

Alabama Believers Call for Prayer in Child Hostage Case

Residents in a rural Alabama town prayed on Friday and called for the release of a 5-year-old boy being held captive for a fourth day by a man accused of shooting a school bus driver and then taking the child hostage.

The suspected gunman has been locked in a standoff with law enforcement officers near the small town of Midland City since Tuesday, when authorities say he grabbed the kindergartner from the bus after killing 66-year-old driver Charles Albert Poland.

The suspect and child, who by all accounts did not know each other, then disappeared into an underground bunker on the man's property in southeastern Alabama.

The hostage-taking occurred as a national debate rages over gun violence, especially in schools, after a gunman killed 20 students and six staff members at a Connecticut elementary school in December.

"What we're doing right now is trying to bring everybody together in the unity of the faith to pray for one little boy in a bunker across the highway," said Michael Senn, a local pastor.

Law enforcement negotiators have continued to communicate with the man, identified by neighbors as 65-year-old Jimmy Lee Dykes. Officials said they believed the child was unharmed.

Senn, who lives near the dirt road that runs onto Dykes' property, told the *Dothan Eagle* newspaper that authorities had been able to maintain contact with Dykes through a pipe leading into the bunker, which is said to have electricity and a stockpile of supplies.

"They've been talking to him pretty regularly," Senn said.

They also have been able to deliver needed medication to the child. A state lawmaker says the boy has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Asperger's syndrome.

Law enforcement officials have offered few details about the standoff and have not released the names of those involved.

Homemade signs seen around the town identify the boy as "Ethan." A school official said his sixth birthday is next week.

Messages such as "Please release Ethan" and "Pray 4 Ethan" were tacked up outside the town hall, where a somber candlelight vigil on Thursday night drew about 100 people.

Many of them were students at Dale County High School, which, along with several other local schools, has been closed while the standoff drags on.

"The town is quite tore up about this," Midland City Mayor Virgil Skipper said in a telephone interview on Friday. "It's just brought people closer together."

Skipper said the child's family was holding up well.

"They're under a lot of stress," he said. "But they're handling it the best they can."

Dykes had been due to appear for a bench trial on Wednesday after his arrest last month on a menacing charge involving one of his neighbors, court records showed.

A Dale County Sheriff's Office investigator told the Southern Poverty Law Center's Hatewatch blog this week that Dykes had been described as a Vietnam veteran and survivalist who did not trust the government.

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