

COPS grant will fund additional officer for schools

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Once again this week, school shootings made national news as a 12-year-old boy in Nevada, shot and killed a math teacher and himself at Sparks Middle School on Monday. Tuesday, in Danvers, Mass., a math teacher was found shot and killed behind the high school where she taught, and a 14-year-old boy has been charged in her death.

While Liberal schools have never experienced a similar emergency, local law enforcement and district officials are prepared to respond if necessary, said Liberal Police Chief Al Sill.

“School safety is a top priority for the police department, and for the community,” Sill said in a phone interview on Tuesday. “It always has been.” While current events may bring school shootings in and out of the headlines, “everyone is keenly aware of this issue.”

At this time, LPD and USD No. 480 have one school resource officer who makes the rounds at several schools in town.

“Obviously, we can put someone in every school,” Sill said, noting that the police department

itself struggles to recruit and retain a full roster of officers.

“We’re in a pretty remote area, and it can be hard to hire,” he said. “We’re still down a few, but we did hire a couple officers recently, so we’ve managed to get our strength back up. It’s a challenge.”

To address the need in the school system, LPD applied for, and was awarded a grant in 2012 from the Community Oriented Policing Services — COPS — administered by the Department of Justice.

“We sought that out on behalf of the school, and entered into an agreement with the district that upon receiving the grant, we’d hire, train and supervise a fully-sworn police officer, ” Sill said.

The grant provides a three-year stream of funding to hire a full-time police officer designated for school security. Over the three-year period, responsibility for the officer’s pay would gradually shift to the district. One other stipulation? The person hired must be a post-9/11 military veteran.

And, when you place such stipulations on a position, Sill said, “it can be tough to find the right person. We’ll get it filled eventually, but it’s very difficult.”

The COPS grant won’t penalize recipients for time delays. The three-year window “freezes” until the police officer is hired, then restarts with the full three years of funding intact. If the right person isn’t found by 2015, LPD can reapply.

Ed Poley, director of Whirlwind Counseling, said the grant offers a great fit for returning military veterans, the clientele his United Way-funded agency seeks to serve.

“From my perspective, it’s a pretty natural fit,” he said. Post 9-11 vets bring a unique skill set to civilian life, Poley said. They are accustomed to working in small teams, assessing dangerous situations in crowded environments, “and they’ve been living under that umbrella that keeps

you alert, aware, ready to respond.”

An additional benefit is the age factor of such veterans.

“Most of the young vets are not far removed from high school,” Poley observed. “They understand it, the kids, the trends. If you’re 40 years old, unless you’ve been around education, it maybe very stressful to work in that school environment day after day.”

From a professional perspective, Poley said the prospect of designated law enforcement or security jobs for veterans was promising.

“As I try to work with my guys, I don’t just want to look at the short-term, finding a job for them,” he said. “Young vets are searching for careers.”

A long-time educator himself, Poley currently serves as counselor for the Tyrone, Okla., school district. He says schools have “been concerned about shootings and security for a long time,” and current events only underscore the problem of violence and death in public places. People worry about the safety of their children, and they sometimes worry about the ramifications of arming school security officers as well. It’s a familiar situation for Poley, a Vietnam vet himself.

“For an awful long time, there was the John Rambo stereotype: veterans who were all druggies and baby-killers,” he said. “Now, it’s PTSD. There’s the idea out there that veterans are wound tightly and not stable. But for the most part, that is theatrical stuff on TV. People with PTSD will withdraw. They’re suffering, but they internalize the problem.”

As Sill and his LPD officers know, Poley noted, use of deadly force in most situations “is almost null and void,” and having a person at the schools who is both a veteran and fully-trained police officer “will be vastly better than bringing in people who have not been in life-and-death situations before,” Poley said.

For now, the district continues to rely on its current school resource officer. The 2013-14 academic year has been uneventful thus far, with no emergency situations, Sill said.

The district and LPD partner with Kansas law enforcement agencies that sponsor continuing education and workshops like a Dodge City roundtable seminar scheduled for November. Though he's already sent several officers to the training, Sill said he will send a few more this time around. School auxiliary services director Robert Burkey also plans to send several USD 480 employees to the Dodge City event.

"Even without that extra school resource officers, we've got pretty quick response time around town," Sill said. The police department sponsors an annual mock emergency with other agencies in order to stay sharp.

"Rest assured," Sill said. "We're focused on keeping schools safe."