

# Prosecutor: In school bomb threats, age is no defense

Students can face felony charges and thousands in restitution costs, regardless of age

*By Jennifer Wentz*

**[jwentz@eveningsun.com](mailto:jwentz@eveningsun.com)**

POSTED: 01/16/2015 06:12:26 PM EST **0 COMMENTS**



Adams County Sheriff James Muller stands next to his dog, Allegra, at an assembly at New Oxford High School on Jan. 15.

(Jennifer Wentz - The Evening Sun)

For Officer Doug Fishel, bomb threats are never a joke. Even if the suspects are still in middle school.

He talks to the suspects' friends, family, neighbors and teachers. He'll search their homes for phones and laptops and confiscate them for analysis. Then, when he makes the arrest, he'll place them in handcuffs and drive them away in a police car for sentencing.

If they're found guilty, that sentence doesn't go away for a long time.

"You've just threatened the school? That's a felony," he explained to a crowd of high school students Thursday.

Following a rash of bomb threats at area school districts over the past year, including one on Thursday, Conewago Valley School District took a proactive measure to teach students that something as simple as a written note on a bathroom wall can have serious consequences for their future.

Officer Fishel, from Eastern Adams Regional Police, as well as Adams County District Attorney Shawn Wagner, Sheriff James Muller and Assistant Supt. Russell Greenholt conducted assemblies at the district's middle and high schools to make sure students know the long-lasting legal consequences these threats carry.

And no, being under 18 won't protect students from the law, they said.

Conewago Valley, Fairfield Area, Gettysburg Area and Littlestown Area school districts received about a dozen total threats in the last calendar year. Another such threat was made in the district Thursday, just hours after officials made their presentations to the student body, according to Eastern Adams Regional Police.

School officials were not immediately available to comment on the most recent threat.

Police, though, have arrested the culprits in each of the threats made in 2014, Wagner said.

While he could not comment on specific cases, either because they were ongoing or the suspect was under that age of 14, Wagner said bomb threats involving schools are usually felonies. Students, regardless of age, can face charges of making terroristic threats, threat to use weapons of mass destruction and institutional vandalism, among others.

Offenders over the age of 18 will likely go to jail, he said. And juveniles face thousands of dollars in restitution costs and charges that will follow them for decades.

When a person over the age of 14 receives a felony charge, that charge becomes public record, Wagner said. Employers, colleges, newspapers and other groups can access that information, potentially barring students from jobs and education for years to come.

And if students think those charges disappear when they turn 18, they can think again, Wagner said. Those charges can't be expunged from their records until they turn 70.

Restitution costs for bomb threat cases can exceed \$15,000 per incident, Fishel said. That includes the cost of police overtime and bomb-sniffing dogs.

These dogs come from the South Central Emergency Response Task Force, of which Muller and his Belgian Malinois, Allegra, are members. The team, usually consisting of about six dogs in a school case, searches every locker, classroom and closet to ensure student safety.

That's good news for students, who can rest assured they are not at risk, but bad news for whoever wrote the threat, Muller said. Each dog costs the culprit about \$200 per hour, usually equating to an additional \$3,900 in restitution costs.

Two separate bomb threats in Conewago Valley School District last winter cost law enforcement a total of about \$40,000, Eastern Adams Regional Police said when they arrested the threat-maker in April.

Costs and overtime create an inconvenience for law enforcement and school officials, but Greenholt said his main concern is ensuring the students feel safe. Police never had reason to believe the threats made in the past year posed a credible danger to students, but the idea of a bomb at school unnerves members of the community.

Last January, Muller and Allegra visited the Hanover home of Kim Wallace and her daughter, Jamie, to assure Jamie she had nothing to fear after a threat was made at New Oxford High School. Jamie had been terrified and did not want to return to school, Wallace said.

After Friday's threat, New Oxford-area resident Amanda Blume pulled her 7-year-old son out of class for the day. She took him, her 3-year-old daughter and their two dogs to a friend's house.

The family lives near the high school, so she does not want her children to feel scared by any additional police activity they see there, she said. And although she realizes the chances of police finding an actual bomb are very slim, she does not want to take any chances.

"We live in a world where these things are real and not just a threat," she said. "When a tragedy happens to them, every school says, 'I never thought it would happen to us.'"

The school also assigns consequences — and that almost always means expulsion, Greenholt said.

"I didn't mean it,' doesn't mean a whole lot to me," he said. "To me, it's about the rest of the student body that's been impacted."

Conewago Valley School District is not alone in its approach to bomb threats. Other districts follow similar procedures.

Littlestown Borough Police arrested a 15-year-old Littlestown Area High School student in November for writing three threats on bathroom walls. The district and police worked together to check surveillance video, perform handwriting analyses and interview students before making an arrest, Borough Police Chief Charles Kellar said at the time.

Gettysburg Area School District has also worked with law enforcement to investigate threats. Students, though, might not realize that, Supt. Larry Redding said.

"Parents need to have conversations with their children about the seriousness of threats," he said. "It's not just a school matter; it could be a matter for state police or, in some cases, federal agencies."

Altogether, he said, it is an all-too-common scenario for any school district, but threats are no more likely to happen now than they were years ago, he said. Instead, they seem to come and go in cycles, with multiple copycat threats often following the initial one.

It's a cycle Greenholt and other officials said they hope they can break when students realize that one careless note or comment can follow them for the rest of their lives.