



**STATE OF WISCONSIN  
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE**

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August 21, 2018

SENT VIA EMAIL ([joanne@wifamilyties.org](mailto:joanne@wifamilyties.org))

Joanne Juhnke, Policy Director  
Wisconsin Family Ties

Dear Ms. Juhnke:

Thank you for your letter dated August 20, 2018, related to the second round of school safety grants. We appreciate your comments and always appreciate suggestions from our various stakeholders. Our goal with the school safety grant program is to make our schools the safest in the nation, and we look forward to partnering with you on this project as we move forward.

Your letter contained some statements, however, that I believe are important to clarify. We are aware of the potential stigma and blame that students with mental health challenges may face, and that those students should not automatically be funneled into the criminal justice system. This is precisely one of the goals of the School Safety Intervention Teams (SSITs). SSITs will be multi-disciplinary teams of teachers, counselors, administrators, and law enforcement officers who will be equipped to get students the help they need. On the other hand, a school without a SSIT, and without access to appropriate training, may unnecessarily engage with law enforcement to solve a problem that could have been more appropriately addressed through mental health professionals. We feel this is a problem that you would like to avoid, and based on our training and expertise, this is a problem that SSITs can effectively address.

You also expressed concerns with adolescent mental health training. Specifically, you state that “teachers are not the target audience for this particular training.” Respectfully, this is not true. There will be a tremendous value for any school personnel attending this training. Those who attend will be trained in how to handle a student in crisis; de-escalation techniques to avoid the need for additional interventions; and positive coping mechanisms and positive relationships, so that students feel comfortable asking for assistance when they need it. Many teachers take on the role of being a mentor and would be able to provide a positive trusting relationship.

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You may not be familiar with the specific topics that are part of the curriculum. These topics include training on how to identify signs that a student is experiencing a crisis; signs that a student has experienced a traumatic event; assisting students to develop problem solving skills; assisting students to develop healthy coping mechanisms; verbal de-escalation techniques; engaging parents; and a panel discussion with local behavioral health service providers.

Also, you suggest that a “more appropriate training for teachers would be Youth Mental Health First Aid.” Importantly, our grant covers 100% of the costs of teachers attending Youth Mental Health First Aid, so if an applicant would like to spend money for this program, the grant program will reimburse for this expense. However, the Adolescent Mental Health Training provides more advanced training, while Youth Mental Health First Aid focuses just on the basics. For example, Youth Mental Health First Aid does not discuss how to assist a child on a long-term basis, and does not provide attendees with direct access to local resources for their students.

On the other hand, Adolescent Mental Health Training emphasizes follow-up and long-term relationship building. Since we are also requiring that schools that apply for grant funding to form SSITs, we highly encourage that those who are going to be a part of this team attend the Adolescent Mental Health Training. This is encouraged because completing a violence risk assessment is not the end of a SSIT’s job; they should continue to provide long-term support to students. For all of these reasons, we believe that the Adolescent Mental Health Training provides substantially better value for teachers and school districts.

Your letter also suggests that SSITs may potentially “cause harm” to students with mental health or behavior-related disabilities. We disagree. The purpose of the SSIT is to have a well-trained multidisciplinary group in each school that is able to determine how likely it is for a student to carry out a threat. Their job is not to decide if a student *made a threat*, but to determine if they actually *pose a threat*. This goal cannot be achieved without examining what threat was made; determine if the student has the capacity to carry out the threat; and complete a thorough examination of the child’s current situation. The focus of the SSIT should not be based in discipline but in *violence prevention*.

Since 1999, the U.S. Department of Education, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the U.S. Secret Service have recommended based on their findings in their study, the *Safe School Initiative*, that threat assessment teams or SSITs should be established in schools as a way to prevent violence. Again in 2008, the same agencies released the *Bystander Study*, indicating that in an overwhelming majority of school attacks, other

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students had information regarding the impending attacks but did not report this information to an adult. Again in July 2018, the Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center published its report, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model*. This report indicates that the goal of threat assessment is to identify students that need assistance; determine the risk that they will commit acts of violence; and provide interventions to mitigate that risk.

Finally, you state that the violence risk assessment report, along with the confidential reporting application or tip line, are an “alarming proposal[s].” Respectfully, we do not believe these are alarming and our recommendations are aligned with the recommendations provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and National Threat Assessment Center. The benefits of these programs are most recently demonstrated by a report released by the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, and University of Virginia – Curry School of Education. This report reviews 1,865 threat assessment cases reported by 785 public schools during the 2014-15 school year.

The result of this study supports the conclusion that SSITs will *not* result in an increase of law enforcement referrals, but just the opposite. The Virginia study shows that out of the 1,865 threats assessed, only 5% of those students were arrested by law enforcement, and 1% taken to juvenile detention. Of the remainder, 73% resulted in school discipline as follows: reprimand 53%, detention 3%, in-school suspension 16%, out-of-school suspension 43%, and expulsion 6%. In addition to the school-based discipline, 32% were referred for school-based counseling, 19% for a mental-health assessment, outside mental-health services 21%, review of existing IEP 21%, 5% special education evaluation, and 5% hospitalization (some may have been referred for more than one service). While there were consequences for some behaviors, the guiding principal of the threat-assessment process was to address the underlying issue rather than focus solely on the threat. There was no statistically significant finding that there was any disparity among ethnicities between the frequency of referral and legal consequences. I am happy to provide you with these studies if you are interested.

In regards to your concern regarding anonymous reporting, “Safe2Tell Colorado” is an example of a program that may be considered by Wisconsin. During the 2017–2018 school year, they received 16,000 anonymous tips. Of these tips, 2,786 were suicide threats, 1,831 were drug tips, 1,641 were bullying tips, 933 were self-harm tips, 784 were depression tips, 692 were planned school attack tips, and 609 were threat tips. The way this program works is that a tip is received either via an app, email or phone call; it is reviewed by a trained professional; and is triaged to the appropriate responder.

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Examples of responders include, school personnel, law enforcement, or mental health crisis workers.

Another anonymous reporting program was developed by Sandy Hook Promise called “Say Something.” This program includes information for students and parents regarding what a threat to harm someone looks like and when it should be reported. It also provides an anonymous reporting tool that is similar to Safe2Tell Colorado. Trained professionals respond to tips and triage them to the appropriate responders.

At this time, schools are required to report specific and imminent threats to law enforcement immediately. While law enforcement may initiate an investigation of the threat, it does not mean that law enforcement will make an arrest. However, should law enforcement along with the SSIT at a particular school identify a high risk threat (specific, plausible, and imminent) a police report will be completed and a Suspicious Activity Report will be forwarded to the State of Wisconsin Department of Justice. This report is to determine if further intervention regarding this situation is warranted from the State/Federal level.

In the case that a SSIT completes a threat assessment, some information may be submitted to the Department of Justice for data collection/analysis purposes. This information will not include identifying information regarding the student and will be used to determine trends, needs, and possible interventions.

While it is understood that the “Zero Tolerance” policies popular immediately after the Columbine attack have had the unintended consequence of funneling children needlessly into the juvenile justice system, a well-designed and well-implemented threat assessment program does not seek to remove children from the educational environment. Instead, it seeks to find a long-term solution to the challenges a specific child faces.

Thank you again for your concerns and recommendations. We will continue to review our program and all suggestions. As we move forward, we would appreciate the opportunity to hear from you more and find ways to improve the safety of all school children in Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

/s/ Kristen Devitt

Kristen A. Devitt  
Director, Office of School Safety

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