



HOLLIS POLICE DEPARTMENT  
HOLLIS, NEW HAMPSHIRE  
A Nationally Accredited Agency



Joseph R. Hoebeke  
CHIEF OF POLICE

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CAPTAIN

Dear Commission of Law Enforcement Accountability, Community, and Transparency,

My name is Rick Bergeron and I have served over 20 years in New Hampshire Law Enforcement. I have been serving as the School Resource Officer for Hollis Police Department and SAU41 since the 2011/2012 school year. I am also currently serving as the President of the newly formed New Hampshire Juvenile Police Officers Association (NHJPOA) which is a non-profit 501 (c) organization in NH. The NHJPOA's mission statement is;

“The mission of the New Hampshire Juvenile Police Officers Association is to provide guidance and support to Law Enforcement Officers, school safety professionals, and educators in and around New Hampshire. This support includes training, program evaluations and advisory functions. We strive to obtain excellence in quality educational opportunities for each School Resource Officer, other juvenile and Law Enforcement Officials, and education security or safety professionals assigned to public and non-public schools, through hosting workshops, seminars, and an annual State Conference, so that they may better serve the youth of our communities”.

NHJPOA is currently working with New Hampshire Department of Homeland Security to bring specific trainings that are geared towards Law Enforcement Officers who work with juveniles. NHJPOA had several in person training opportunities scheduled, (Human Trafficking, 2020 NH SRO Conference, NASRO's Basic SRO course), from May-August 2020, however all were canceled due to Covid-19. We hope to add more SRO geared trainings to NH, many with no tuition cost.

I listened to last week's accountability/transparency meeting recording after learning that the topic of SROs had been discussed. While I can't speak on the behalf of all SROs in NH, I can speak competently on the Hollis Police Departments partnership with our local School Administrative Unit (SAU41) to form our SRO program which began in 2006.

At program inception, there were many parents and some school staff that were opposed to a officer in the school. Some feared that the officer would aggressively “police” the students and this would interfere with the learning environment. However, Officer Dunne was able to quickly become a new and integral part of the school culture. She became involved in the classroom experience when invited to speak on various topics and ended up mentoring many students. The students even gave her a nickname, TDunne. Officer Dunne was beloved in the schools; however, it was the philosophy at the time that the SRO assignment duration was a temporary one, which had a five-year expiration date for every officer that went into it.

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When Officer Dunne left the school, I was selected as her replacement. The process included an oral board with the school administration as I was not the only officer that applied for the position. Using teaching skills obtained through the DARE program and following Officer Dunne's advice to seize any opportunity to get into the classrooms to make connections with students, I was slowly welcomed into the school culture. My initial success with establishing positive relationships was made significantly easier with the successful program started by Officer Dunne who was so loved by the students and staff. Over the years working as a partner with SAU-41, we have collaborated to begin or enhanced several educational opportunities in the schools. Some of these programs include:

Distracted Driving Simulator

Seatbelt Convincer (Tied it in with Physics class)

PEERS Foundation's Augmented Reality Distracted Driving Education Simulator

NH Liquor Commission's Fatal Choices Program

8th Grade Safety Day Field Trip (happens every year)

NH Seatbelt Challenge (Current State Champs)

Explorer's Program

Life Skills Program

Lunch with an Officer K-3

Field Trips to Traffic Safety Conferences

Field Trip to Distracted Driving Summit (NH Teen Driver Program)

Women's Self Defense (R.A.D) during school and after

School Walkthroughs by patrol

Judging HBHS We the People competition teams

Reading to students during, Read Across America

Safety talks in Kindergarten

Being asked to cameo in student's spirit week skits, movies, projects, and presentations

The SRO program has also partnered with the schools to train staff in the Avoid Deny Defend strategy in an active attack scenario. I have facilitated FEMA ICS100 classes for school staff so they have a working knowledge of the principles of incident command. We also have completed security audits through NH Homeland Security for feedback on current building safety standards. In doing these early on, we helped secure several grants for those safety items that the schools were lacking, saving thousands of dollars to the towns of Hollis and Brookline. Through time, school safety committees were formed and eventually a district wide safety committee. All stakeholders are involved in these meetings to include Hollis Police/Fire, School Principals, SAU staff, Brookline Police/Fire, and Town Emergency Planners from both towns. Hollis Brookline Middle School even won a Preparedness Award from NH Homeland Security and they were asked to present their approach to safety, at the NH Safety Preparedness Conference.

I read the NAACP's New England Area Conference report attached to last week's testimony. In that document, #3 states to remove uniformed, armed police from public schools and increase the presence of trained professionals to manage disciplinary matters. I would submit that the schools already have trained professionals that handle disciplinary matters. They are the school administration. The administration only gets the SRO involved in incidents when there was criminal behavior by a student. I looked back at all the calls for police service I handled at Hollis Brookline High School for the past 5 school years (2015-2020). I found that in that time frame only 11 students (14-18 years old) were petitioned to court for committing misdemeanor crimes, most for assaults or drug related offenses. Of the 11 students, all but 4, received a finding of continued without a finding/placed on file dispositions. In those cases, sanctions were put in to help the student deal with the underlying cause or issue. The other 4 students had outside cases which were globally resolved and had a JPPO assigned. We did have 4 students (14-17 years old) summoned to court for tobacco violations. Historically tobacco violations were resolved exclusively through the school discipline process, however we started to see an increase in vaping. Through collaborative discussion with the school, it was decided that tobacco/vaping violations would be brought forward by HPD. The collaborative change in procedure ultimately reduced the number of students being caught vaping significantly. The school also brought in several speakers to educate the students and parents.

Please note that in all but one of the above instances, the students were not handcuffed, searched and placed into custody by police while at school. In all the aforementioned circumstances students were released to parents, and later served with petitions at their homes to address charges in court. This gave the police department and school administration valuable time to reflect on whether criminal charges were appropriate prior to filing them.

I would like to note that in all these cases, if there were no SRO in the school, the school would have called the police department due to the nature of the incident or outcry for certain behavior (vaping tobacco) to be stopped in school. Any one of 10 different officers may have responded to

handle the situation, none of whom have had the opportunity to build relationships with school officials and students prior to responding for the imminent incident.

So in the past 5 school years, I have filed misdemeanor criminal charges against a total of 11 students. Each of these cases was initiated by school administration and then supported by the Hollis Police Department. These cases have taken up an extremely small portion of my total time within the school system.

Although my experience is only within one SAU, I would suggest to you that in order for any SRO program to be valid and accepted within the community it serves, there has to be agreement on the expectations of the program. A police officer is never simply part of the staff of the school, yet a School Resource Officer often has to be accountable to both police administrators and school administrators.

In Hollis, the expectations of the SRO program are spelled out through a written memorandum of understanding that the Police Chief and the SAU Superintendent review and ratify every year. The MOU can be adjusted when needed by either party with the other's approval. In the MOU, either party can also remove services with proper time and notification.

At an earlier Commission hearing, I heard talk of why police have to be in uniform? Well it is my opinion, because we are police officers. We are what we are and we do not try to hide this from the school community or from those who would threaten it. Officers in plain clothes does not help bridge the gap between students and uniformed police officers. That being said; I have seen SRO's across the state wear all sorts of uniforms in the schools. Some officers like myself wear the traditional uniform, some wear outside carrier style uniforms, and others soften the uniform to an identifiable law enforcement polo shirt and khaki type pants. One thing that is universal across the board of SROs, we all have various tools to do our job around our waist, in our pockets, and strapped to our chest. However, the most important tool is the mentorship and guidance we provide to students.

So, what does a Hollis SRO actually do and why is the relationship beneficial to the school, community, and police department? As the SRO, I am expected to have a grasp on pretty much all things "school", which is a small community within the larger community. I provide law enforcement expertise and resources to students, parents, and school staff. I help anticipate if there will be a need for extra officers for after school events (large sporting events with rival teams, guitar night, prom, etc). Answering questions on legal processes (traffic tickets, DVPs, Stalking orders). Being present and assisting in organizing the safety and security for large school events such as High School Graduation and Prom.

I also serve as a positive role model for students. This is accomplished by using a triad approach. By being a law enforcement officer, teacher, and informal counselor to students. I also assist with training for the school administration in law enforcement and related matters. Providing information about crime trends and changes in laws relevant to schools and to the school

administrative staff. I assist the schools in the development of Emergency Operation Plans and crisis preparedness guidelines for schools through New Hampshire Homeland Security and the Emergency Management's School Readiness Program. I am also incorporated into each of the school's Safety, Security, and Crisis Teams.

I am involved with enhancing the school's curriculum and provide instruction that will enhance the student's understanding of the law, the Hollis Police mission, and the responsibilities of citizenship. These classes include being a guest speaker in Civics, Amendments to the US Constitution, and Criminal Law to name a few. I have also assisted in being a chaperone on numerous field trips in state, out of state, and out of the country. The school staff likes having an officer chaperone as they are aware of the surrounding activities, are first aid/CPR certified, and if needed, can easily speak to officers everywhere.

I strive to maintain positive/productive relationships with the school administrators and the SAU employees. Every school administrator has my personal cell phone and they reach out whenever they have a question or a concern. I actively look for safety and educational programs to bring to the schools in New Hampshire.

Prior to the NHJPOA, I would gather other local SROs in Southern NH, to discuss current trends going on in their schools. In doing so we were able to mentor each other and share beneficial programs & resources for our students and the community. I am also a liaison between the school, police department, Juvenile Probation & Parole, and community resources.

One of my favorite aspects of being an SRO are the personal connections I make. I know I have impacted the lives of so many in a positive manner. Through mentorship, informal counseling, and teaching, I have hopefully helped shape the opinions Hollis Brookline students have of police officers. Many of these relationships and mentorships continue today, long after the student has graduated high school. It is this aspect and the sense of fulfillment it gives me, that I have forgone aspirations of personal promotion, as it would take me away from the job I love doing. I truly feel like I am helping my community which is the reason I got into law enforcement in 1999.

Not every police officer would make a good SRO. Anyone who is going to spend time within schools must understand the overall objectives of our educational system and how school environments are different from the outside world. SRO's must be carefully selected for this unique position. In Hollis the position of SRO has evolved into a hybrid position. Staff, parents, and students see the position as a member of the school.

Lastly, I would like to end with a few suggestions that have seemed to work for Hollis' SRO program and also some suggestions that I could see improving programs across the state. I would like to see an SRO educational track implemented at the state level. These classes would include a basic SRO class, advanced SRO class, mental health first aid, FERPA class, public speaking/instructor development, and a de-escalation class to name a few. I sought out these classes over the years to improve my own abilities in the schools. I would also suggest that

departments have an SRO field training program for new officers going into the schools. This is the one thing I wish I had prior to entering the school. It would have helped bridge the gap between the new SRO and the one leaving. The new SRO also gets to learn first-hand how the days flow and first-hand the expectations of the job. As the NHJPOA grows, it will continue to serve as a mentor to other SROs, with several decades of experience among the board and members.

NH police executives have long recognized that in order to maintain legitimacy and trust with the community, police officers must be invested in the people they serve. Those departments fortunate enough to have SRO programs are doing just that; they are investing in their school community. Your Commission even includes the word Community in its title. Relegating the police to just nameless faceless uniforms that swoop in to the school when there is an emergency separates the police from the school community and serves to weaken relationships and opportunities to build trust. I don't believe that should be the goal of anyone interested in police reform.

Thank you for your time and if you have any questions relative to my testimony, please do not hesitate to reach out and ask. I would encourage the Commission to reach out to the schools in New Hampshire with established SRO programs and gain their input on the partnership police departments have in the schools and in their respective community.

Respectfully,



Richard G. Bergeron

MPO/SRO Hollis Police Department

&

New Hampshire Juvenile Police Officers Association

President