



Northern Illinois University Refines Mass Notification in Wake of Fatal Shooting

By Jim Kapparos

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Quick action on campus saved lives, and university officials are now examining how they can improve disaster response and upgrade life safety systems to better protect students and faculty.

A tragedy that occurred hundreds of miles away prepared officials at Northern Illinois University (NIU) in DeKalb for the possibility of a crisis on their own campus. And when that day came in February 2008, some lives were lost, some were saved and many were altered forever when a gunman began shooting people on campus.

In 2007, the entire nation was reeling from the devastation of the Virginia Tech University shootings in Blacksburg, Va. As a result of that tragedy, NIU decided to apply lessons learned from Virginia Tech and re-examine and fine-tune its own emergency plan. The hope, of course, was never to have to implement the plan for a similar event. Unfortunately, NIU's emergency plan was put to the test on Feb. 14, 2008, as the result of a shooting on campus.

No one knew why the shooter chose NIU, other than he had previously attended classes there. A history of

mental illness may have brought him to Cole Hall where he opened fire, killing five students and injuring more than 20. He also shot himself and died at the scene.

As the emergency unfolded, NIU replaced its normal Web site home page with an all-crisis news page, explaining the incident, and it disseminated an e-mail message notifying the campus population that a shooting was underway. In addition, public safety officials arrived on the scene within minutes to restore safety.

Because of the emergency plan's warning messages, many students and faculty locked themselves into rooms, turned lights off, closed drapes and hid. Others stayed off campus, while others fled the area.

A major part of NIU's mass notification success was the all-crisis Web site format. Before the shooting, NIU had installed six dedicated servers to support the Web site, which was a fortuitous decision: In the first 48 hours after the shooting, the NIU Web site got 14 million hits.

"If we did not have those servers, it would have crashed," said Melanie Magara, NIU's Assistant Vice President for Public Affairs. "We had people who learned in a timely manner what was happening on campus via our Web site."

NIU has been appropriately praised for its actions and reactions regarding the situation. However, some students and faculty learned, taught, talked and walked on campus throughout the shooting. They were not using computers, were not close enough to see or hear the

victims or did not hear about it from someone else. They were unaware of the situation until well after it had concluded.

"I think a lot of universities are looking at what other technologies are out there and what are the ways to retrofit existing technology," Magara said. "Can there be a better use of existing fire alarms? In our case, the incident was over so quickly, there was no further danger in about two minutes." Some campuses are expanding their use of A/V notification, such as by using lights of different colors on these devices, to denote non-fire emergencies.



Cole Hall (the single-story building pictured in the background) was the site of a shooting in which five students were killed at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb in February 2008.

Magara believes that if everyone in all buildings could have been alerted to the shooting, campus officials would have told people to "stay where you are."

What's Next?

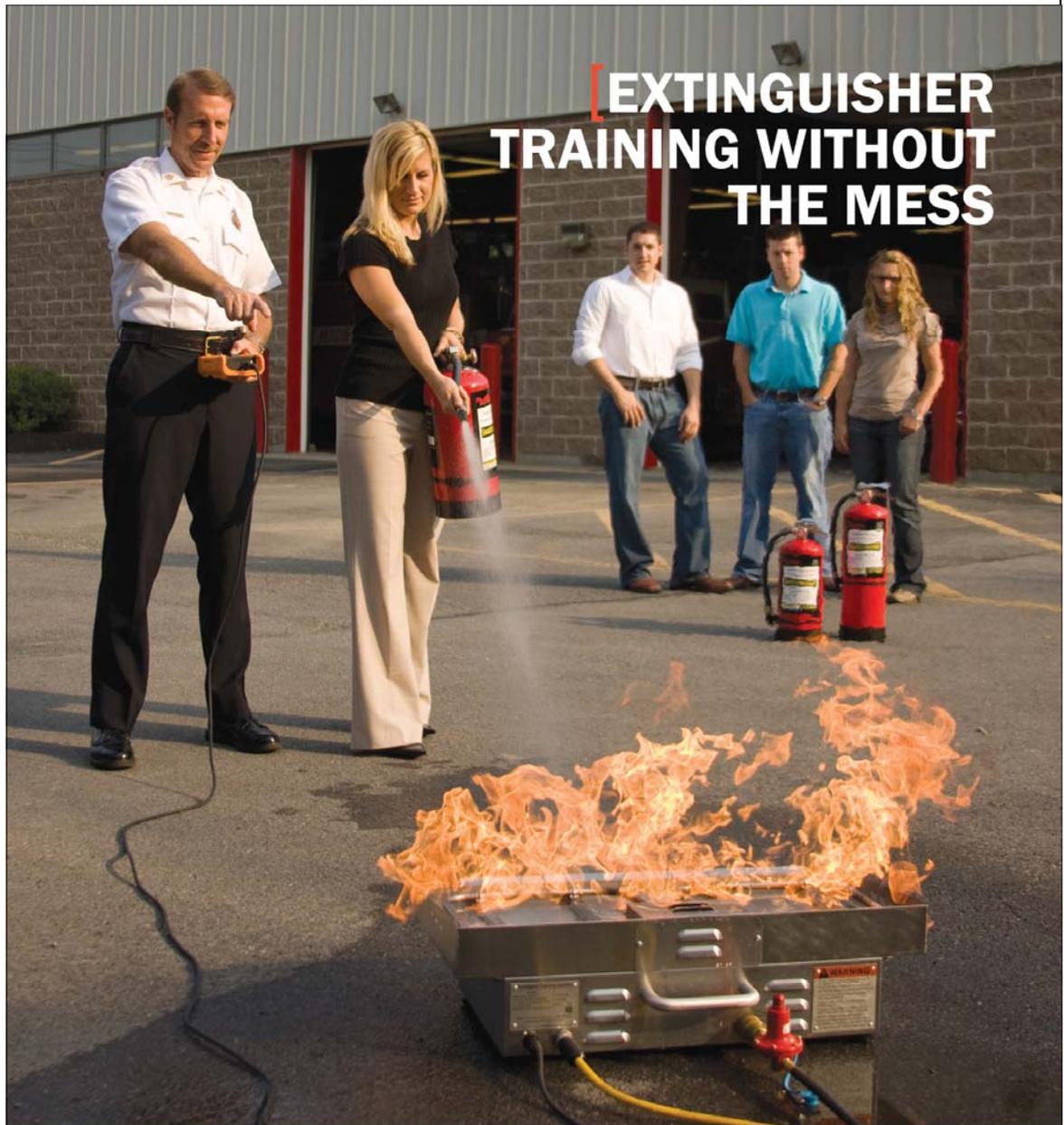
In the months after the shooting, NIU faced various questions: What would have happened if there were multiple shooters, winding their way through campus? What if those shooters orchestrated assaults at timed intervals? School officials know the potential for disaster was far greater than what actually transpired. Was the school ready for what might have been?

Questions are turning into solutions as NIU officials continue to work toward further securing the campus for anything that might arise in the future. The school has received some grants to help make the campus among the safest in the state, if not the country. Questions asked and solutions developed may provide a basic outline for others responsible for protecting hundreds or thousands of people.

Therefore, a “building-specific emphasis” is guiding NIU in its quest to further improve security and mass notification on campus. NIU is looking at all of its buildings individually for emergency preparation and mass notification because of each structure’s specialized purpose.

“We’re looking at whether someone should be assigned to lock the doors or open the doors, given the type of building it is and its use,” she said. “Does someone know where the disabled students may be in a given building who may need assistance with evacuation? And whose job is it? From a technology aspect, what’s necessary? If there’s a shooter and a fire alarm goes off, do I know what that means? Is it nuanced in its operation so different signals mean different things?”

Special attention is being directed to the residence halls. “All the residence



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halls include fire alarms, but their age and functionality vary widely," Magara said. "We've had unfunded mandates for sprinklers, and we're evaluating what we have as part of this process, too. We meet all codes, but when you add some of the required things, we need to evaluate what we have in place that enables us to communicate non-verbally."

Further analysis shows why NIU's reaction to the shooting was appropriate and successful.

"On Feb. 14, we had a plan and we had practiced our plan," Magara said. "When I got word of a shooting, I had to make two quick phone calls. We had the authority to carry out that plan. There was no time to have a meeting. We needed to err on the side of giving people as much information as possible as quickly as possible, and it worked."

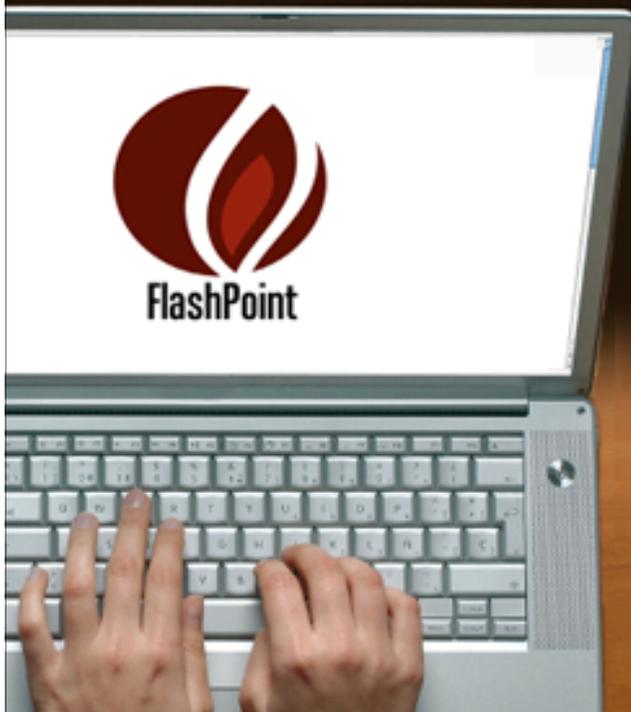
Jim Kapparos ... Since 1992, Jim Kapparos has been involved in many aspects of the fire alarm industry. He is employed as the Business Development Manager, Healthcare and Education for System Sensor. He is a member of National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), the Society Fire of Protection Engineers (SFPE) and several State fire/burglar alarm associations including the Florida Fire Marshals and Inspectors Association (FFMIA). He is a graduate of the University of Maryland and holds a NICET certification.



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