



MINUTES
SPECIAL COMMISSION FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES - REGULAR SESSION
THURSDAY, August 22, 2024, 1:00 PM.

The Special Commission for Safe Communities convened in regular session in the Government Center Boardroom at 1:00 PM, on August 22, 2024. Chairperson Denton called the meeting to order.

Roll Call

Attendee Name	Title	Status
Scott Denton	Chairperson	Present
Elizabeth German	Vice Chairperson	Present
Cathy Lust	Commissioner	Present
Kaitlyn Selman	Commissioner	Present
Aron Klein	Commissioner	Present
Ryan Bertrand	Commissioner	Present
Timothy Harris	Commissioner	Absent
Chris Cashen	Commissioner	Absent

Commissioner Jay Shannon stepped down from the Commission due to relocating outside of the area.

Staff Advisors Present:

Aaron Veerman, Staff Liaison

Public Comment

No public comment was received.

Approval of Minutes

The following item was presented:

Item 4.A. Consideration and action to approve the Minutes of the June 27, 2024, and July 25, 2024, Regular Special Commission for Safe Communities Meeting.

Commissioner Bertrand made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Klein, to approve the Item as presented.

Chairperson Denton directed the Staff Liaison to call roll:

AYES: Lust; Bertrand; Klein; German; Selman

Motion carried.

Regular Agenda

The following item was presented:

Item 5.A. Presentation and discussion by Chairperson Denton on the Special Commission for Safe Communities Progress Report provided to city council.

Chairperson Denton presented a six-month progress report to the city council during the Committee of the Whole meeting on August 19, 2024. The presentation included a summary of discussions and the variety of guests who have spoken at commission meetings since the commission's inception in 2023. The council was interested in the information and no negative comments or other feedback was received.

Council Member Mollie Ward recounted the recent shooting in which her home was hit by gunfire and made a point that even if a shots fired incident didn't result in death or bodily injury, it still affects the individuals, families and the community.

Mayor Mboka Mwilambwe inquired if the commission gathered any information yet regarding guns in domestic violence situations.

Item 5.B. Presentation and discussion by Asst. Chief Veerman on the current status of gun violence in the Bloomington-Normal area.

Assistant Chief Veerman relayed the following information provided by Bloomington Police Department (BPD) Crime Intelligence and Analysis Unit Supervisor Jack McQueen:

- In the past two months, Bloomington has had 7 shootings, none of which appear to be related to each other and all of which appear to have been unplanned and the result of personal disputes between the shooters and victims.
- The suspect for the July 17th shooting near RT Dunn Drive in Bloomington was the same as the suspect for the July 20th shooting on Trader Circle that Normal Police Department handled. The suspect in those two shootings was arrested by BPD.
- Two subjects were arrested for the July 25th shooting near the intersection of Veterans Parkway and Morris Avenue: the shooter and a subject with outstanding weapons warrants out of Chicago. In addition to the arrests, a search warrant for the suspect's apartment, executed by BPD's Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT) team, resulted in the seizure of five handguns. Follow-up investigation, including tracing, of those five handguns is being conducted by the BPD's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives Task Force detective.
- During the week of August 19th, BPD officers seized two handguns discarded by two local juveniles during a foot pursuit of the juveniles. Both Bloomington and Normal are seeing an increase in juveniles carrying weapons.
- Year-to-date, as of August 19, 2024, there have been 30 confirmed shootings in Bloomington and 17 in Normal.
- The five-year average of shootings for Bloomington is 33.5.

Items 5.C. Presentation and discussion by School Resource Officer Scott Day regarding interactions with youths and programs to prevent violence in Bloomington schools.

Officer (Ofc.) Scott Day is one of BPD's School Resource Officers (SROs). He has been a BPD police officer for 22 years and is in his 10th year as an SRO. He is currently the SRO for Bloomington Junior High School in District 87. He is a member of the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) and the Illinois School Resource Officers Association. His background with BPD includes being an Active Assailant Instructor and Hostage Negotiator,

a Defensive Tactics Instructor, a member of the Crisis Intervention Team, and an Illinois Juvenile Officer.

Being an SRO in Illinois requires a minimum of 3 years of law enforcement experience, completion of a 40-hour SRO course, a criminal background check and no disciplinary concerns. SROs must re-certify every 2 years with training. SROs are carefully selected, specifically trained and properly equipped to work in the schools.

Ofc. Day stated that SROs wear multiple hats, including being an informal counselor/mentor, an educator and a police officer. He estimates that SROs spend an average of 50% of their time in the role of counselor to the students. SROs also act as crisis negotiators and de-escalators within the school. The four core skills an SRO has are:

- Communication
- De-escalation
- Patience
- Empathy

If there is a concern, an SRO can search a student and their locker at their school, whereas other officers would need a warrant to do a search. In his nearly 10 years as an SRO, Ofc. Day stated he's made 6 arrests within a school.

SRO programs are shifting the focus away from punitive methods to restorative justice. Restorative justice seeks to understand the root causes of disruptive/destructive behaviors and build or repair relationships and community with students. The goal of restorative justice is to support reflection, communication, and problem-solving skills for both students and staff. This approach helps manage individual misconduct incidents and fosters a culture of care, respect and community.

Some of the proven benefits of SRO programs include:

- Prevention/minimization of property damage in the school and surrounding areas
- Prevention of student injuries / death due to violence or drug overdoses
- Reduction of the need for schools to call 911 or other calls for service
- Reduction in the likelihood of a students ending up with criminal records
- Increase the likelihood that students will get connected and receive help from social service and health care systems
- Increase in students and school staff feeling safe within the school

Ofc. Day closed by providing a list of some of the community and school resources that SROs build working relationships with to help students:

- Project Oz
- Mclean County Center for Human Services
- YWCA / Stepping Stones
- Western Avenue Community Center
- 100 Black Men
- The Jule Foundation / Andre Hursey
- McLean County Juvenile Court Services

Commissioner Lust asked if SROs are included in intervention plans. Ofc. Day replied that they prefer not to be.

Commissioner Bertrand asked for suggestions on how to limit the flow of guns in schools. Ofc. Day responded that accessibility to guns is an issue. Students can get guns from friends, parents, sellers, often from people in their 20s. There is speculation that students are being given guns to carry out a specific act within the school. He added that people with concealed carry licenses sometimes leave guns in their vehicles and their vehicles are then broken into.

Commissioner Selman asked if there are proven benefits of having SROs. Ofc. Day stated the statistics are national are provided by NASRO. SROs have been proven to help solve crimes and have access to cameras within schools, as well as knowing the students within the schools. Commissioner Selman further asked what it means that SROs have been "vetted". Ofc. Day replied that officers who are chosen to be SROs have no disciplinary issues in their backgrounds. Aaron Veerman, Staff Liaison, added that BPD does an extensive background investigation before anyone is employed with BPD, including lateral officers coming from another agency. He said BPD has a good idea of who the officer is and how they behave before they are placed in the SRO role. Ofc. Day added that SROs are SROs because they love what they do.

Commissioner German asked if there was anything else SROs would like to see happen that would help de-escalate personal issues students experience within the schools. Ofc. Day responded that training for working with students who have autism would be helpful, as well as training to work with children experiencing anxiety. He added that some teachers have been in their roles for 30+ years and there have been many changes since they started as teachers.

Commissioner Selman inquired about the student to teacher ratio within District 87. Commissioner Lust indicated she has resources that can provide that information and said she will check on that.

Commissioner Denton asked how an SRO finds out that a student has a gun. Ofc. Day replied that other students will often report when they see or hear something because they do not want that kind of thing in their school. For example, during a lockdown situation in a prior year, the intel about a student with a gun came from a student at a different school. How the SRO reacts when they receive this intel is based on the threat and information about the student that the SRO already knows. When a search needs to be done, generally the school administration will conduct searches for things like vape pens and THC, but SROs are always present for weapons searches.

Item 5.D. Presentation and discussion by Stephanie Barisch regarding a school intervention program used in other schools.

Stephanie Barisch, MS, LCPC, is the Director of Therapeutic Services at The Center for Youth and Family Solutions in Bloomington. They provide behavioral and mental health services for youth and are a mobile crisis provider for youth under the age of 21. Additionally, they provide outpatient counseling for families, not just youth.

Director Barisch stated funding for services and resources like what they provide largely flows toward responding and reacting to situations, not toward measures that could prevent the situations. She believes more attention needs to go toward people at younger ages, before anything happens. To truly change the trajectory of gun violence, focus on programs that reach children at a younger age, before they need therapy/treatment.

Director Barisch pointed toward East Moline School District 37, which is utilizing a program called Social Emotional Learning (SEL). CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), provides the following definition for SEL: "Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." This program helps students acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes they need to become responsible adults. The program helps students from kindergarten all the way into high school. Research shows a high quality SEL curriculum has resulted in improvement in academic engagement, an increase in graduation rates and college readiness, a reduction in conflict with other students and teachers, and a decrease in domestic violence.

Commissioner Selman asked if Director Barisch could share some of the studies that show results of using an SEL curriculum. Director Barisch stated she will share the studies with the commissioners via email.

Commissioner Bertrand asked if all students receive the SEL curriculum, or only targeted students, and do the staff/teachers receive any training. Director Barisch indicated that the program being used in East Moline is for students only and is specifically focused on students who have been identified as needing preventative intervention.

Commissioner Bertrand also inquired if there is a stigma for the students who receive the SEL curriculum. Director Barisch responded that there is no stigma for these students. They are not receiving therapy, it's more informal and the kindergarten through 8th grade students have given positive feedback about their experience with the curriculum group and they do not feel singled out.

Commissioner German asked if the school is providing the funding for the SEL curriculum. Director Barisch stated that right now, their program is unfunded. She has been writing grants and are starting conversations with the school district about future funding.

Commissioner Denton asked if there is a way to fund the program not through the schools. He questioned if there is something the commission could do that would potentially help them receiving funding, perhaps through a recommendation to the local school boards. Director Barisch replied that McLean County has resources that other counties in Illinois only dream of having, and that this area is "rich in resources". She believes a recommendation from the commission could be beneficial to their program and the benefit to the school system here would be significant.

Commissioner Denton asked Director Barisch if she could put together something for the commission on how to make a recommendation to the City of Bloomington. Director Barisch indicated she will put something together and send it to either Staff Liaison Veerman or Commissioner Denton.

Commissioner Selman mentioned the Office of Justice has evidence and community-based violence prevention federal grants have been available in the past and will be again in the future.

New Business

Commissioner Lust mentioned that District 87 has adopted a social/emotional curriculum and she will ask if the person coordinating that would be willing to come speak with the

commission at a future meeting. She will also gather information on the concept of community-based restorative justice to bring to the commission.

Commissioner Denton mentioned there was a recent article in the Pantagraph about gun violence and Illinois State University professor, Dr. Dawn Beichner-Thomas, was cited. Commissioner Selman said she knows Dr. Beichner-Thomas and will invite her to speak to the commission at a future meeting.

Commissioner Bertrand asked if an Illinois state's attorney would be willing to come speak to the commission about domestic violence and restraining orders. Staff Liaison Veerman stated he will make the request of the State's Attorney office.

Commissioner Lust noted the McLean County Behavioral Health Coordinating Council (BHCC) is being reorganized. City Council Member Donna Boelen is on the BHCC and Commissioner Denton offered to approach her about meeting with one or more of the commissioners and members of other agencies regarding potential collaboration and funding for mental health/gun violence initiatives.

Commissioner Selman suggested having some teachers who are involved with SEL curriculum at District 87 come speak to the commission regarding interactions they have with students in their schools. Commissioner German offered to ask if any teachers would be open to coming to the commission to speak.

Commissioner Member Comments

Commission member comments were recorded under New Business.

Adjournment

Commissioner Bertrand made a motion, seconded by Commissioner German, to adjourn.

Motion carried (viva voce).

The Meeting Adjourned at 2:11 PM.

CITY OF BLOOMINGTON



Scott Denton, Chairperson

ATTEST



Aaron Veerman, Staff Liaison