

Dept. of Justice: National advocates call on Wisconsin lawmakers to fund the office of school safety

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MADISON, Wis. – National school safety advocates today are urging Wisconsin legislators to reverse the Joint Committee on Finance refusal to fund the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of School Safety (OSS) to ensure the office can continue its current, lifesaving operations to keep Wisconsin kids safe.

“Office of School Safety trainings and programs follow national best practices, helping to ensure that high-quality school safety resources are available to Wisconsin schools,” said Attorney General Josh Kaul. “We need to keep these resources in place, not leave our schools and our kids without them.”

OSS was created with bipartisan support in 2018 in response to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Fla. and has proven to be a critical resource for students, teachers, school administrators, and educational communities across the state of Wisconsin implementing practices proven to prevent violence in schools.

Max Schachter, a national school safety advocate and parent of one of the students killed in the Parkland, Fla. shooting, has been urging Wisconsin lawmakers to fund OSS for months. Schachter provided the following statement regarding OSS funding.

“It’s sad that after 17 people were murdered in the Parkland school shooting, including my sweet little boy Alex, there are still legislatures, like in Wisconsin, that think it won’t happen in their state. Thankfully a school shooting the scale of Parkland hasn’t happened YET; due in large part to the good work of the Wisconsin

Office of School Safety. The Wisconsin legislature's decision not to fund the ongoing training and Speak Up, Speak Out program I believe will lead to disastrous consequences. Schools will be less prepared to respond when tragedy strikes because the OSS will have canceled their critical response training. Children struggling with depression and suicidal thoughts won't have the trained analysts in the Speak Up, Speak Out program to talk to, and when kids know that someone is planning a school shooting the program designed to prevent it will be closed.

"In the five years since my son Alex was murdered in the Parkland school shooting, Florida has moved mountains to make schools safer throughout our state. Very soon our office will be staffed with over 30 personnel. We have allocated over \$1 Billion for school safety and \$500 million for mental health funding. In all of our 4,000+ schools we have a school safety officer, threat assessment teams, directors of school safety and mental health coordinators. I could go on and on...Most importantly, our leaders understand that safety comes before education, because you can't teach dead kids. Wisconsin should NOT wait for tragedy to strike before their leaders take the safety and security of their schools seriously."

OSS staff provide trainings that follow national best practices related to crisis prevention and response, free of charge, to any Wisconsin school that requests it. They also developed and maintain critical incident response teams for every region of Wisconsin, and they established and run the Speak Up, Speak Out Resource Center, including the 24-hour tipline. OSS has also distributed nearly \$100 million in grants for safety enhancements, threat assessment training, and mental health training to public, private, charter, and tribal schools throughout Wisconsin.

Michele Gay is the executive director of Safe and Sound Schools, she is also the mother of Josephine Gay, who was killed at Sandy Hook School. Safe and Sound Schools partnered with OSS when developing Speak Up, Speak Out.

"Safe and Sound Schools believe the safety of Wisconsin's students and school staff are the greatest priority of its citizens. We are proud to have partnered with the Office of School Safety as it built a statewide reporting program, Speak Up, Speak Out; provided critical technical assistance to school communities; supported school communities in prevention, response and recovery (including the community of Barron, Wis., during the kidnapping and recovery of a student); and conducted statewide threat assessment trainings, intervening on behalf of students in crisis and protecting against acts of targeted violence," said Michele Gay. "We urge Wisconsin legislators to stand up for students and school communities and continue

funding OSS to provide for the critical needs of school safety at this unprecedented time of need in our schools and communities.”

Susan Payne is the Founder and Former Executive Director of the Safe2Tell non-profit prevention initiative developed as a response to the Columbine tragedy in Colorado. She also served as a special agent for the state of Colorado and is a nationally recognized school safety expert. Payne worked closely with OSS staff to develop Wisconsin’s Speak Up, Speak Out 24/7 confidential reporting system.

“In the past 24 years since Columbine, the stark reality of lessons learned in tragedies involving students and mass attacks of violence, that our best chance of preventing them is to have a school community that knows how to identify the warning signs, a bystander reporting system to report those concerns combined with trained multi-discipline teams to respond at the school and community level,” said Susan Payne. “Combining that with training on the United States Secret Service threat assessment model and crisis response will provide a comprehensive prevention framework for safer students, safer staff and safer communities. I’m proud to say that this strategy has been a bipartisan supported solution that works.”

Speak Up, Speak Out

On September 1, 2020, OSS launched Speak Up, Speak Out (SUSO), a 24/7 statewide confidential reporting system free to all Wisconsin schools. SUSO is a comprehensive, one-stop place to turn with important concerns, offering a Threat Reporting System, Threat Assessment Consultation, Critical Incident Response and General School Safety Guidance. SUSO aims to promote the reporting of concerns before violence happens.

SUSO Fast Facts

- More than 1,700 schools and law enforcement agencies in Wisconsin have received at least one tip from SUSO since its inception.
- To date, SUSO has received more than 7,000 contacts, with half of those coming in the 2022-2023 school year alone.
- Between May of 2022 and May of 2023, 63 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties received at least one SUSO tip.

Students, parents, school staff, or any community members can submit a school

safety concern or threat via the SUSO website, mobile phone application, or toll-free number.

SUSO Reports can be made 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:

- Online at speakup.widoj.gov
- 1-800-MY-SUSO-1 (1-800-697-8761)
- Mobile app ([iOS](#)/[Android](#))

John-Michael Keyes, co-founder of the I Love You Guys Foundation, a national organization that provides school and community safety and family reunification programs, has collaborated and partnered with OSS since its inception.

“I urge the State of Wisconsin to prioritize funding for the Office of School Safety to ensure that our students, staff, and communities have secure learning, teaching, and visiting environments,” said John-Michael Keyes. “Let’s work together to make our schools the safest they can be.”

OSS Training

OSS staff are certified to train a variety of courses that follow national best practices related to violence prevention, protection, mitigation, crisis response and recovery. OSS offers these trainings free of charge to any school or law enforcement agency in Wisconsin that requests it. Trainings offered in Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) equip school and law enforcement staff with the knowledge, protocol and model practices needed to determine if someone poses a threat to their school and how to intervene effectively based on the level of concern posed. Crisis Intervention trainings equip school staff to respond effectively when a crisis event occurs in a way that will promote psychological recovery for all staff and students. Other trainings help school staff establish standardized response and reunification for any school crisis, from fires and floods to acts of violence. OSS staff continue to expand the trainings offered to ensure that Wisconsin schools have a comprehensive toolkit to help keep kids and school staff safe.

School shootings are preventable. Two practices are proven to prevent school violence: an accessible, effective threat reporting system and BTAM. OSS leads the state in bringing both the practices to school.

The U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) [studied](#) 41

incidents of targeted school violence that occurred at K-12 schools in the United States from 2008 to 2017. According to their report, “many of these tragedies could have been prevented, and supports the importance of schools establishing comprehensive targeted violence prevention programs as recommended by the Secret Service in Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model.”

This approach is intended to identify students of concern, assess their risk for engaging in violence or other harmful activities, and implement intervention strategies to manage that risk. The threshold for intervention should be low, so that schools can identify students in distress before their behavior escalates to the level of eliciting concerns about safety.

OSS Training Fast Facts

- Between May of 2022 and May of 2023, OSS staff provided trainings and presentations in 63 of Wisconsin’s 72 counties.
- Between May of 2022 and May of 2023, OSS staff reached 5,837 people through trainings and presentations around the state.

Dr. Stephen Brock and Dr. Melissa Reeves, members of the National Association of School Psychologists and authors of the PREPaRE curriculum, have trained OSS staff in their model practices for school crisis prevention and response.

“It is essential to have the capacity to respond to the aftereffects of school-associated crisis events. Our school age youth, because they are younger, are particularly vulnerable to having crisis event exposure result in health problems,” said Steven Brock and Melissa Reeves. “These problems can have long lasting (even lifelong) effects and will result in academic failure and challenges to mental wellness, which in the long run will have greater costs than the small funding required to support school safety efforts.”

Critical Incident Response Teams

In 2022, OSS established and trained twelve Critical Incident Response Teams (CIRTs) around the state. CIRTs are designed to provide all Wisconsin K-12 public, private, charter and tribal schools with access to a regionally based team to support them if a critical incident ever occurs at their school. Each CIRT is made up of volunteers who are part of a multi-disciplinary team. These teams include law enforcement officers, school administrators, counselors, psychologists, social

workers, nurses, teachers, school safety experts, and representatives from other related professions. The mission of the CIRT program is to minimize the psychological impact of a school critical incident; provide resources to help stabilize the school community; work to identify individuals that may require long-term mental health services after a critical incident occurs; and offer support to school administrators and educators. Wisconsin is the first state to implement regionally based CIRTs on a statewide basis. Additional training academies are being held this summer, adding team members across the state.

CIR Fast Facts

- Between June of 2022 and May of 2023, OSS provided evidence-based crisis response and intervention training to 191 participants at regional CIR training academies, ensuring access to best practices across the state.
- Between May of 2022 and May of 2023, OSS provided 71 instances of CIR support and resources to schools that were impacted by a traumatic incident, helping them recover and return to learning more quickly.

OSS was initially supported by more than \$2 million in federal grant funding from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance. OSS is currently supported by more than \$1.8 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding which will end in December of 2023. Without additional funding, the critical services provided by OSS will cease to exist. Wisconsin DOJ has requested the legislature permanently fund OSS in the next biennial budget.

View this press release on the Wisconsin DOJ website [here](#).