

Broward schools to implement wearable panic buttons

Devices will be used for shootings and other emergencies



The Alyssa Alert panic button badge, to be worn by Broward County school teachers and staff, is displayed at Plantation Middle School in Plantation on Tuesday, Jan. 7. (Carline Jean/South Florida Sun Sentinel)



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Immediate help in a school shooting or other crisis will soon be a few clicks away for Broward school employees, even if they don't have access to their phone.

The school district is buying panic buttons that all teachers and staff will be required to wear around their necks at the start of the new school year in August.

The button looks like an ID badge but can be pressed to pinpoint the exact location within a school where the emergency is happening.

Press the button three times, and the front office will be notified of an urgent medical situation, such as a student who is injured or has a seizure.

Press eight times or more, and law enforcement will be notified that there's a school shooting or other emergency that requires immediate attention. The alert will trigger an emergency lockdown and will alert the Broward Sheriff's Office real-time crime center, which has access to surveillance cameras that activate during an emergency.

The panic buttons are the district's latest effort to comply with Alyssa's Law, which the state Legislature passed in 2020. The law is named after Alyssa Alhadeff, a 14-year-old student who was killed in the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in 2018.

The leading advocate for the law has been Alhadeff's mother, Lori Alhadeff, who is also a Broward School Board member. If Stoneman Douglas had a panic button system at the time, Alyssa might not have been killed, Alhadeff told the South Florida Sun Sentinel.

A security monitor spotted the killer when he first entered campus but didn't alert administrators or law enforcement. A state commission investigating the tragedy concluded that school staff were poorly trained on how to respond to an active shooter. District staff will be trained at the start of the new school year on how to use the panic button, school district officials said.

"I believe that this panic button will definitely save lives by immediately alerting law enforcement of an active shooter," Alhadeff said. "We know that seconds matter. Time equals life and that the faster we can get law enforcement on the scene to take down the shooter with the gun, the more lives that we will save."

The School Board voted in December to enter into a three-year \$5.1 million contract with CENTEGIX, an Atlanta-based technology company. In addition to the buttons, the contract includes visual strobes that will be installed in every classroom, hallway, and common area. The strobes will illuminate to notify building occupants to immediately take action and will provide geolocations to emergency responders, officials said.

Law enforcement officials say the CENTEGIX panic buttons may have saved lives during the school shooting in Apalachee High School in Winder, Ga, in September, as multiple staff members pressed them, and officers arrived quickly at the precise location, [Education Week reported](#).



This is actually the second time the school district has implemented a panic button system. The first time was in 2021, when the School Board entered into a contract with the Fort Lauderdale-based company SaferWatch for a mobile app that serves as a panic button.

At the time, school district officials said this model was preferable to the panic buttons because employees could submit specific information about the emergency as well as photos.

But that initiative faced a major challenge: many school district employees [didn't download the app](#) onto their personal phones. Alhadeff estimated that only about 20% of employees downloaded it, although SaferWatch President Geno Roefaro provided numbers indicating it's closer to half.

The hesitancy was based on an inaccurate assumption that the app might be used to track employees, even though it only worked inside schools, Broward school officials said.

The school districts installed the app on all district-issued phones and laptops, but only administrators are usually issued district cell phones. While district

officials conducted awareness campaigns, they weren't allowed to force people to install the app on their personal phones.

"We hoped that everybody would just automatically put this on their phone and have this. We didn't think that there would be issues," Alhadeff said.

The wearable panic buttons will only operate in areas where the strobes are, so employees don't need to worry they're being tracked, said Ernie Lozano, who oversees the district's safety and security department.

Stoneman Douglas teacher Eric Garner, who was on campus during the day of the shooting, voiced concerns about the phone app. But he said he likes the wearable button.

"Something that you're wearing is going to be with you, it is not something that I'm gonna have to say, 'I'm having this event around me and now I have to grab my phone, hit the app and put in all this information,'" he told the Sun Sentinel. "It makes a whole lot of sense to me, and it seems like a very good direction for us to be going in."

The district will still maintain the SaferWatch app in addition to the wearable panic buttons.

"This is an additional layer of safety, so we're not phasing out anything," Superintendent Howard Hepburn said. "We're just adding to our current capability."

SaferWatch is working with CENTEGIX to ensure compatibility, Roefaro said.

"We want to provide our customers with the most comprehensive solution on the market – mobile application, desktop application and now wearable badges for all staff," he said. "The CENTEGIX wearable badge is integrated into the SaferWatch system and their panic alert data will be sent to us. SaferWatch is also the software that 911 and law enforcement uses to receive the alerts. ... We believe the two systems together provide the most comprehensive system in the market today."

The panic buttons are already used in a number of other school districts in Florida, including Duval, Hillsborough, Lee, Palm Beach and Volusia counties.

"It's been used several times in medical emergencies, Palm Beach County School Board Chairwoman Karen Brill said. "It locates where the incident is and it's real-time. I think they're terrific."