

**Comments by David R. Ford, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
to the Virginia Tech Review Panel
May 21, 2007**

Topic: Emergency Policy Group Process/Action for April 16, 2007

Chairman Massengill and Members of the Review Panel,

I am David Ford, and I serve the university as Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. One of the responsibilities I have by virtue of my position is to be a member of the university's Emergency Policy Group. It is in that capacity that I share with you today my account of the processes used and actions taken by the Policy Group related to the shooting incidents in West Ambler Johnston Residence Hall and in Norris Hall on the morning of Monday, April 16, 2007.

Shortly after 8:00 a.m. on Monday, April 16, I was informed that there had been a shooting in West Ambler Johnston Hall and that President Steger was assembling the Policy Group immediately. By approximately 8:30 a.m., I and the other members of the group had arrived at the Burruss Hall Board Room and Dr. Steger convened the meeting. I learned subsequently that as he awaited the arrival of other group members, President Steger had been in regular communication with the police, had given direction to have the Governor's office notified of the shooting, and had called the head of University Relations to his office to begin planning to activate the emergency communication systems.

When he convened the meeting, President Steger informed the Policy Group that Virginia Tech Police had received a call at approximately 7:20 a.m. on April 16, 2007, to investigate an incident in a residence hall room in West Ambler Johnston. Within minutes of the call, Virginia Tech Police and Virginia Tech Rescue Squad members responded to find two gunshot victims, a male and a female, inside a room in the residence hall.

Information continued to be received through frequent telephone conversations with Virginia Tech Police on the scene. The Policy Group was informed that the residence hall was being secured by Virginia Tech Police, and students within the hall were notified and asked to remain in their rooms for their safety. We were further informed that the room containing the gunshot victims was immediately secured for evidence collection and Virginia Tech Police began

questioning hall residents and identifying potential witnesses. In the preliminary stages of the investigation, it appeared to be an isolated incident, possibly domestic in nature. The Policy Group learned that Blacksburg Police and Virginia State Police had been notified and were also on the scene.

The Policy Group was further informed by the police that they were following up on leads concerning a person of interest in relation to the shootings. During this 30 minute period of time between 8:30 and 9 a.m., the Policy Group processed the factual information it had in the context of many questions we asked ourselves. For instance, what information do we release without causing a panic? We learned from the Morva incident last August that speculation and misinformation spread by individuals who do not have the facts causes panic? Do we confine the information to students in West Ambler Johnston since the information we had focused on a single incident in that building? Beyond the two gunshot victims found by police, was there a possibility that another person might be involved (i.e. a shooter), and if so, where is that person, what does that person look like and is that person armed? At that time of the morning, when thousands are in transit, what is the most effective and efficient way to convey the information to all faculty, staff and students? If we decided to close the campus at that point, what would be the most effective process given the openness of a campus the size of Virginia Tech? How much time do we have until the next class change?

And so with the information the Policy Group had, at approximately 9 a.m. we drafted and edited a communication to be released to the university community via email and to be placed on the university website. We made the best decision we could based upon the information we had at the time. Shortly before 9:30 a.m., the Virginia Tech community – faculty, staff and students – were notified by email as follows:

“A shooting incident occurred at West Ambler Johnston earlier this morning. Police are on the scene and are investigating.

The university community is urged to be cautious and are asked to contact Virginia Tech Police if you observe anything suspicious or with information on the case. Contact Virginia Tech Police at 231-6411.

Stay tuned to the www.vt.edu. We will post as soon as we have more information.”

The Virginia Tech Emergency/Weather Line recordings were also transmitted and a broadcast telephone message was made to campus phones. The Policy Group remained in session in order to receive additional updates about the West Ambler Johnston case and to consider further actions if appropriate.

At approximately 9:45 a.m., the Policy Group received word from the Virginia Tech Police of a shooting in Norris Hall. Within five minutes a notification was issued by the Policy Group and transmitted to the university community which read:

“A gunman is loose on campus. Stay in buildings until further notice. Stay away from all windows.”

Also activated was the campus Emergency Alert system. The voice message capability of that system was used to convey an emergency message throughout the campus. Given the factual information available to the Policy Group, the reasonable action was to ask people to stay in place. The Policy Group did not have evidence to ensure that a gunman was or was not on the loose, so every precaution had to be taken. The Virginia Tech campus contains 153 major buildings, 19 miles of public roads, is located on 2,600 acres of land, and as many as 35,000 individuals might be found on its grounds at any one time on a typical day. Virginia Tech is very much like a small city. One does not entirely close down a small city or a university campus.

Additionally, the Policy Group considered that the university schedule has a class change between 9:55 and 10:10 a.m. on a MWF schedule. To ensure some sense of safety in an open campus environment, the Policy Group decided that keeping people inside existing buildings if they were on campus and away from campus if they had not yet arrived was the right decision. Again, we made the best decision we could based on the information available. So at approximately 10:15 a.m. another message was transmitted which read:

“Virginia Tech has cancelled all classes. Those on campus are asked to remain where they are, lock their doors, and stay away from windows. Persons off campus are asked not to come to campus.”

At approximately 10:50 a.m., Virginia Tech Police Chief Flinchum and Blacksburg Police Chief Crannis arrived to inform the Policy Group about what they had witnessed in the aftermath of the shootings in Norris Hall.

Chief Flinchum reported that the scene was bad; very bad. Virginia State Police was handling the crime scene. Police had one shooter in custody and there was no evidence at the time to confirm or negate a second shooter, nor was there evidence at the time to link the shootings in West Ambler Johnston to those in Norris Hall. The police informed the Policy Group that these initial observations were ongoing investigations.

Based upon this information and acting upon the advice of the police, the Policy Group immediately issued a fourth transmittal which read:

“In addition to an earlier shooting today in West Ambler Johnston, there has been a multiple shooting with multiple victims in Norris Hall. Police and EMS are on the scene. Police have one shooter in custody and as part of routine police procedure, they continue to search for a second shooter.

All people in university buildings are required to stay inside until further notice. All entrances to campus are closed.”

Information about the Norris Hall shootings continued to come to the Policy Group from the scene. At approximately 11:30, the Policy Group issued a planned faculty/staff evacuation via the Virginia Tech website which read:

“Faculty and staff located on the Burruss Hall side of the Drillfield are asked to leave their office and go home immediately. Faculty and staff located on the War Memorial/Eggleston Hall side of the Drillfield are asked to leave their offices and go home at 12:30 p.m.”

At approximately 12:15 p.m. the Policy Group released yet another communication via the Virginia Tech website which further informed people as follows:

“Virginia Tech has closed today Monday, April 16, 2007. On Tuesday, April 17, classes will be cancelled. The university will remain open for administrative operations. There will be an additional university statement presented today at noon.

All students, faculty and staff are required to stay where they are until police execute a planned evacuation. A phased closing will be in effect today; further information will be forthcoming as soon as police secure the campus.

Tomorrow there will be a university convocation/ceremony at noon at Cassell Coliseum. The Inn at Virginia Tech has been designated as the site for parents to gather and obtain information.”

A press conference was held shortly after noon on April 16, 2007, and President Charles W. Steger issued a statement citing “A tragedy of monumental proportions.” Copies of that statement are available on request.

The Policy Group continued to meet and strategically plan for the events to follow. A campus update on the shootings was issued at another press conference at approximately 5 p.m. University employees began immediately to provide counsel and care for the families of the deceased and injured victims. Before Dr. Zenobia Lawrence Hikes, Vice President for Student Affairs, briefs you on those ongoing activities, do you have any questions?