

Statement of Don Bridges  
Before the Federal Commission on School Safety  
“Proactively Protecting Our Schools”  
Eisenhower Executive Office Building  
Washington, DC

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Good morning, Commissioners. It is indeed an honor to speak before such an accomplished body.

The assignment of School Resource Officers, commonly known as SROs, is a concept that dates back to the 1950s. More than 60 years later, the goal of the program remains the same – to bridge the gap between police and youth.

It is understandable that greater emphasis has been placed on safety as a result of the latest acts of violence that have occurred in schools across the country. I am here to tell you that School Resource Officers serve as the first line of defense in thousands of schools across the nation. They serve as partners of educators and are law-related instructors, teaching students the law and the importance of obeying it. We teach inside the classroom, walk the halls outside, and patrol the school grounds. Students see us as both protectors and confidantes whom they trust because we build relationships with them, day in and day out. Educators and school administrators rely on us to provide staff training, guidance on law related matters and enforcement of the law, when necessary.

SROs serve to develop positive relationships with students and the school community. These officers are the connection between the police department and the school system. The SRO is a positive role model and provides an opportunity for students to interact with a police officer in a friendly, non-threatening manner and environment. In many cases, it is the first ever interaction that kids have with police officers. We build relationships with students and through these, they help us keep the school safe by informing us of potential acts of violence before they occur. SROs deal with issues in the schoolhouse, whether they are student fights, gang activity, threats of self-harm or our worst case scenarios.

I would like to tell you about an incident that happened to me in the late 1990s when the Baltimore County SRO Program was just beginning. A young student came to me with information that would change the lives of several families. She went to the main office and asked if she could speak with me. In my conversation with the very distraught student, I learned that on the previous evening, she was talking to her boyfriend on the phone and during that call her boyfriend shared that when he went to get food from the family freezer, he saw a human foot. The information that she provided me lead to my police department solving a homicide resulting from domestic violence. I tell you this to illustrate the unique role that SROs play in the community. We are law enforcement officers who develop trust relationships with thousands of kids across the country, and in so doing, help solve crimes or far, far better, prevent them.

Students learn to trust us as their advisors with problems and concerns they don't know how to handle and may not feel comfortable sharing with their peers, parents or teachers. Often times we present issues to principals and collaborate with them to determine the best way to resolve student problems. We keep staff informed of safety trends and changes in the law that may impact schools and their communities. We share school related concerns with police commanders to work together in solving community issues. The presence of an SRO in schools is designed to make everyone feel safe.

After almost 20 years as an SRO, I recommend that when school districts and police or sheriff's departments make a decision to implement School Resource Officer programs, they must follow proven best practices as we did in Baltimore County. There must be an understanding that this concept is deeply rooted in the philosophy of Community Policing. It is mission critical that before implementing a successful program, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is developed and agreed upon. The MOU should define the role of the School Resource Officer as well as the other stakeholders in the program.

In Baltimore County, Maryland, the nation's 25<sup>th</sup> largest school district, we have had School Resource Officers for almost 20 years. During the 2017-18 schoolyear, the program comprised of 64 SROs that were assigned to area schools. Our program was recognized by the National Association of School Resource Officers as a model program. As a result of the recent uptick in school related incidents, we will be starting, in the next schoolyear, an Elementary School Resource Officers Liaison Program. The goal is to create an officer friendly program geared toward providing a police presence in over 100 elementary schools across our 610-mile county, something that parents, administrators and elected officials have wanted for years.

The success of this amazing program is deeply rooted in the training, selection, and recruitment of the right type of police officers who express a desire to become an SRO. The job is not for anyone or any police officer. There must be a deep commitment and desire to work with kids and the ability to collaborate with civilian school administrators and educators.

In 2010, a survey was conducted in Baltimore County by the Department of Research, Accountability and Assessment and the results showed that:

92% of our students advised that they never skipped school because they felt unsafe

62% of staff and 43% of students said they felt the presence of an SRO was a deterrent to violence

86% of administrators felt that SROs served as a resource

69% of students advised that they "never" felt intimidated by the presence of their School Resource Officer

90% of students and 96.5% of staff reported feeling either very safe or somewhat safe at school

In the role that I have served for almost two decades as Baltimore County's first School Resource Officer, I have never forgotten what is at the heart of what we do. I call it "The Promise" and I see it reflected in the shield that we wear as we commit to putting ourselves in harm's way for the safety of our children

and the entire school community. We are there to provide a secure environment so that those that we serve can focus on reaching their full potential.

In my many conversations with SROs throughout the country, we often agree that the role of the SRO has and continues to evolve. However, we always remember the significance of the position we hold, as well as the impact we have on our most precious natural resource – the young people we are entrusted to protect and serve. I wholeheartedly support and recommend the School Resource Officer program as the best way to protect our children and keep our schoolhouses safe. Thank you for listening.