children who were absent at the start of the school day or who left prior to the incident occurring. It is recommended that at least one member of the team be a mental health provider or counselor (Trump, 2011). In clinical care settings, where pediatric patients need to be transported off site, it is recommended that MOUs be established with taxi-services, public transportation agencies, neighboring city, county, or state transportation services, and by military support (Nager, 2009). Additionally, volunteers from the Medical Reserve Corps are recommended to assist clinical staff members in the transportation and reunification of pediatric patients (Nager, 2009).

The recommended construct of the planning team and reunification team by “I Love U Guys” is as follows, and recommended job skills of each individual:



# Reunification Incident Command Organization Chart



“I Love U Guys” provides a detailed description of each role of the Crisis/Reunification Team below.

<b>Role</b>	<b>Responsibilities</b>
Incident Commander	Defining and coordinating the objective of accountable, easy, reunification of students with parents.
Public Information Officer	Communicating with Parents and Press, if appropriate. Coordinating use of mass call or text messages.
Social Media Coordinator	Tweeting Parents and Press, if appropriate.
Safety Officer	General site observation and safety concern remedy.
Liaison Officer	Communicating with Fire, Medical or Law Enforcement
Operations	Establish and manage operational staff
Greeters	Help coordinate the Parent Lines. Tell parents about the process. Help verify identity of parents without ID.
Checkers	Verify ID and custody rights of parents/guardians. Direct Parents to Reunification Location.
Runners	Take bottom of Reunification Card to Student staging area, recover student and bring to Reunification Area.
Crisis Counselors	Standby unless needed
Kidherds	Often Teachers or Staff in the Staging Area.
Movie Coordinator	At the elementary level, deploying a projector and screen can reduce student stress
Planning	May be staffed or the Planning Staff (Scribes) reports to Incident Commander
Scribe	Documents event.
Logistics	May be staffed or the Logistics Staff reports to Incident Commander
Stage Hands	Initial setup of the Check In area, the signage, Student Staging Area. Stage Hands may be assigned to Operations as the setup is completed.
Finance	May or may not be staffed during a reunification.

<b>Role</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Skills</b>
Project Manager	Scheduling, project management and oversight	At the district level this may be the superintendent or in larger districts it may be the safety director.  At the school level this is often the principal or safety team lead.  This position demands management and communication skills
Emergency Planner	Creating and revising the reunification plan	Good communication and writing skills are necessary. Either knowledge or willingness to learn enhanced features of Google Maps.  Completion and certification of IS-100SCa online course  It is not uncommon for this role to be filled by a vice principal, dean of students, safety team lead or school resource officer
Liaison	Facilitate meeting times and places, document forwarding	Scheduling, email and phone
Mental Health	Review materials with professional consideration	Respective professional skills
Law Enforcement, Fire and Medical	Review and contribution of individual office, department or agency concerns	Respective professional skills
Legal and Insurance	Review and contribution of individual office, department or agency concerns	Respective professional skills

## Reunification Site

Reunification sites must be accessible for everyone to move safely and quickly to and from. The communications abilities of each site must be assessed when making the emergency plans (Trump, 2011). Visual barriers of some capacity must be used to obstruct the line of site from parent check-in areas to student holding areas (Trump, 2011; Standard Reunification Method). If the reunification site occurs off campus, there must be the appropriate number of entrances and exits from the locations to safely accommodate responders and parking (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). If buses are required to transport children to a reunification site, the bus communication system must be checked periodically (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008). It is imperative that parents be directed to park away from the school or organization's main entrance, as first responders must have accessible access points to the site of the incident (Trump, 2011). Gates and fences that are already on site can be used to organize traffic flow and redirect traffic (Graham et al, 2006). Additionally, media staging areas should not be located near reunification sites (Philipott & Serluco, 2009; U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, 2007).

Students with special needs should be given extra consideration at every point in the reunification process, and if necessary and possible, should be provided a special holding area staffed by school or organization personnel (Standard Reunification Method).

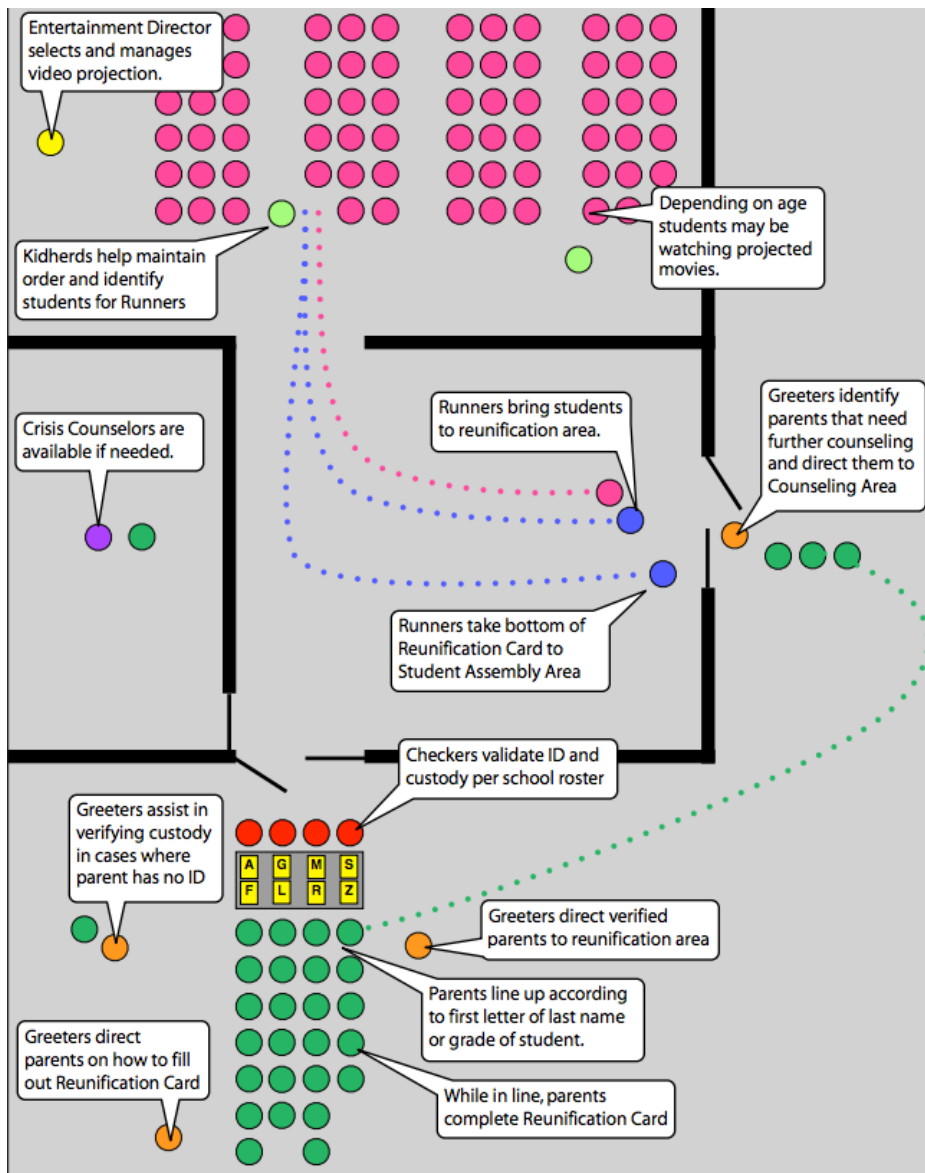
Children should only be released to designated individuals on their emergency information card (referred to in the Standard Reunification Method as the "demographic card") on file with the schools. The Henrico County Public Schools recommend that there should be at least one non-parent individual listed on the emergency contact card of each child in case parents are inaccessible during an incident. It is also recommended that parents present an official form of identification at the reunification site, and that parents who do not possess such identification should not be listed on the emergency card. It is recommended that every reunification site be assessed partially based on its ability to accommodate sufficient parking.

"I Love U Guys" recommend that Google Maps be used to determine the accessibility of the site, and to designated entry points and access points for parents, police, buses, and responders. The organization also recommends that before an off-site reunification site is identified, sexual offenders lists and the general safety of neighborhoods should be evaluated. A list of considerations when mapping routes put forth by "I Love U Guys" is below:

1. Evacuation routes
2. Incident Command Post locations
3. Incoming district responder routes
4. Incoming fire routes
5. Incoming medical routes
6. Outgoing medical routes
7. Incoming parent routes
8. Outgoing parent routes

9. Staging area
10. Landing Zone
11. Media Staging
12. Reunification signage locations
13. Parent check-in location
14. Possible road block sites
15. Possible neighborhood evacuation perimeter
16. Sexual offender locations
17. Security perimeter
18. Long perimeter

Further, "I Love U Guys" recommends a general structure of the reunification site similar to other authors below:



“I Love U Guys” and the Massachusetts State Police recommend that reunification teams have access to Go-Kits, costing approximately 300 dollars to equip, be readily accessible in the event of a crisis. The MSP also recommend that individuals classrooms have go-kits with attendance sheets, basic first aid materials, and emergency plan cheat sheets. A list of recommended items from “I Love U Guys” is below.

<b>Item</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Date</b>
Inventory Sheet	1				
Popup tent	1				
Parent check in banner	1				
Bungee cords	12				
Folding table (6 foot)	1				
Folding chairs	4				
24 count boxes of pens	2				
English reunification cards	2500				
Spanish (or another language) reunification cards	500				
Directional signs	12				
Bull horn	1				
Extra bull horn batteries	1				
Flashlights	4				
Extra flashlight batteries	12				
Safety vests	24				
Set of laminated alphabet sheets (A - Z)	2				
Set of laminated grade sheets (K - 12)	2				
Numbered plastic bins with lids	8				
Duct/Gaffers Tape	2				
Emergency contact hardcopy	1				
Suntan Lotion	10				

Some districts are moving to electronic parent verification (see page 11) and include electronic rosters, laptops and internet hot spots in their reunification Go Kits.

## Reunification Area Structure

Three zones are recommended at reunification sites, including a holding area for students to be released, a report point where parents sign in, and a student release point where children will be released to their parents or guardians (Washington State School Safety Center). The MSP recommend that school or organization office staff, because of their potential familiarity with students' parents, staff the report point. Locating the report point and the release point a moderate distance from each other will reduce congestion at the reunification site.

## Reunification Procedure

Staff and volunteers should direct parents to the report point upon arrival, where staff of the reunification team can assist them with paperwork. Any additional information on the incident requested by parents should be referred to the designated Public Information Officer, and members of the reunification team should wear vests, nametags, or other identifiers if they are available (Washington State School Safety Center, 2008, Massachusetts State Police). Adults should provide the name of their child, and staff should cross check their official identification with the emergency release authorization card of the child. Staff will provide the adult with a release form. The staff member should then fill out their portion of the form, indicating that they have seen documentation of positive matching identification (P&S, 2009). A runner will then take the form to the holding area, and the parent or guardian will be directed to the student release site to wait for their child. If the child is available for release, the runner will transport the child to the student release area (P&S, 2009). If students are unavailable for release, their parents should be identified prior to checking in and led to a "notification room" to await further information (P&S, 2009). If the child has undergone first aid or other medical care, the Washington State Safety Center recommends that a "Notice of First Aid Care Given" form be filled out and presented to the parent. The notification room should be staffed by mental health providers and support staff in case of traumatic news. The Columbine Review Commission recommends that the procedures in the event of a child's death should include the provision of immediate psychological needs of the child's family (Erikson, 2001) and the mental health providers should reassure parents that efforts are being made to secure the child's remains in order to deliver them back to the family (P&S, 2009). If the parent or guardian is not available to pick up their child, P&S recommend that staff members place phone calls, and if no one on the emergency card can be reached, that a member of the team transport the child to their place of residence. If there is no parent available at home, as a last resort, the child should be placed with child protective services.



## Documentation

Copies of student rosters, including absences and early sign-out lists, and emergency authorization cards should be easily accessible on campus and at an off campus reunification site (Trump, 2011). Every step of the process should be documented and noted for each child at every step of the reunification process (Philpott & Serluco, 2009; Standard Reunification Method).

## Plan Accessibility and Distribution

All staff and administration of schools and organizations must have easy access to emergency protocols and Reunification Team member designations. The student or child roster, list of absent children, and emergency release forms should be available to staff in hard copy and through electronic means (Trump, 2011). Childrens' emergency contact information, and anticipated modes of communication should be updated at the beginning of enrollment or the beginning of the school year (P&S, 2009). In addition to this information, the childrens' primary physician should provide detailed documentation of the child's baseline health for children with medical conditions (American Academy of Pediatrics, Foltin et al., 2008). Emergency Authorization forms should include contact information for several authorized adults who are able to retrieve a child in the event of an incident (P&S, 2009). In addition, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools recommends that all documents be translated into the language understood by the parent or guardian of each child.

## Communications

It is recommended that parent notification and communication be a top priority of the reunification plans, and methods in which to communicate should be updated and assessed every year (Trump, 2011). Staff and students should be discouraged from using cellphones near the incident site to avoid overloaded circuits (Henrico County Public Schools). The U.S. Department of Education indicates that this is of particular importance in the event of a bomb threat, as bombs may be triggered by specific frequencies, and this matter should be explicitly communicated to parents. Parents should remain close to the phone listed as the emergency contact number during the incident (Henrico Public Schools). Schools and organizations should have template letters and press releases prepared to reduce confusion and miscommunication during disasters of a higher likelihood, depending on the locations. It is recommended that organizations utilize radio stations and television stations as a means of communications with specific channels to contact identified in their emergency plans. Schools and organizations should utilize their automatic phone message and text message capabilities throughout the incident and direct parents and guardians to phone numbers or their websites to gather further information.

## General Best Practices

Several sources recommend that schools and organizations dealing with children develop an all hazards blueprint plan that can be translated to several types of disasters, whereas other authors, including the National Commission on Children and Disaster (2010) recommend a risk-assessment approach to planning, including scenarios that are most likely to occur in a particular region. The MSP recommend that different methods of reunification be considered depending on the type of incident. Sufficient staffing in clinical care facilities and other organizations will increase safety and efficiency of the family reunification process (Nager, 2009).

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