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“Protecting Our Future: Addressing School Security Challenges in America”

My name is Timothy P. Gerity, President of the New Jersey Association of School Resource Officers. (NJASRO) Thank you for taking time to hear from members of the public regarding the important issue of school safety.

I am a resident of West Milford, New Jersey in Passaic County. I am the father of three children and a full time sworn law enforcement officer with the Saddle River Police Department in Bergen County, New Jersey. I hold a Master of Administrative Science Degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University with graduate certificates in Administrative Science and School Safety and Administration. My current assignment is that of Detective Sergeant, Municipal Counter Terrorism Coordinator and liaison to the schools. I am also a member of the Bergen County Prosecutor’s Office Cyber Crimes Task Force and School Safety Task Force.

For the purposes of establishing my background in school safety I’d like to give a brief history. In 1994 I was assigned as a D.A.R.E Officer to a public and private school. I went on to become a D.A.R.E Mentor. A Mentor is an individual who trains fellow officers on how to deliver certain curriculum in schools. In January of 2002 I was assigned as a School Resource Officer to a K-5 elementary, K-12 private and 9-12 regional high school. Over the course of my career I have had the opportunity to serve on numerous school safety task forces and committees. These task forces and committees have been at the local, county and statewide level. I was a *Schools Sector Facilities Subcommittee member of the New Jersey Domestic Security Preparedness Task Force* responsible, in part, for making recommendations that were reduced to writing for the 2004 “School Safety Manual – Best Practices Guidelines.” In 2005, as a representative of NJASRO, I participated in an initiative that would see every school in New Jersey visited by a school safety expert. This initiative facilitated the completion, as part of Best Practices, two separate documents; a Vulnerability Assessment and a Field Checklist. The field check list was designed to audit compliance with selected aspects of school security Best Practices. The local use vulnerability assessment was designed to identify vulnerabilities within the school and generate recommendations to reduce the risks.

I still remain active and involved with committees and task forces that continue to evolve as administrations change and the nature of threats and incidents also change. In the interest of brevity, I will not go in depth on all of my involvement on all of these initiatives however the work product of a particular working group of which I was a participant of bears significant relevance to this testimony. In 1988 the Uniform State Memorandum of Agreement Between

Law Enforcement and Education (MOA) was jointly issued by the New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety and the Department of Education. This document continues to serve as a basis or guide for the interaction between law enforcement and education. The MOA addresses emerging issues in schools whether they are related to weapons, school safety, harassment, intimidation and bullying or technology. It also addresses the sharing of information between education and law enforcement as well as law enforcement conducting operations on school grounds. Undergoing consistent updates, the document serves as a relevant and important piece of reference material for not only those who function within the school environment but also for those who create and execute school safety and security plans. The MOA was updated in 1992, 1999, 2007, 2011 and 2015 by a committee of various representatives from sectors who have interest in both public and private educational institutions. I was a member of this working group up until 2011 but professional demands limited my availability. It is my goal to return as a seated member of this working group.

The purpose of my testimony, as President, is to speak about the New Jersey Association of School Resource Officers. In November of 2001, a new organization was incorporated in New Jersey. The New Jersey Association of School Resource Officers (NJASRO) is a not-for profit 501(c) (3) organization. NJASRO is for school-based law enforcement officers, school administrators, and school security/safety professionals working as partners to protect students, school faculty and staff and the schools they attend. The true and tested strength in the School Resource Officer program is that it is much more than a curriculum. The SRO Concept can easily be adapted to the needs of ANY community, desiring safe schools, and effective community partnerships. The Mission Statement of the organization was and still is to:

*“Provide a network of communications and training for New Jersey’s School Resource Officers, Youth services personnel, School administrators, and Educators; Distribute and share advice, and coordinate information on the value of teaching elementary, middle, junior high, and high school students on the principles of good citizenship and community responsibility; Reduce school violence and drug abuse by enforcing violations of the law occurring on school property; Introduce programs that promote and enhance acceptable social behavior.”*

Through planning and strategic lobbying the organization was successful in having the Safe Schools Resource Officer / School Liaison Training Law passed in 2006. (P.L.2005, c.276 (C.52:17B-71.8 et al.) Recognizing the significant importance of properly training law enforcement officers; the Police Training Act required the Police Training Commission in consultation with the Attorney General, to develop a 40 hour training course for safe schools resource officers/school liaisons. Similarly in Title 18A Education - 18A:17-43.1 the same training course is required for service as safe schools resource officer or liaison to law enforcement.

*“...a board of education shall not assign a safe schools resource officer to a public school unless that individual first completes the safe schools resource officer training course.”*

*“...a board of education shall not assign an employee to serve as a school liaison to law enforcement unless that individual first completes the safe schools resource officer training course.”*

A Safe Schools Resource Officer/School Liaison Training Program provided by NJASRO was found to meet all statutory training requirements and was implemented in police academies throughout the state. This training supports Section 1.8 of the Statewide Memorandum of Understanding.

*“It is recognized and agreed that without ongoing active communication and cooperation among school and law enforcement officials the goals of this Agreement cannot be achieved. For this reason, Article 2 of this Agreement requires that law enforcement agencies and school districts designate one or more liaisons.”*

It is important to note that a safe and secure school environment requires the fostering of a supportive and nurturing learning environment, as well as protection from outside/inside threats. School Resource Officers, Class III Specials, school administrators, educators and school safety professionals, properly trained, pursuant to C. 52:17 B-71.8, help to ensure that our children will learn in the most positive and constructive school environment possible.

It is also important to note that while everyone involved in the process wanted to make schools safer for students and employees, there was also a concern that “over policing” in schools would have an impact on the learning environment of schools and negatively affect school culture. In 2009, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a White Paper: “Policing in Schools, Developing a Governance Document for School Resource Officers in K-12 Schools.” In it, the ACLU highlighted the importance of written guidelines for an SRO program and the need for support and training for the SRO to understand their role within the school and the rights and needs of the children they would serve. Without that understanding, the SRO might create an “adversarial environment that pushes students, particularly at-risk students, out of school rather than engaging them in a positive educational environment.” The ACLU recommended that the SRO receive at least 40 hours of training at a minimum, to include topics such as adolescent development and psychology, working with special needs children, and cultural competency. NJASRO’s Safe Schools Resource Officers/School Liaison Training pre-dates and meets the criteria.

School Resource Officers (“SRO”) are “police officers” who have extensive training, experience with the juvenile justice system and community policing in schools. They are role models, mentors and act as a liaison between the police department, school administrators and the local community. In many cases, SROs also teach classes such as the DARE curriculum to elementary students and play a vital role, on all levels, in identifying at risk students, cases of abuse, intervene in drug and alcohol use and provide support for students who feel they have no one to turn to. SROs also provide law related education to high school students in driver’s education and business-related classes, among other courses.

While most would agree that a fulltime police officer who is also a School Resource Officer is the ideal solution, this option is out of reach to many New Jersey districts because of budgetary restrictions. A full-time officer who is an SRO can cost in excess of \$100,000, per year, per officer, including salary and benefits. Also, a full-time officer can be ordered to respond to police matters outside of schools causing them to leave school grounds during the school day. As a compromise to the desire to have fulltime SROs in schools, balanced against the significant cost and the 2% budget cap for New Jersey public schools, the legislature offered a solution in 2016. NJASRO played a substantial role in providing pertinent information and proposing legislative language to find a solution to provide high quality and cost-effective safety measures for schools. With the signing of Senate Bill 86, the creation of Special Law Enforcement Officer –Class III (“SLEO Class III”) a 2015 legislative Task Force recommendation was signed into law.

The creation of the SLEO Class III now allows school districts to have a more affordable option to enhance school security and increase the number of highly trained SROs in New Jersey Schools. SLEO Class III officers are typically paid hourly and do not receive health and retirement benefits for this position. The Class III officer is generally hired by the Chief of Police of the local police department and is in his/her chain of command. Payment for these positions can be paid by the board of education, the municipality or on a fee sharing basis. It is important for all sides involved from the superintendent of schools, mayor and police chief to have an open and productive line of communication on this topic.

However, even with the current proliferation of Class III officers, who are required to attend the Safe Schools Resource Officer/School Liaison training, the financial struggle remains the same for some districts. In the late 1990’s the COPS Office, Community Oriented Policing Services, under the United States Department of Justice, offered a 4 year SRO grant program. The grant paid the costs of assigning an officer to the schools for the first 3 years. The 4<sup>th</sup> year was split between the community and the education entity. This is truly where assigning police officers to schools gained traction in New Jersey and became an accepted Community Policing Model. Unfortunately, after its seminal introduction, the grant was not renewed. In the past few years there has been some very limited, competitive grant opportunities available to offset the costs of assigning an SRO to schools. However, they have been few and far in between. Current federal grant opportunities, in the school safety arena, support training programs, development of initiatives or lean towards installing technology. There are very few, if any, that financially

support districts in putting “boots on the ground.” I’m hopeful that, through my testimony, there comes a renewed opportunity through state or federal grants to help local districts pay for full time SRO’s, which by definition includes Class III Officers.

NJASRO has trained approximately 1,200 class attendees over the last 10 years. On average we would hold 4 classes at Police Training Commission approved facilities around the state with approximately 25 attendees. In 2018 we’ve scheduled 8 classes and have capped attendance, for logistical purposes, to 40 attendees. Earlier this year we held classes in Monmouth County and Bergen County. For the remainder of the year we have classes scheduled in Monmouth, Union, Ocean, Essex, Atlantic and Morris Counties. We’ve begun scheduling for 2019 and have already booked Camden County for a January class. The 5 day class consists of instruction blocks that include, but are not limited to, SRO roles and responsibilities, school safety, behavior and risk assessment, counter terrorism, juvenile law, school searches and seizures, Memorandum of Understanding, Title 18 A, mentoring, special needs and working with the administration. Attendees must verify their employment with a law enforcement agency or provide documentation of their employment by a Board of Education. Our cadre of instructors include active duty law enforcement, retired law enforcement and education representatives.

Security and vigilance has become standard practice in our government buildings, airports, and other high profile locations as part of our nation’s homeland security efforts. This has resulted in the dismantling of numerous terror plots and created an environment where terror attacks are more difficult to execute at these locations. In light of increased security measures at other locations, terror attacks on soft targets involving innocent civilians and often children are becoming an increasingly more desirable target for attacks. If schools are to be considered soft targets then planning teams must remain diligent and open minded as they consider emerging threats. This is a complicated narrative as current trends dictate that emergency and crisis plans must be expanded to include the threats from Home Grown Violent Extremists (HGVE’s) and the use of encrypted social media by terrorist networks. This places a tremendous burden on school safety planners as the luxury of planning and preparing for an attack orchestrated by radical extremist groups outside the United States, has shifted to where the planning and preparation must include threats originating from those individuals who are currently members of our student population. While successful threat assessments are vital to preventing the next school shooting the assessments must now address those individuals who face potential radicalization as a result of perceived injustices, anger and isolation. The shift in planning must overcome the belief that terror attacks will only come from outside sources.

Given these challenges facing school safety planners an assessment must be made in how plans are drafted and executed. School administrators must be made aware of common radicalization techniques affecting student populations and be given effective programs to challenge online radicalization messaging. They must be aware of and be able to identify behavioral indicators and provide assistance to youth who are struggling to adjust within their

community. This in turn may help children cope with their feelings of isolation, anger, and depression and reduce the opportunity for extremists to exploit these feelings for recruitment.

There are ample opportunities to assist youth and many techniques are already in use as schools look to prevent bias incidents and bullying from occurring. Schools could convene students from varying cultural backgrounds to promote cultural understanding and provide educational opportunities on aspects of different cultures. They could promote open discussions with the assistance of the community and religious centers about conflicts and ways that violent extremists may use religion to justify their actions. These few improvements in training, educating and providing resources may greatly reduce the likelihood of a terror attack from within on a U.S. school.

New Jersey has long recognized the importance and value of a safe and secure school environment. It has also recognized that safety and security must be in balance with a school's main function which is to educate our children. School violence is a complex issue that can result in a never ending debate amongst scholars in all fields of study. The common agreeable element amongst those who debate the topic is the fact we, as a society, need to do more to protect the school population. If we look at the history of initiatives in New Jersey, from 1988 to 2018 we see guides, task force creations, documents, manuals, electronic databases, plans, codes, directives, recommendations, laws, minimum requirements and reports. NJASRO is proud to have participated in the latest statewide school safety initiative. Just last week the New Jersey Department of Education held its School Safety Specialist Certification Training. I was proud to write the curriculum for and present on the topic of Law Enforcement and Education Partnerships. All of the initiatives, recognized or unrecognized, are the result of the due diligence in the areas of school safety and security by the countless members of various State agencies, task forces, working groups and committees.

While continued public meetings and community discussion are valuable platforms, true change will only come through action. Adequate resources also need to be allocated to enable schools to pursue these measures, and mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure compliance.