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CEDAR HILL — A sad sign of the times played out last week on the Northwood University campus.



Time was when a local chamber of commerce spent its time luring new businesses to town and helping its members attract more customers. But gun violence has changed the chamber's mission in this Dallas suburb where 46,000 people live.

Amanda Skinner, the chamber's CEO, began to worry that Cedar Hill stores, restaurants, churches, banks and other "soft targets" need more training to protect themselves against "active shooters" intent on committing mass murder.

So, on Friday, some 40 people gathered in a college classroom for a daylong educational program on demented gunmen and what to do if they arrive on your doorstep. Sgt. Victor Vasquez and Cpl. Juan Herrera, veteran Cedar Hill police officers, conducted the training.

"It's a sad reality that we have to do this," Vasquez told the group.

Erbie Lee Bowser was not far from their minds. Bowser is accused of killing four people and wounding four others Wednesday night during a dramatic shooting spree that began in Dallas and ended in DeSoto, a southwest Dallas County community next to Cedar Hill.

Those shootings took place in residential neighborhoods, but Cedar Hill Police Chief Steve Rhodes issued a warning to the group.

"It was not in a business, but it could have been," Rhodes said. "Fortunately for us, he did not come here."

Vasquez and Herrera, using a PowerPoint presentation, advised business owners to write their own emergency plan and share it regularly with new employees. They dispensed simple advice for those unfortunate enough to get trapped in a building with a crazed gunman:

- Run. If you can get out without confronting the shooter, do it.

- If you can't escape, then hide. Not under a desk, but in a closed room that can be locked or barricaded.
- If you can't escape or hide, the last resort may be to fight. "Take the shooter down," Vasquez said.

Peggy Wilson, 86, snowy-haired and grandmotherly, asked Vasquez if it would be OK to shoot the gunman. "Some of us carry pistols on occasion," said Wilson, a former city councilwoman. "What if we try to take out the shooter ourselves?"

Vasquez smiled and said, "Well, you have the right to protect yourself and defend yourself."

The training day also included police demonstrations of how they clear a building occupied by an active shooter. Class participants, clad in bright green T-shirts and eye protectors, portrayed hostages. Police officers armed with AR-15 assault rifles stormed the building and "killed" a shooter with harmless training ammo.

"Run, run! Go, go, go!" officers yelled as they ushered hostages out of the building after the shooter was neutralized.

Invariably, dramatic shooting incidents — the movie theater in Aurora, Colo., and the elementary school in Newtown, Conn., come to mind — produce massive publicity and gut-wrenching agony.

Even so, Americans are much more likely to die from cancer, heart disease, diabetes and suicide. Homicide, a category that includes shooting deaths, has not been among the top 15 causes of death in the United States for several years, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The fear factor often prevails, however. Churches, which once opened their doors to everyone, are locking them during the week to protect office staff. The larger ones are installing security cameras in Sunday school classrooms and creating "safety teams" to sort through security issues.

Skinner, the Cedar Hill chamber's CEO, said she got the idea for Friday's program after participating in the police department's active shooter training program. "Most people cannot imagine what it would be like to go through something so traumatic," she said. "What I hope is that the businesses here will go back and do their own training and develop a written plan."

At a glance: The Mind of a Shooter

Mentally unbalanced people who end up committing mass murder evolve through five stages:

1. Fantasy Stage: Examples include thinking about killing while playing video games or watching violent movies.
2. Planning Stage: Written evidence might be found in their homes.
3. Preparation Stage: The accumulation of weapons, ammunition and equipment.
4. Approach Stage: The hours and minutes leading up to the shooting.
5. Implementation Stage: It's a done deal and becomes news.

Common qualities found in people who commit mass murder:

Poor impulse control; Injustice collectors; Obsessions; New energy or tone; Repeated loss of temper; Physical eruptions or fighting; Stalking

SOURCE: Cedar Hill Police Department