

Sustaining the SRO Position in Tough Financial Times

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Below: SRO Kevin Quinn meets with students.



Left: SRO Maureen Connelly, Montgomery County, MD Police Department with two students.



There is strong agreement that School Resource Officers (SROs) play a valuable role in school safety. However, in this climate of financial uncertainty, schools and local governments are finding it increasingly difficult to fund SRO positions. Drawing upon the lessons learned from the Federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, as well as from the broader SRO community over the years, this article presents 7 strategies schools and communities can use to make the case to sustain the SRO position.

What does the SRO do?

To better address the question of how to sustain an SRO position, local school-community partnerships must first understand just what it is that SROs do. Trained SROs are well aware of the triad nature of their work. An SRO who is meeting the demands of the full job description is a: teacher, counselor/mentor, and sworn law enforcement officer. SROs carry out these multiple roles and responsibilities in addition to engaging in teaching evidence-based drug or violence prevention programs such as a Second Step, Project ALERT, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, or others. The SRO may supplement existing prevention curricula by making classroom presentations; and also present law related education curriculum on a variety of topics including bullying and cyberbullying.

SROs develop valuable relationships that provide a positive pro-social figure in the life of students who otherwise might not have such relationships. These relationships may also help the SRO gain valuable intelligence that can prevent a crime or crisis, such as a bomb threat or a suicide. SROs are partners in school-community efforts to share information to support a young person in trouble. The SROs may also provide valuable training to school staff and parents on topics from drug prevention, bullying and gang prevention. The SRO can also provide technical assistance to school in the development of school safety plans and emergency readiness plans/protocols. Finally, SROs are also public safety officers already on the scene, should the need arise at school.

From the experience of the Federal Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (SS/HS), a comprehensive program supported jointly by the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice since 1999, law enforcement

partners (including SROs) have been involved in all SS/HS programmatic elements: 1) Safe environment/violence prevention; 2) Alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse prevention; 3) Student behavioral, social, and emotional supports; 4) Mental health services; and 5) Early childhood social and emotional learning programs. In short, SROs are engaged in a comprehensive approach to school and community safety.

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Are SROs Effective?

For schools, law enforcement departments, and other governmental agencies to make the case to sustain the SRO position it is especially important in times of financial uncertainty to present data about the effectiveness of SROs. Most law enforcement officers and school staff would agree that having an SRO in their school is a supportive strategy that greatly contributes to school safety. There is substantial anecdotal evidence to that effect, but in this era that demands evidence-based practices, what do we really know from the research?

There is research data showing the benefits of having SROs in schools. For example:

- When students have a positive opinion of the SRO they are more likely to report a crime and feel safe in school.
- Students and staff feel safe with SROs in school and many feel that the SROs have reduced bullying and fighting.

- SROs improve the perceptions that young people, school personnel, and others in the community have of law enforcement officers.
- The SRO program helps create and maintain the law enforcement agencies reputation in the community.

Local communities, and the field of school safety overall, must continue to collect solid and consistent evidence about the effectiveness of SROs, linking their roles and activities to outcomes such as reduced crime and violence. Working closely with researchers from universities and other organizations can yield more data to make the best case to sustain SROs.

What Does the SRO Position Cost?

Before addressing the issue of sustaining the SRO position, it is important for a school-community to look at what an SRO costs. Estimating the costs varies by community. Salaries differ in each community, as do the costs of benefits associated with those salaries. The cost of an SRO will not be the cost of an entry-level law enforcement officer because an SRO should have experience as an officer working in the community prior to becoming an SRO. Some officers have many years of experience, which would increase personnel costs. Other expenses should also be factored in, such as training (basic



or advanced SRO training or specialty training), overtime pay, equipment and the cruiser the SRO uses.

What Are the Benefits of An SRO?

Offsetting the costs are the benefits of an SRO. Peter Finn, co-author of the Community Oriented Policing Services Office seminal document, *A Guide to Developing, Maintaining and Succeeding With Your School Resource Officer Program*, published an article in the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (August 2006), which named four benefits of the SRO position:

- 1 The reduced workload of patrol officers (meaning there is less need for officers to come off patrol to answer calls at school because the SRO is already on the scene).
- 2 An improved image of law enforcement with youth.
- 3 The development of relationships between law enforcement and schools.
- 4 An enhancement of the law enforcement agency's reputation in the community.

Improved relations with law enforcement can yield greater cooperation for community policing efforts in the future in terms of both crime prevention and willingness to report crimes.

Sustainability Strategies From the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative

In its support to the SS/HS Initiative, the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention has worked with school-community sites around the country to develop the following strategies that can help sustain the SRO position.

1. Partnership and Collaboration. Working in partnership is essential to sustaining the SRO position. By playing critical roles with other community partners, such as fire and rescue, emergency management, neighboring law enforcement agencies, health departments and others, the SRO and law enforcement departments show that they are essential collaborators in areas like emergency management. Being an active partner in this critical work makes the case for the SRO's indispensable "already-on-the-scene" assistance.

2. Capacity Building. Enhancing an SRO's capacities through quality training is central to their performance. The better trained the SRO—whether it be in incident command or other crisis management work, verbal judo, gang prevention, youth development or others areas—the more valuable that officer is and the greater the likelihood that the position will be sustained. SROs can also play an important role in building the capacity of school staff and volunteers in important school safety strategies by training them in topics like crime preven-

tion through environmental design and school security surveys. This training of others helps sustain the security capacity in the schools.

3. Communications. SROs should use public relations strategies to make sure the community is aware of their work, including contacts with students and parents, counseling, and follow-up referrals. SROs can increase their visibility and value by writing a regular school safety column in the local newspaper or parent or school publication, as well as communicating safety plans to all parents through PTO/PTA groups and other partners. Communications enhances community support for the SRO position, especially when the law enforcement agency communicates data about the impact of the SRO through numbers and "success" stories.

4. Leadership. SROs can exercise leadership in the school community by serving as key players in activities such as training, safety issues, evidence-based programs, school policies and procedures, event planning, alcohol education weeks, extracurricular activities, and even as security advisors to the architects and city planners of new school facilities. To bolster chances of sustaining their position, SROs must have the support of leadership in their departments ideally with their police chiefs or sheriffs meeting regularly with school superintendents and directors of juvenile justice and mental health services to discuss community issues involving young people. Together this leadership can



work with parents, the business community and others to promote the SRO program with the school board and city or county council. In a tight fiscal climate, leadership in the community will look at how the SRO saves money. For example, an SRO handling an incident in a school saves a call for service from the road patrol. Other incidents do not even escalate to a call for service because the SRO intervenes to de-escalate the situation.

5. Policy. SROs can work with the leadership in their departments to provide what is necessary to establish the SRO position in the department policy. SROs can also provide assistance in the development of school policies related to bullying and violence prevention, handling mental health referrals, truancy or other related issues.

6. Evaluation. The SRO should work to convince schools and others in the community that they cannot live without them. They can do this by collecting and sharing data on how the SRO's activities have had an impact on the lives of students and staff. SROs can work with their law enforcement agencies, school staff and local evaluators to collect data related to perceptions of school safety and academic scores. Data might include measures of feelings of safety and levels of fighting and other violence, correlated to SRO activities. Local data can be collected on the number of incidents responded to, traffic enforcement citations, student and parent contacts, calls for service and arrests.

7. Finance. When it comes to paying for the SRO, various models exist with different arrangements working for different communities. In some communities, the school district (through its school budget or a grant to the school—such as the SS/HS Initiative) funds the SRO position. In other communities the law enforcement agency (through the law enforcement budget or a grant to that agency) funds the position. The more common scenario is to have a shared



SROs from the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, DC at a bike rodeo.

arrangement where the school district picks up some of the costs, and the law enforcement agency picks up others costs. This split is negotiated in a variety of ways that lessen the burden for any one agency. Sometimes costs are split with 50% of the cost of an officer being paid by the school for nine months with the officer going back on road patrol in the summer. Sometimes the costs are split over the course of a year because the SRO runs a summer program for the school.

For more information on financing the SRO, see *A Guide to Developing, Maintaining and Succeeding with Your SRO Program*, (www.cops.usdoj.gov/files/ric/Publications/sro_guidelines.pdf). Chapter 7 is called "Identifying Sources of Program Funding" and includes: Who Pays for the Program; How to Find the Money; and Case Studies. Chapter 8 deals with Maintaining Program Funding and includes: How to Motivate Law Enforcement Agencies to Maintain Funding; How to Motivate the Schools to Contribute (More) Funding; How to Motivate Public Officials; and What Motivates Everybody.

Finally, a number of these strategies work together to help sustain the valuable positions of SROs in the community. For example, in Gillette, Wyoming, SS/HS Proj-

ect Director Kip Farnum pointed out how communicating data made a big difference in local leadership's decision to partner in financing the SROs, saying, "We have had a very good response from our city and county with regard to sustaining our SRO program. Before 2008, the city paid for one SRO for our district of 21 schools. In 2008, funding from the SS/HS grant to the school district paid for an additional SRO. The community and the district liked that arrangement so much that in 2009 the city hired an additional SRO at their expense. In the Fall of 2010, the city hired another SRO for us following the presentation of evaluation data about SRO activities and results. Additionally, the Sheriff's Office has committed to providing another SRO for 2011-12 after the SS/HS grant expires."

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