

January 2024

MARYLAND CENTER for SCHOOL SAFETY

# Guidance Conducting the After-Action Review (AAR)



[schoolsafety.maryland.gov](https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov)  
410-281-2335

## Background

An after-action review (AAR) is a team-based process following a particular school event that affords all participants the opportunity to reflect, provide their perceptions and observations, and identify promising practices and lessons learned that can be applied to enhance future incidents in public, non-public, and private schools in the state of Maryland (DOJ, 2020).

The Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS) identifies three tiers of incidents where an AAR is beneficial for Local Education Agencies (LEAs). These tiers are categorized as Tier I, II, and III. This guide provides direction for LEAs completing Tier III incidents; however, the AAR and the after-action report can be applied to both Tier I and II incidents alike.

### ***Tier I***

Incidents involve preplanned events within the school.

Examples: Field Day, Open House, Conferences, Prom, Graduation, etc.

The above events do not require completing an after-action report; however, school safety employees and school administrators may use the form as documentation and address successes and areas needed for improvement.

### ***Tier II***

Incidents involve an unscheduled event that disrupts school activity or creates a risk to the school, staff, or students. The risk does not rise to a critical life-threatening event.

Examples: weather-related emergencies, an escalated adult on the property, incidents with minimal staff and student involvement, etc.

### ***Tier III***

Incidents involve a life-threatening event that triggers the legal requirements as a critical life-threatening (CLT) incident. A CLT includes conduct that occurred causing death or which resulted in serious bodily injury to one or more individuals or which may be charged as a threat of mass violence under Criminal Law Article, §3-1001.

The Safe to Learn Act of 2018, Md. Ann. Code Ed. Art. [§7-1510\(g\)](#) and Code of Maryland Regulation (COMAR) 14.40.05 require each LEA to notify MCSS of CLT incidents that occur on school grounds, conduct a review of the incident, and file an after-action report following that incident. COMAR 14.40.05 *Critical, Life-Threatening Incident* requires the LEA to complete the following activities on or before the defined days for each critical life-threatening incident.

Required Activity	Timeline for Completion
Notification of incident to MCSS (either verbally or in writing)	No later than 24 hours
After-action meeting held	Within 45 days of incident
LEA after-action report submitted to MCSS	No later than 100 days after the incident occurred
MCSS files agency report to Maryland General Assembly and Governor	Within 45 days of receiving the report from the LEA
MCSS shares recommendation(s) with LEA	

After-actions are beneficial for each tier described above but are only required to be conducted and reported to MCSS following a Critical Life-Threatening Incident. This guide will provide direct guidance on how to complete Tier III events, as required by law.



# Critical Life-Threatening (CLT) Incident Reporting Requirements



## CLT Incident\* Occurs

Max.  
24 Hrs.



## Contact MCSS

Local Education Agency (LEA) must notify MCSS of all CLT incidents

Max.  
45 days



## Hold After-Action Meeting

Identify key responders, incl. school leaders, community partners, MCSS rep, etc.

Max.  
100 days



## MCSS Recommends Improvements

Compiled from statewide partners, to be considered when applying for school safety grants, developing policies/plans/priorities



## MCSS Submits Final Report

Report will be provided to the Governor & MD General Assembly

Max.  
45 days



## Complete After-Action Report

Find the AAR Reporting Tool at: <https://bit.ly/mcssAAR> or scan below:



## LEA Implements & Improves

Use the recommendations, priorities, strategies to reduce future CLTs & improve response

**\*A CLT Incident** is one in which conduct occurs that causes death or serious bodily injury to one or more individuals or which may be charged as a threat of mass violence under Criminal Law Article §3-1001. (See COMAR 12.40.05)

## Questions?

Contact MCSS at: [school.safety@maryland.gov](mailto:school.safety@maryland.gov)

## ***Incident Review***

Public schools in Maryland are required to have an “emergency plan for all public-school grounds to include maintenance, transportation, and central administration office under its jurisdiction.”<sup>1</sup> Following a CLT incident, it is important that organizations conduct a thorough review of each incident to identify what activities, plans, and procedures worked well and what may need to be improved or updated. This review process will include:

- Making notifications;
- Gathering information;
- Documenting and reporting information; and
- Making improvements.

## ***Information Gathering***

Following an incident, it is critical to gather information that will allow the school and system to put together a timeline of events. The goal of this activity is to reconstruct the event from multiple sources into a “single, fact-based account of what happened, including key decisions, actions, and communications.”<sup>2</sup>

MCSS recommends that school systems gather and archive hard copies and electronic materials generated during the incidents as soon as possible. This may include emails, camera recordings, alerts, and other materials used throughout the response and recovery from the incident.

**Note:** *A meeting conducted immediately after an incident has been resolved, prior to the release of responders, is known as a “[hot wash](#)” and does not meet the requirements of an “after- action review.” It is recommended that schools conduct a hot wash immediately following the incident to ensure that there is an opportunity to collect information while it is fresh in the minds of the individuals involved for use at the after-action review.*

---

1 COMAR 13A.02.02.04

2 FEMA, Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program (HSEEP) 5-7, January 2020, <https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Homeland-Security-Exercise-and-Evaluation-Program-Doctrine-2020-Revision-2-2-25.pdf>

# The After-Action Review Meeting

**Within 45 days following the incident**, the LEA shall conduct a review of the incident and hold an after-action review meeting<sup>3</sup> to identify what lessons have been learned from the incident and identify action items to prevent future occurrences.

## After-Action Review Participants

The LEA is **REQUIRED** to invite an MCSS staff member. Additional participants should include local law enforcement agencies, emergency responders, and other representatives from agencies involved in the response to or recovery from the incident. These may include representatives from:

1. School or school system transportation staff;
2. School or school system communication staff;
3. School or school system leadership;
4. County or municipal responders; and
5. Local, state, or federal responding agencies.

## Facilitating the After-Action Review Meeting

Successfully facilitating the AAR team meeting requires the individual serving as the facilitator to remain neutral and nonjudgmental. It is to be expected that all participants will be emotionally invested professionally and personally thus requiring the facilitator to be empathetic to the needs of participants while at the same time ensuring honest and open dialogue. All participants should review and agree upon meeting norms at the outset. One of these norms must include stating and acknowledging facts while not assuming and placing blame. The example of meeting norms below should serve as a starting point and are not intended to be all-inclusive. It is recommended that meeting norms be developed together at the beginning of each AAR meeting.

*Individuals participating in the AAR will:*

- *State and acknowledge facts honestly.*
- *Speak from their own perspective.*
- *Listen with the intent to understand the perspective of others.*
- *Avoid judgment or placing blame on themselves or others.*

---

<sup>3</sup> See Md. Ann. Code Ed. Art. §7-1510(g)(2)(ii), see also COMAR 14.40.05

To effectively engage participants in the identification of actions and lessons learned, facilitators should plan questions in advance that speak directly to the event. The following are general questions that should always be answered in the meeting and provided as part of the after-action report.

- How did individuals (staff, students, parents, emergency responders) respond to the event?
- What was supposed to happen based on current plans, policies, and procedures?
- Was there a difference in how individuals responded and how they should have responded? What was the impact of this difference?
- Were the consequences of the action (or inaction/decision) positive, negative, or neutral?
- Do the existing emergency plans, policies, and procedures support activities and associated tasks?
- Are the various stakeholders (staff, students, caregivers, responders) familiar with emergency plans, policies, and procedures?
- What are the strengths and areas of improvement to remedy identified deficiencies?”<sup>4</sup>

## ***After-Action Review Meeting Steps***

### ***1. Incident Overview***

Details of the incident should be reviewed both verbally and in writing by all members of the AAR team at the beginning of the meeting. Providing incident details in writing allows participants to refer to information over the course of the meeting. Written documents can be collected and destroyed at the meeting’s conclusion to preserve all confidential information. The team may find it helpful to provide visual representations of details and information to ensure that all team members are able to participate fully in the process.

### ***2. Actions that were successful in responding to and recovering from the event***

This discussion item should include participants identifying why these actions proved successful, i.e., the root cause of success. Items to consider here include but are not limited to:

- The degree to which school personnel practiced and rehearsed emergency response procedures.
- The knowledge and awareness of school personnel of emergency operating procedures.
- The degree to which school personnel previously communicated and coordinated emergency drills with local emergency responders.
- The knowledge and awareness of students and parents of emergency operating procedures.

---

<sup>4</sup> FEMA, Homeland Security Exercise Evaluation Program (HSEEP) 5-7, January 2020, <https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Homeland-Security-Exercise-and-Evaluation-Program-Doctrine-2020-Revision-2-2-25.pdf>

### *3. Actions (to include the absence of actions) that proved detrimental in responding to and recovering from the event*

This discussion item should also prompt participants to identify why these actions were detrimental, i.e., the root cause. Items to consider here include but are limited to:

- The degree to which school personnel practiced and rehearsed emergency response procedures.
- The knowledge and awareness of school personnel of emergency operating procedures.
- The degree to which school personnel previously communicated and coordinated emergency drills with local emergency responders.
- The knowledge and awareness of students and parents of emergency operating procedures.

### *4. Lessons Learned*

Identification of preceding actions in the meeting should lead members to acknowledge lessons learned because of the event. Individuals should consider lessons that are specific to the location (e.g., school site, off-campus event, transportation event) being reviewed but must also seek to apply these lessons across all schools within the education agency. Lessons learned should be clearly communicated so that individuals who have not participated in the AAR meeting and who may or may not be familiar with this particular event can clearly understand and react to the information provided in the statement.

### *5. Corrective actions that must occur to address identified gaps, needs, and concerns*

AARs are conducted to ensure that systems and organizations improve the response to and recovery from emergency events as well as seek to mitigate future occurrences. As such, information gleaned must be used to inform corrective actions. The AAR team should:

1. Define corrective steps and strategies to be taken;
2. Determine a time frame of urgency to complete the corrective step;
3. Identify the required resource allocation for the corrective step; and
4. Designate a responsible person for monitoring progress and ensuring completion.

## Frequently Asked Questions: After-Action Review Meetings

### **Q. What is an “after-action review”?**

A. “After an emergency event has occurred on your campus and your education agency has activated your emergency operations plan (EOP), it is likely that you and your colleagues have feedback and lessons learned.”<sup>5</sup> An after-action review allows all parties involved with mitigating your critical life-threatening incident to discuss their roles and the school’s plans following the response to an incident, which is “critical to strengthening, maintaining, and refining your EOP.”<sup>6</sup>

For example, suppose during the incident that a plan, procedure, or policy did not work as expected. In that case, this meeting will help participants identify what corrective actions might be needed (e.g., revising plans, providing additional training) to prevent a recurrence. AARs encourage participation and emphasize trust and the value of feedback.

### **Q. Who should participate in the after-action review?**

A. At a minimum, the law requires school systems to invite responding public safety agencies (including law enforcement) that assist the local school system and a member of MCSS. Additionally, MCSS recommends including any school or school system staff and local, state, or federal agencies that support incident response or recovery efforts. Specifically, meeting participants should be individuals with *knowledge and information about the incident and actions performed by their respective agencies*. When inviting participants, consider including school administration and school staff who were involved in the incident, including transportation, communications, or other central office staff.

### **Q. How do I conduct an after-action review?**

A. Once a date and location for the meeting have been established, the LEA should designate a meeting facilitator and a meeting notetaker. Following a large-scale incident, you may consider using a facilitator outside your organization. Upon request, a neutral MCSS staff person (one not assigned or typically involved in your school system) can assist in facilitating a review. The facilitator begins by welcoming and acknowledging the parties involved, then provides a general incident overview and walks through a timeline of the incident. Participants should be encouraged to identify any inaccuracies in this information.

**Note:** *If the facilitator is an MCSS staff member, the LEA is expected to provide an overview of the incident and timeline of events.*

<sup>5</sup> REMS-TA After-Action Reports: Capturing Lessons Learned and Identifying Areas for Improvement (2022), [https://rems.ed.gov/docs/AfterActionReportsFactSheet\\_508C.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/docs/AfterActionReportsFactSheet_508C.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



# MCSS Critical Life-Threatening Incident Report

## *After-Action Report for Tier III Incidents*

As required by law,<sup>7</sup> at the conclusion of the AAR meeting, the LEA will develop and submit an after-action report to MCSS within **100 days**<sup>8</sup> of the AAR meeting. After-action reports submitted to MCSS could be subject to disclosure by the Maryland Public Disclosure Act.

**Note:** *It is recommended that the LEA develop a draft report, which would be shared with the participants of the AAR meeting, to ensure that successes, areas for improvement, and lessons learned were captured correctly before submitting the final after-action report to MCSS.*

The after-action report submitted to MCSS should include the following information.

### 1. Incident Overview

- Incident description
- Timeline of events
- Number of people injured
- Number of fatalities
- Number and type of first responders

### 2. After-Action Review Information

- AAR meeting date
- Name, title, and agency of after-action meeting attendees

### 3. Incident Details

#### a. **Pre-Event**

This section is used to discuss contributing factors and antecedents leading up to the event. Pre-event information includes items that may not have been known during the event but have been learned after the fact.

*Some examples of content to include:*

- *What circumstances allowed for a substantial number of students to be outside, unsupervised, during school hours?*
- *If this was a dismissal time, what supervision policies exist that may or may not have been followed?*

<sup>7</sup> Md. Ann. Code, Education Article, §7-1510(g)(2)(iii). COMAR 14.40.05

<sup>8</sup> COMAR 14.40.05.04.C

- *Staff-to-student ratio*
- *Did this event occur in a known hot spot? Have there been other security-related incidents/events in this area?*
- *Is this area monitored by CCTV?*
- *Were there any indicators of the involved students having disciplinary concerns prior to this event/incident?*
- *What resources have been allocated to any of the students involved (e.g., counseling, instructional/behavioral/social-emotional interventions, etc.)?*
- *Has a behavioral threat assessment previously been conducted for any of the involved students?*

#### **b. Event**

This section is used to capture information and details of the event. Depending on the event, the length of this section may vary. For example, in an incident where an assault occurs, and the offender is captured immediately, sufficient details may be captured with minimal documentation. However, events that last a significant amount of time may require an entry in this section that is significantly longer and more involved.

*Content to note may include, for example:*

- *What actually happened?*
- *How many students were present at the event/incident?*
- *How many adults were present at the event/incident?*
- *Were any adults (school personnel or caregivers) aware of the potential for the event/incident to occur?*
- *If a fight, to what degree were any adults aware of the fight? To what degree were other students aware of it?*
- *To what degree were other students aware of the potential for the event/ incident occurring?*
- *If a student possessed a firearm, to what degree were other students aware that the student in question did so? Were any adults aware?*
- *How many students were in immediate danger (e.g., from a firearm discharge, weather-related damage, etc.)?*

#### **c. Post-Event**

This section is used to capture information about what occurred after the event. It is possible that some of the items that may fall within this field began within previous sections; this is to be expected, and pertinent facts surrounding those items should continue into this section if necessary.

Provide a timeline of decision-making related to the emergency operation's lifespan. In addition to this timeline, include other relevant content to detail the event thoroughly.

Relevant content to note may include:

- *Who discovered the victim(s)?*
- *Who rendered aid or assistance?*
- *Who was the Incident Commander?*
- *Who was on the Command Team?*
- *Was the Emergency Plan activated?*
- *What emergency procedures from the Emergency Plan were put into place, if any?*
- *Where was the command post?*
- *Who kept notes in the command post?*
- *Did transfer of Incident Command (e.g., to/from school personnel) take place?*
- *Who was the Law Enforcement Commander, and what time did they arrive?*
- *What suggestions did the Law Enforcement Commander provide that affected emergency operations or student movement?*
- *What time was the facility declared safe from threat?*
- *Was the phase of emergency operations changed to allow student movement throughout the lifespan of the event? If yes, to what level did this occur?*
- *At what point during the lifespan of the event, if any, was the students' day returned to education/business "as usual?"*
- *Were the students housed inside or outside of classrooms during the lifespan of the event?*
- *If students were housed outside classrooms, where were they housed, and for what period?*
- *How much learning time was lost?*

**d. Recovery/Post-Event Procedures**

For each item below, determine if that action occurred during or after the incident. If "Yes," provide details regarding the conduct of that item.

- Staff debriefing
- Study body debriefing
- Administrative debriefing
- Counseling/Crisis Intervention Plan implemented
- Parent debriefing
- Letter sent home with students
- Public safety debriefing/critique

Appropriate reports filed  
All event-related expenditures accounted for  
Student body recovery

**e. Peripheral Information**

This section captures any pertinent steps within the event that were not captured within the previous sections. You may have felt that some facts weren't relevant/ didn't fit appropriately into other sections of this report. This section provides a place to capture those items.

Peripheral items to note may include:

- *Where was the parent staging area?*
- *What time were parents initially notified of the event? How frequently were they provided updated information?*
- *Who assumed responsibility for communications with parents?*
- *Was communication with parents effective in assuaging fear and providing important information?*
- *What time did parents begin to arrive?*
- *Were any students released to parents prior to dismissal? If so, why? Who made the decision(s)?*
- *What factors, policies, procedures, or laws guided the decision to hold students or release them to parents?*
- *Where was the media staging area?*
- *What time was the press briefing?*
- *Where did the press briefing take place?*
- *Were the Recovery/Post-Incident Procedures indicated in the Emergency Plan completed? Are notes or documents relating to the debriefing available?*

**4. Incident Review Information**

AARs are conducted to ensure that we improve the response to and recovery from emergency events and seek to mitigate future occurrences. As such, the information they contain must be used to inform these corrective actions and/ or other improvements.

Your AAR team should define clear corrective steps/strategies to be taken, determine a timeframe of urgency for each, identify the required resources, and designate a person responsible for ensuring completion. All target completion dates should be within one (1) calendar year from the date of the incident.

**a. Successes**

This section should identify specific actions that proved to be successful. Be sure also to include the root cause of each action identified. It's important to ensure that successes are documented, as this could provide guidance for LEAs (your own or others) in the future.

Items to consider here may include, but are not limited to:

- *The degree to which school personnel practiced/rehearsed emergency response procedures.*
- *School **personnel's** knowledge and awareness of emergency operating procedures.*
- *The degree to which school personnel had communicated and coordinated previous emergency drills with local emergency responders.*
- *Students and parents' knowledge of emergency operating procedures.*
- *What specific actions taken in the emergency response to this incident were effective in mitigating harm (physical, emotional, behavioral, etc.)?*

#### **b. Detrimental Elements**

This section should identify items that could have gone better and why these actions proved detrimental. Be sure to include the root cause for each action identified. In some instances, it may prove challenging to identify areas to improve. However, it is imperative that this section be completed for improvement within the LEA and other LEAs across the state.

Items to consider here may include, but are not limited to:

- *The degree to which school personnel practiced/rehearsed emergency response procedures.*
- *School personnel's knowledge and awareness of emergency operating procedures.*
- *The degree to which school personnel had communicated and coordinated previous emergency drills with local emergency responders.*
- *Students and parents' knowledge of emergency operating procedures.*
- *What specific actions taken in the emergency response to this incident were not effective in mitigating harm (physical, emotional, behavioral, etc.)?*

#### **c. Lessons Learned**

In this section, consider lessons that are specific to the location being reviewed, as well as how those lessons might be applied to all schools within your education agency. Lessons learned should be communicated clearly, in a way that allows individuals who have not participated in the AAR meeting (and who may or may not be familiar with this event) to clearly understand and react to the information you provide. Be thorough in your thinking and response. These lessons learned will be used to improve all LEAs within Maryland.

#### **d. What recommendations do you have for statewide action/improvements?**

This section allows for the LEA involved in the current incident to provide guidance and insight to MCSS that could assist other LEAs across the state in preventing or responding to a similar incident.

# Maryland Center for School Safety Summary Report

**Forty-five (45) days** following the receipt of the LEA after-action report, MCSS will prepare and submit an incident summary report to the Governor and General Assembly. MCSS will provide copies of these reports to the LEA. Summary reports of critical life-threatening incidents are available on the MCSS website (<https://schoolsafety.maryland.gov/Pages/RES-CLT.aspx>).

**Q. What does the MCSS summary report include?**

A. MCSS incident summary report includes the following information.

- Incident date
- Notification date
- AAR meeting date
- After-action submission date
- Lessons learned
- School Safety Recommendations

## Accountability and Improvement Planning

Once corrective actions have been documented and reports submitted, it is imperative that the LEA and schools implement identified action steps and improvements. For example, if a piece of equipment does not function as expected or designed, tracking the repair or replacement of that equipment will be the first step in the improvement planning process. Therefore, it is recommended that school systems develop a mechanism that allows them to document and track corrective actions through their completion. MCSS remains available to support and assist agencies as they seek to remedy areas of need and implement strategies.

**Note:** *To determine if a corrective action improvement had the desired effect, schools must validate the improvement. The use of future exercises and drills will allow the school to evaluate the effectiveness of the improvement.*

# Resources

## ***After-Action Resources:***

DOJ: <https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-w0878-pub.pdf>

REMS TA:

[https://rems.ed.gov/docs/AfterActionReportsFactSheet\\_508C.pdf](https://rems.ed.gov/docs/AfterActionReportsFactSheet_508C.pdf)

Texas A&M: [https://rise.articulate.com/share/7BiuU\\_6hzbXtjArQWFXUy2Sy7NgsJU9#/](https://rise.articulate.com/share/7BiuU_6hzbXtjArQWFXUy2Sy7NgsJU9#/)

FEMA:

[https://training.fema.gov/programs/emischool/el361toolkit/assets/after\\_actionreports.pdf](https://training.fema.gov/programs/emischool/el361toolkit/assets/after_actionreports.pdf)

## ***Hot Wash Resources:***

Ohio: <https://ohioschoolsafetycenter.ohio.gov/static/Hotwash+Note+Template.docx>

FEMA:

[https://training.fema.gov/is/flupan/references/02\\_course%20forms%20and%20templates/02\\_hot%20wash%20form-508.pdf](https://training.fema.gov/is/flupan/references/02_course%20forms%20and%20templates/02_hot%20wash%20form-508.pdf)