

Good Morning Senators and Representatives:

My name is Richard Monterosso of West Hartford, Connecticut. I appreciate this opportunity to share my perspective on school safety from my perspective of over thirty years of social work practice since my graduation from the University of Connecticut School of Social Work in 1981. My testimony today is personal and does not represent the school administration or district of my employer or of the Connecticut Suicide Advisory Board.

As both a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and a School Social Worker certified at the Professional Level by the State Department of Education, I have had extensive experience in psychiatric treatment settings at all levels of care and in schools with students who have exhibited behaviors of concern. My school social work experience includes over sixteen years in a public high school and four years at the former Newington Children's Hospital (now Connecticut Children's Medical Center) Clinical Day School for students from the Greater Hartford area with serious emotional disturbances. I have been involved with safety planning at the state and local levels. I am a member of the State of Connecticut Suicide Advisory Board (chaired jointly by the Department of Mental Health and Addictions Services and the Department of Children and Families), a leader within the Enfield townwide task force for suicide prevention, and help my school team identify students with persistent non-criminal behaviors of concern requiring intervention by the Families With Service Needs program at the Superior Court Juvenile Matters.

Creating and maintaining a safe school environment requires an emotionally, as well as physically, secure environment in which students of all ages and their families feel comfortable self-reporting personal safety concerns or sharing concerns about other students who are expressing aggressive and/or self-harmful ideas or exhibiting behaviors of concern. These safety concerns need to be identified and effectively addressed before there is time to develop into aggressive suicidal and/or homicidal ideations, intentions, plans, access to means, and opportunity. Given the multiple communication modalities available on a constant basis, providing for student and school safety is a challenge and a responsibility which is not limited by the borders of a school campus, neighborhood, town, city or region.

Within the school staff team, School Social Workers are uniquely trained to understand the ecological matrix of bio-psycho-social factors in the life of the student. School Social Workers provide supports to students with disabilities, crisis assessments, and facilitate school and community-based services for students and their families. School Social Workers work with parents, teachers and other school staff to address the emotional-social-behavioral issues impacting personal growth and academic progress. At risk indicators of frequent absences/truancies, failing grades, emotional issues, and behavioral concerns need to be identified promptly for assessment and intervention beginning in the elementary grades. These timely supports promote effective coping strategies and positive self-identification as an inquisitive and competent student who learns to use adult supports as needed.

Sadly, students in elementary, middle, and high schools may feel overwhelmed at times and verbally or electronically express suicidal thoughts, sometimes with plans and the intent to use

lethal means accessible to them. At times these ideas may include harming others as well. Students who self report their own fears of suicidal or aggressive urges, or those of their peers, serve as a first alert system when the adults at home and in their school have earned their trust and confidence to share safety issues.

School Social Workers assist families with behavioral health crises by stabilizing the student and assisting with crisis referrals, as needed, to United Way 211 for Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Service. These urgent assessments and interventions are provided on site at schools or in the community at the family home.

In behavioral health emergencies when a youth is presenting an imminent danger to self and/or others, the School Social Worker is an integral part of the school team identifying the risk factors and working with the police who determine the need for involuntary protective custody ambulance transport to a medical facility for emergency department evaluation.

Providing school districts with sufficient funds to have School Social Workers in all schools promotes school safety, as well as student success, by facilitating the early identification of students at risk for failure, including violence to self and/or others, and by facilitating professional interventions, including collaborating with community resources for students and their families. Social Workers are also participating in trainings to plan for post-vention following any community tragedy in order to support youth and adults during the response and recovery period as a prevention for future risk factors.

Please provide my testimony to all three working groups:

Gun Violence Prevention Working Group  
School Security Working Group  
Mental Health Services Working Group

Thanks you for your dedication in addressing this priority issue of school safety.

Respectfully submitted,

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