

In wake of shootings, WSU sent immediate campus alert; UI held off

Elizabeth Rudd/Lewiston

MOSCOW - A series of fatal shootings Saturday in Moscow provoked different responses from universities on the Palouse, with one sending out alerts immediately.

Washington State University Assistant Police Chief Steve Hansen said he made a call to send out a message to students, faculty and staff minutes after learning the suspect in a series of shootings made his way to Pullman. His message reached about 25,000 people by 3:46 p.m. - about 10 minutes after he initiated the WSU Alert System.

The University of Idaho opted against a Vandal Alert notification and instead turned to social media to notify that police were responding to reported shootings, posting links to a news story on its Facebook and Twitter accounts about 4:10 p.m.

The notifications were in response to police allegations that 29-year-old John Lee had shot four residents at three different locations in Moscow. He reportedly fled to Whitman County where he led police on a high-speed chase through Pullman before being apprehended south of Steptoe.

Moscow residents David Trail, 76, Belinda Niebuhr, 47, and Lee's adoptive mother, Terri Grzebielski, 61, were killed in the shootings, according to Moscow police. Michael Chin, 39, of Seattle, was also injured in the incident.

UI Vice President for Finance and Administration Ron Smith said UI officials learned of the shooting at about 3 p.m. from a police scanner. They spoke with Moscow police about 10 minutes later and were informed the suspect was about to be apprehended, or already was in custody, in Whitman County.

UI sent out a Vandal Alert at about 11:30 p.m. after deciding against it following police consultation earlier in the day, Smith said. At that point, he said UI officials felt there was no further danger to campus and an alert wasn't required.

"If we'd known what was going on at 2:30, there'd definitely have been an alert sent out," Smith said.

Hansen said he was made aware of the pursuit by one of his officers involved in the chase. He was at a basketball game, which required him to call in another person to send out the alert.

The alert system is in place for a couple reasons, Hansen said. It allows WSU to warn people of emergencies and comply with standards in the Clery Act, and to provide answers to questions before they're asked. The Clery Act requires universities to notify their communities of potential dangers or risks to campus in a timely manner.

"It's designed to make everyone aware if there is a situation going on on campus or in the area," Hansen said.

The alert system is tested twice a year and activated whenever necessary, erring toward caution, Hansen said. He believes WSU's system worked efficiently Saturday, noting the university has an advantage with its own commissioned police department.

"I think it worked very well," Hansen said.

WSU issued an all-clear message for faculty, staff and students following the incident on its website, Twitter account and by sending out emails, Hansen said.

The Vandal Alert system is set up to notify students, faculty and staff of confirmed emergencies on or close to campus that are occurring in real time. Smith said there were red flags for him when he learned the first shooting was reported in an apartment building. Students were also moving back into the dorms that day.

But Smith said the information provided to them from Moscow police led UI officials to believe the threat had passed. Police advised them there was no need to close the Student Recreation Center - located across from Arby's where one of the shootings occurred - or change the basketball game scheduled Saturday, he said.

The alert sent later in the evening was to inform everyone that the incident was resolved and to express the president's sorrow for the victims' families, Smith said. The university also sent out a news release at about 10 p.m. with statements from President Chuck Staben.

"We talked about it a lot of the afternoon and decided it would be best to provide information that everything was safe at that time," Smith said.

Smith said he thinks UI's response went smoothly and the university did the best it could, but officials intend to review the situation. UI will be looking at how it utilizes the Vandal Alert system in the future, but he said the university is also leery of compromising an ongoing investigation.

"We don't want to cause or create any more chaos than what is already going on," he said.

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