

An Interview with Director of Emergency Management Sarah Powell

Several faculty members have asked me about whether the University has any plans for educating the faculty about safety concerns. A bit of investigation led me to Sarah Powell, Director of Emergency Management. My interview with Sarah Powell is below.

Paul LaFollette (PL): I have been approached by some colleagues who are concerned about their safety, and most particularly about not knowing how to respond to various threatening situations in which they may find themselves. These concerns range from the possibility of a shooter on campus, to questions like “how should I respond to the threat of violence within my classroom,” or “how can I keep myself safe on campus, especially after dark?” Can you speak to some of those concerns?

Sarah Powell (SP): It sounds like the anxieties that exist among the faculty are the anxieties that exist among most of the population right now.

PL: Yes, I think that what we need right now is a combination of reassurance, recommendations, and knowledge.

SP: Absolutely. Just to give you some background about my position, until about two years ago, there was no job at Temple like mine. At that time, I was the project director for the Center for Preparedness Research, Education, and Practice in the Department of Public Health. I was working specifically with behavioral health response. I was recruited into my current position by Jim Creedon (Senior Vice President of Construction, Facilities & Operations) to really address what was at that point a serious lack of coordination. There were people doing a lot of things at Temple in the world of emergency management, but not in any kind of coordinated, university wide fashion.

So, over the last couple of years I have been doing a lot of planning and creating procedures. I have also been working on creating emergency management teams for every building on campus. I am very much committed to making every School or College, Administrative Unit or Department a partner of mine in this process. We all have a role in life and safety concerns.

I very much want our faculty to understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. I also want to provide a conduit for transmitting information to faculty. I do training, which covers evacuation, shelter in place, lockdown and active shooter preparedness. Active Shooter preparedness is really about personal survival. I am working with HR to create a mandatory on-line version of our training. Next semester, at some point, it will be ready to go. That will reach all full-time faculty and staff.

But I also find that in-person training is generally more effective, because people can ask questions. Some schools and colleges have invited me to make presentations to them at their collegial assemblies. I have done that for Fox School of Business and the College of Education. But that only happens when the administration of various schools are motivated to ask me to make presentations.

PL: It is not always easy to motivate busy faculty to come to meetings, but I think it is important to develop some sort of communications between our faculty bodies and your office. One thing that I can suggest is that following this interview in which I introduce you and your office to the faculty, perhaps you and the *Faculty Herald* can work together to create some educational articles over the next few issues of the *Herald*.

SP: That would be great. Another thing that I have been thinking about is this: In the recent knife attack at Ohio State, following the attack, the university closed classes for the rest of the afternoon, and was open for business the first thing the next morning. They effectively told their faculty that they expected them to be talking about this in their classes, and they encouraged them to do so. But I don't know whether faculty were given any guidance as to how to do that. There are really specific ways as to how to respond after stressful events. These sorts of conversations need to be facilitated by people who know what they are doing. We wouldn't want people unwittingly ramping up anxiety. At some point, this issue of response in the aftermath needs to become a part of the planning. I definitely want to create teams who know how to provide psychological first aid. Groups like housing or residential life provide an easy audience for this kind of thing. Getting faculty involved would be worthwhile too, if we can find a way to reach them.

People also approach me all the time about a sense of personal safety in their own buildings. It is possible to get panic buttons in offices, or hand out whistles. These are simple things that can contribute to a sense of greater safety.

Any avenue that you can suggest to me that can bring me into conversation with the faculty, I am happy to hear about, whether that might mean meeting with the Senate, or with individual faculty, or holding workshops. All of those are possibilities.



Sarah Powell

PL: Well, I will remain in touch with you about finding ways to increase your visibility among the faculty, and to help us become more aware of the things we can be doing to promote our own safety. May I suggest to faculty that they may, if they have questions, contact you directly?

SP: Yes, please do encourage faculty to contact me directly. My email is sjpowell@temple.edu.

PL: Thank you for your time, and I am sure we will be talking again.



Photograph from an active shooter drill on Temple's Campus, June 2, 2016