

**STAND WITH  
PARKLAND**



The National Association of Families for Safe Schools

Prepared Testimony

of

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*before the*

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*on*

School Safety

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# STAND WITH PARKLAND



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Chairman Bizzarro, Representative Madden who joined us in Parkland for the memorial this week, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. Nothing is more important than the safety of our nation's children and I appreciate your decision to hold this hearing on school safety.

Four years. The span of a high school career. Many of us look back fondly at those memories. Sadly, it's been four years since I hugged our daughter Gina, said "I love you", and sent her on her way to school with some valentine's day chocolate and a reminder to eat it before it melted.

My wife and I never imagined that would be the last time we would see her. The last time we would be together **as a complete and happy family**.

Four years ago, multiple mistakes, some in the moment and some that had piled up over the years, would converge to create an incredible tragedy that left my Gina, and 16 other wonderful souls dead.

My name is Tony Montalto and I appear today on behalf of Stand with Parkland - The National Association of Families for Safe Schools - I am the president of this organization that was founded by the families of the children and school staff murdered during the massacre at Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14th, 2018. The organization is uniquely inclusive and nonpartisan we advocate for practical school safety reforms in an effort to prevent future mass shootings from occurring in America's schools using the Schools Safety Triad:

1. Enhanced campus security
2. Improved mental health screening and support programs
3. Responsible firearms ownership

All three of these things push and pull on each other when it comes to school safety and each of these failed us and led to tragedy. Our organization recognizes the importance of specific proposals, fulsome discussions, and **compromise** in order to develop and implement pragmatic solutions. This model has been effective as we've worked on legislation in Florida, and we are here to share this with you in hopes of Pennsylvania adopting these life-saving measures.

As a result of this willingness to compromise and commitment to meaningful progress, Stand with Parkland has facilitated large strides in school safety legislation in our home state of Florida. The first example, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act in 2018 was passed within three weeks of my daughter's murder. It added programs to secure the campus, funding for student mental health and significant changes to firearms laws. We saw political courage as lawmakers worked across the aisle and this law passed with bipartisan support through a Republican controlled legislature with a Republican governor.

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This law created the Office of Safe Schools within the state Department of Education. Another positive addition from this law was the implementation of the [Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission](#). Established to investigate the Parkland massacre and make recommendations to the state legislature to improve school safety and security. The law also mandated each school district to identify a School Safety Specialist to ensure accountability and compliance oversight authority. After sitting through hundreds of hours of expert testimony before the commission I have gained knowledge of the failures that occurred leading to Gina's death, as well as, insights into other areas that need to be corrected to help prevent tragedy.

In the current legislative session Stand with Parkland has introduced an amendment to create a Districtwide Mental Health Coordinator to ensure each student receiving mental health services is on path for the best outcome possible. This individual will report to the district Superintendent and the Office of Safe Schools and on a quarterly basis provide a status report on students who have gone through the Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) process.

Stand with Parkland has worked with the Nation Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) which is part of the US Secret Service. In 2019 and 2020 Max, Ryan Petty and I toured the nation telling our sad and cautionary tale as the NTAC team trained over 5,000 lawmakers, law enforcement, mental health and school professionals on their [Protecting America's Schools Report](#) and the most proactive tool we have to prevent targeted attacks on our school's **Behavioral Threat Assessment teams**. These are **multi-disciplinary** in nature bringing school professionals, law enforcement, and mental health specialists together to evaluate students who have demonstrated concerning behavior.

These assessments are not designed to stigmatize or punish the student and are best conducted long before the student resorts to violence and before the threshold of law enforcement action. In most cases this is the best way to intercede and get the students help through programs that are available.

In their 2021 report [Averted School Attacks](#) the National Threat Assessment Center identified **School Resource Officers (SROs)** as having been involved in preventing over two thirds of the attacks they studied. School resource officers are an important piece of the puzzle for safe and secure schools. They help coordinate and implement safety plans, provide guidance to struggling students, serve as role models, and establish positive relationships between law enforcement and the school community. As I know all too well, they are the **last line of defense** for students and teachers when an attack occurs.

While Stand with Parkland supports armed individuals at schools, as provided for in Florida law, we believe that arming teachers is a misguided idea and actually undermines efforts to safeguard our schools against mass shootings. We believe our teachers should be focused on teaching and trained law enforcement or school security officers should be provided to protect our students and staff at school.

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The 2021 [Averted Schools Attacks](#) report also showed that another key to stopping targeted school attacks is to provide students a way warn authorities about what they see and hear. Frequently attackers in the planning stage will attempt to recruit others to join them or warn some of their peers about an upcoming attack. Here is an opportunity to leverage technology and make it easier for students to pass these warning signs to school officials and law enforcement by using mobile device applications. After the massacre in Parkland, our state created the [Fortify FL](#) app. There are others on the market such as [SaferWatch](#), [Safe2Tel](#), and [SafeUT](#) which perform multiple functions in addition to tip reporting such as, two-way communication, emergency alert notification and panic alarm functions. In 2019 your neighboring state, New Jersey, enacted the “Alyssa” alert system law and Florida passed a similar law in 2020. These panic button laws are a useful part of an overall safety package but the [Protecting America’s Schools](#) report showed that none of the of school attacks were stopped by law enforcement responding to the campus. Yet another reason why carefully trained and selected SROs in our nation’s schools are vital to the safety of students and staff at school.

Stand with Parkland also advocated for and saw the successful passage of Extreme Risk Protection Orders in Florida as part of the response to the massacre that took our loved ones. **Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs), commonly known as Red Flag Laws**, can save lives by creating a way for family members and law enforcement to act before warning signs escalate into tragedies. These are powerful tools that enable law enforcement officers to protect themselves and others.

This legislation also touched on the mental health part of the holistic approach needed to achieve school safety and has been effective in many states including Florida and your neighbors New York and New Jersey. Our ERPOs allow law enforcement to remove firearms from the home of those considered to be a danger to themselves or others. To balance the rights of the individual in question, there must be strong due - process provisions, and penalties for knowingly making a false report. Had these laws been in place before February 14, 2018, the numerous warnings regarding the murderer of our loved ones and the 40 plus visits to his residence would have given law enforcement a chance to remove the firearms from his home and Parkland would still be just our idyllic hometown and not known worldwide for the horror that occurred.

We have seen the Biden administration provide a model “red flag” law for states to use. In the aftermath of the Parkland tragedy 15 states and the District of Columbia chose to adopt these laws which proactively help keep firearms in the hands of responsible owners. 40% of states have risk protection orders and, in those states, hunters still hunt, collectors still curate their collection of firearms, and individuals are still able to protect themselves. Will Pennsylvania’s elected leaders choose to support the safety of their students and help reduce suicide rates or cave in to fear mongering from special interest groups?

Another change that was needed in Florida law was to make it illegal to make a threat to schools through social media. **Our laws must keep up with changing technology.** One effective school safety measure passed in Florida was to establish more open lines of communication in schools between

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parents, administrative staff, health counselors, and students. Information sharing on what happens inside the school and to students is a right that families deserve not only to have access to but deserve as quickly as possible. That's why Stand with Parkland created the **Parents Need to Know initiative** which became part of SB 590 - School Safety. Just this past July it became law, and now requires timely notification of threats and emergencies that happen on school grounds, on school transportation, or at school-sponsored events. Families now have more information to enable them to make better choices regarding their children's safety. I only wish I knew of the threat to my daughter's school. I could have found a way to keep her from harm.

New for 2022 is a comprehensive school safety package that addresses yet more issues arising out of death of my bright and bubbly daughter, her classmates and her teachers. Stand with Parkland's founding families suffered through a disjointed and horrific reunification process as we awaited word regarding the fate of our children and spouses. Some waiting until the wee hours of the morning.

Some being forced to listen to the cries of others as they heard the worst news a parent could hear. And some like my wife were isolated from her supporters until I arrived. Then we were told of Gina's death and left to figure out the next steps on our own.

This current bill attempts to fix that by mandating that stakeholders come together and **develop a coordinated reunification plan** so families and children may be reunited in a more orderly fashion.

The Parkland investigation showed that system failed and staff reacted poorly during the Parkland massacre. Some if not all the student deaths were caused by this. To help ensure our students are safe we need all stakeholders to participate in drills and have debriefings to learn what needs to be improved.

As an airline pilot I know the value of training and of debriefing, what went well and what needs to be done better, to help improve performance. We need the same accountability for our school administrators and teachers.

The frequency of training has changed many times over the course of my 30 plus year flying career and that is what needs to happen regarding drills for our schools. Allowing the Department of Education to follow the recommendations from the MSD Public Safety Commission and talk with local stakeholders to make appropriate adjustments.

The legislation that Stand with Parkland has recommended and helped create in the state of Florida has made schools and communities safer as a whole and we hope that Pennsylvania may take on their own versions of these bills or versions of them that will do the same for teachers, parents, and students.

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On behalf of Stand with Parkland -The National Association Of Families for Safe Schools, we would like to thank the Pennsylvania House Democratic Policy Committee for holding this critical hearing and inviting us to discuss school safety priorities. It has been 4 years since our loved ones were taken from us in a senseless and preventable act of violence at their school. We implore you to act before any Pennsylvania families are devastated by preventable acts of violence in our nation's schools.

Additional information can be found at [StandwithParkland.org](https://StandwithParkland.org)