

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

July 26, 2018

The International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Sheriffs Association, the Major Cities Chiefs Association, the Major Counties Sheriffs of America, the Association of State Criminal Investigative Agencies, the National Fusion Center Association, the National Governor’s Association’s Homeland Security Advisory Council, the National Organization for Black Law Enforcement Executives, the National Association of School Resource Officers, and other regional, state, local, and federal partners are working together to address school safety efforts. On June 27, 2018, many of these associations participated in a news conference to reiterate this partnership and our focus on the identification and development of best practices to keep our schools safe.

In response to the nationwide need to enhance school safety efforts, a number of best practices have already been identified by state and local law enforcement partners, which can be categorized into five general areas: (1) partnerships both within the law enforcement discipline and with other locally based partners, including education departments and social service providers, (2) the role of the school resource officer (and other campus-based armed law enforcement officers), (3) intervention techniques and threat assessments, (4) school vulnerability assessments and target-hardening efforts, and (5) active incident response resources and tools. I will highlight a few of the best practices today.

The first area in the identification of best practices is related to understanding the threat and the warning signs and behaviors that may signal a violent act. One of the inspectors with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation has a background in school counseling. This experience has assisted the agency in understanding the types of changes in student behavior that may be an indicator of a potential violent act and better understanding the need for school-based partnerships and consistent reporting efforts related to behaviors and indicators. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) Behavioral Analysis Unit has done great work in this area, in terms of identifying warning signs and behaviors, as well as providing guidance on the development of threat assessment teams.

Building on this, after understanding the behaviors associated with school threats, we must better collect appropriate information to aid in our intelligence and investigative efforts. Many fusion centers across the country are partnering with local law enforcement and schools to support local efforts, including serving as collection points for warning information and participating in threat assessment teams. Fusion centers function as a national asset to support law enforcement in understanding and identifying threats and behaviors and indicators, including threats to our schools. For instance, in Alabama, the governor has recommended that the Alabama Fusion Center receive reported school-based threats (via a mobile application) to screen and investigate these threats and then route them to the appropriate agency. Many fusion centers also have fusion liaison officers (FLOs) or personnel who work for a local law enforcement agency and partner with the state or major urban area fusion center to share information on trends, suspicious activity reports, and threat information. FLOs can be used as a key partner to engage the fusion center and local law enforcement on school safety-related threats and response planning efforts.

It is well established that school resource officers (SROs) are a key component of school safety. The National Association of School Resource Officers has done great work in this area, identifying key components to successful SRO programs. These components include identifying career law enforcement officers with state certification who understand the tenets of community-oriented policing; establishing a selection process for SROs to ensure that they understand their roles and responsibilities; and providing specialized training for SROs, including an understanding of the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act and school-based individualized education programs (IEPs).

Another best practice is the development of school crisis response plans and the integration of law enforcement in the development and implementation of these plans. As first responders, law enforcement should designate an officer to participate in school crisis response plan development efforts and to ensure that all law enforcement officers in the school's jurisdiction are aware of and understand the plan. The Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) is widely recognized as effective training for law enforcement for crisis response. As a part of crisis response plan development and implementation, another best practice is the integration and use of vulnerability assessments. In Florida, a vulnerability assessment tool is being developed to assist school districts in conducting security assessments to identify threats and vulnerabilities.

In continuing to build upon these best practices, one of the focus areas for law enforcement associations is the “hardening” of schools. This should be accomplished through a layered approach, focusing on the protection of students (including the use of ballistic glass, metal detectors, protected spaces, etc.), reducing response time for law enforcement through immediate notification of an event, and enhancing accuracy of law enforcement response. The Indiana Sheriffs’ Association worked with the Shelby County, Indiana, Sheriff’s Office and the Southwestern Consolidated School District to develop the “Best Practice Solution,” first implemented at Southwestern High School in Shelbyville, Indiana.¹ The practice uses this layered approach to mitigate schools as a soft target, including the integration of technology for both target-hardening and expedited response efforts.

Another best practice to assist law enforcement in enhancing response efforts is the work of the Middle Atlantic-Great Lakes Organized Crime Law Enforcement Network (MAGLOCLEN). MAGLOCLEN provides a service to law enforcement through its development of school-based action response plans. These plans provide law enforcement with resources related to an individual school, including aerial maps of the school, locations of exit points, and other response-related images and locations. Also related to response and mitigation efforts, the Los Angeles Police Department’s Mental Evaluation Unit serves as a best practice. This unit created a checklist to assist officers in better understanding how to respond and interact with individuals who are threatening acts of targeted violence.

A last area of identified best practices is information sharing, including the use of mobile applications for reporting. Virginia State Police has a threat assessment process that includes the establishment of a team to assist schools in navigating the assessment process, including privacy concerns related to assessments. Colorado Homeland Security Emergency Management supported the development of the “Safe2Tell” app that was implemented after the Columbine shooting, and the Texas Department of Public Safety has implemented the “iWatch Texas” reporting system for school safety-related reporting and information sharing.

We are continuing to identify best practices to create a resource for law enforcement to enhance our school safety efforts, focusing on target hardening and response. This effort would not be possible without the support of the U.S. Department of Justice and the FBI. Many of these best practices were identified by state and local law enforcement as a part of the School

¹ <http://www.indianasheriffs.org/news-indiana-sheriffs-set-new-standard-in-school-safety.aspx>.

Safety Summit, hosted by the FBI on June 27, 2018. I would like to thank the FBI, including David Bowditch, Joshua Skule, and Kerry Sleeper, for hosting this summit. The FBI put together a meeting that was informative and impactful and supported state and local efforts to ensure that we are all moving forward together to enhance our efforts to protect schools and not developing separate and potentially conflicting resources and tools.