

FEATURED

## School safety dominates discussion at public safety forum

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Vice president of the school board Dawn Balinski describes her opposition to arming school safety advocates at the sheriff's office's public safety forum Monday while Sheriff Mike Evans (R) attempts to stop attendees from cutting her off.

STAFF PHOTO BY ANDREW CEPHAS

School safety dominated the discussion at a public safety community forum hosted by the sheriff's office Tuesday evening following last week's fatal shooting at Great Mills High School and a Calvert school board meeting a couple days later where a motion to arm public schools' safety advocates failed.

Huntingtown High School was packed with concerned residents, who were joined by several elected officials, including Calvert Commissioner Mike Hart (R), vice president of the board of education Dawn Balinski and school board member and commissioners' candidate Kelly McConkey.

After paying respect to the victims of the Great Mills High School shooting last week, Sheriff Mike Evans (R) described a policy implemented afterwards where deputies were covering every school in the county. He acknowledged that the department is running out of deputies and cannot continue to cover the schools for much longer.

“We have a plan for this week. Spring break starts Friday, so there’s no school Friday. Beyond that, the rest of this week we’re supposed to sit down as a command staff and figure out what we’re going to map out for the remaining weeks of school this year,” Capt. Dave Payne of the sheriff’s office told attendees, adding that they are also focusing on coverage for schools during the summer as there are still activities for students.

Evans is proposing to add two school resource officers — who are armed in the schools and employed through the sheriff’s office — to use at the middle school level in this budget cycle. Currently, each public high school in the county has a school resource officer assigned with a supervising officer assisting where needed. These officers also serve the elementary and middle schools in their high school’s feeder pattern.

An attendee asked why there hasn’t been any emphasis on securing the elementary schools with school resource officers, to which Evans noted there is a need, but it takes funds that the department does not currently have. He encouraged residents to continue writing elected officials to voice their opinion on budgeting.

“Patrol checks are going to keep increasing. We’re going to come up with a plan that’s going to increase the checks in the schools, but it’s a hard time to keep them there for eight hours a day. Private schools, too,” Evans said.

There was thousands of comments on social media over the last week following the March 22 school board meeting where McConkey’s motion during board comments to arm safety advocates in Calvert County Public Schools failed without any discussion. School safety advocates, who are usually retired law enforcement officers, are employed by the school system.

When questioned if \$2 million sent from the county commissioners to the school system could be used for adding more officers in the schools, McConkey said officials haven’t decided how the money will be used. Balinski confirmed the money is coming to the school system as construction funds.

One of the priorities the funding is being proposed to address is adding doors to a number of open classrooms. McConkey added that the vestibules at a number of schools are being improved to better secure entrances.

Lifelong Calvert County resident and Huntingtown High teacher John McGuffin thanked McConkey for “stepping forward” and said the time has come to do something in the schools.

“I have a son that goes here who didn’t come to school Friday. I couldn’t convince him to come to school, but I came to school to work. I can’t lock my room,” McGuffin said before questioning what good a metal detector will do if a shooter is in the hallway.

“A metal detector is only a detector, unless you have somebody behind the detector that has a gun or something to stop the person right there. So my question is when are we going to deputize the safety advocates that we already have? I’m asking simply for it to be considered,” he continued.

McGuffin said safety advocates are retired law enforcement officers, who should be allowed to carry guns to protect schools.

“Why is this a gun-free zone only for the people who follow the law?” he asked.

Although Evans attempted to keep the conversation civil and not put anyone on the spot, many people directed their comments toward Balinski and questioned her opposition to arming safety advocates.

“My opposition to arming school employees is that it is an incredible responsibility to ask someone to use a lethal weapon inside the school building. At this point, the role of the safety advocate is incredibly important. They are there to develop relationships with the children and to understand what’s going on in the school system so they can diffuse situations,” Balinski told the room.

Balinski said carrying a gun and responding to armed confrontations is not in the safety advocates’ job description right now; thus, from a legal aspect, the school board would have to dismiss all safety advocates and post the job to include the weapon carrying requirement and that part of their responsibility is to guard the school. Safety advocates would then be hired from this pool of applicants. She added that, from what she’s been told, not all safety advocates are comfortable carrying their weapon in schools.



Numerous attendees asked why Balinski wouldn’t want retired law enforcement, who were previously trained, to be able to respond to an armed confrontation. Balinski said she would prefer for schools to contact police, evade the threat and lock down until the professionals can arrive, prompting outbursts of opposition from the crowd.

Balinski asked Evans how much training his officers receive related to wielding a lethal weapon and how it compares to the safety advocates. After describing what training officers undergo related to shootings, Evans said, “You couldn’t do this without additional training. Believe me, I agree with you 100 percent there.”

“I would love to have a law enforcement officer in every single school, the cost of which would be astronomical. I’m hoping the governor is starting to move that way. I want the experts to be the ones who are having to make that horrible decision on whether to fire on school grounds,” Balinski said.

When an attendee asked if the school board is willing to arm safety advocates with mace or Tasers, Evans expressed that he would be happy to provide tasers, if necessary.

A safety measure currently being taken is providing all deputies with keys and electronic access to the schools. Evans is also in talks with the school board regarding the department being a part of active shooter drills.

Evans also detailed some of Calvert's statistics, to include violent crimes being down 20 percent last year compared to 2016, and down 50 percent from 2010. Evans said although the opioid epidemic has hit Calvert County and the rest of the country hard, the overdose numbers are lower than last year at this point.

"At this time, we have seen 33 non-fatal overdoses and two fatal overdoses: one from heroin and one from a mixture of PCP and alcohol. In 2017, there were 183 overdoses and 33 fatalities," Evans said, adding that more people died from overdoses than car accidents in the country last year.

Evans said naloxone has helped with the number of fatal overdoses as authorities use the antidote in 80 percent of overdose cases. Everyone who overdoses also is transported to the hospital for an emergency evaluation, which Evans referred to as another way to get them help.

One of the sheriff's office's biggest struggles is with recruiting, as the number of applicants have been steadily declining. Evans attributed this to the sheriff's office's lower starting salary compared to surrounding jurisdictions. The department is actively recruiting minorities and women as well.

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