

Personal Safety and Terrorism

Everybody is talking about terrorism today. It is hard to escape the headlines. The recent change in the Terror Threat level is a good example of how we are all being asked to face new challenges and accept new dangers. This is a good time to think about how to keep yourself safe. Here are some thoughts.

Level Orange Terror Alert.

Many are wondering what this means. After September 11th, the federal government, working through Homeland Security, created a five-level warning system to help Americans understand how likely a terrorist attack might be and to help public safety departments across the country to coordinate efforts. The Orange level is the second-highest level, which means that the federal government is specifically concerned about terror events. To learn more about this warning system you can visit www.DHS.gov.

Be Aware

One of the most important things you can do is to simply be aware of your environment and your surroundings. This means paying a little more attention to where you are and how you might react if something happened. You should know where emergency exits are, know which floor you're on in case you need to take stairs down and in general know how to exit a building or an area safely. You should also know how to contact campus emergency services. Being aware also means that you should notice things that are strange or unusual. If you do notice a strange person or situation, do not confront that situation. Instead, contact the appropriate campus authority and let them handle the situation. Awareness can go a long way in keeping yourself and others safe.

Know Your College Plans

Most colleges have emergency plans for a variety of scenarios. Make certain that you are familiar with any campus emergency procedures. While the procedures

may have been designed in response to an earthquake threat or weather emergency, the response plans are full of good common sense ideas that could be used in a variety of emergencies. If you are unsure about college emergency plans, ask. Check with public safety, your campus health center or any other office on campus. They should be able to help you.

Some Common Sense Ideas

If you do find that some kind of event has taken place on campus, it will be important that you react in a calm and rational manner. While it is easy for panic to set in, you will be safer if you can try to control your emotions and get yourself to safety. For one; never enter or go near a building that has been damaged by an explosion, fire or smoke. Also, try to move away from the scene of any incident. Be cautious that you avoid becoming part of a crowd. Sometimes panic can set a crowd into frenzy and more injuries may result. Also, never put yourself in danger. If you feel you can help someone else without endangering yourself, this is fine. However, it's a bad idea to risk hurting yourself to help others.

Have Communication Plans

Take some time to consider how you might contact friends and family should some kind of an emergency occur. Panicked family and friends may become more panicked if they can't contact you (or, vice versa should some incident happen where your family lives). Consider that some communication services may be interrupted or you may not have access to others. For example, you may not be able to get to a computer, or the campus network may be down making it impossible for you to send emails. At any rate, consider a few different communication alternatives. It's also a good idea to keep in close touch with your friends. Let people know where you're going and when you'll be back. This way, if someone does need to find you, they will know where to start looking.

Voice Your Opinion, But Beware of Demonstrations

You have a constitutional right (and a citizen's obligation) to voice your opinion in regards to war, terrorism, public policy and international affairs. Sometimes the most dramatic way for students to do this is to stage protests and rallies. Your free speech is protected but your safety is never guaranteed. Protests and demonstrations can become frenzied masses. Even the most peaceful protest has the potential to turn ugly. The combination of large crowds, emotional issues and differing opinions can turn a protest into a riot. Choose to voice your opinion by phoning or emailing your elected officials, or by signing appropriate petitions. If you do choose to take part in a protest or rally make sure you do the following: 1) Pay close attention to your surroundings. 2) Go to the event with a group. 3) Visually identify security personnel. 4) Try to stay at the edge of the crowd – avoid the middle where you would have trouble exiting quickly. 5) If you begin to feel uncomfortable, don't question your hunch—just leave.

Be Informed

It's hard to know what might come next these days. As war looms and the terror threat level has been raised, it's difficult to know what to do next. No one can predict the future. However, it is your responsibility as a citizen to be well informed and well read in these turbulent times. Keeping yourself safe means keeping yourself informed. When you are fully informed about the world around you, you are in a much better position to make decisions about your personal safety.