Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Christina Conolly-Wilson. I am the Director of Crisis Intervention and Safety for the Waukegan Community Unit District 60 in Waukegan, IL. Waukegan Public Schools service approximately 17,000 students in a community north of Chicago off Lake Michigan. One hundred percent of our students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The district is highly diverse: 76% of the students are Hispanic, 15% are African American, 9% are Caucasian or other, and 29% are English Language Learners. Waukegan is one of the largest school districts in Illinois. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss with you the issue of school safety.

In my role as Director of Crisis Intervention and Safety, I oversee the district’s suicide and bullying prevention programs; our suicide, self-injury, and threat assessments; and our crisis preparedness, response, and recovery activities. In this role, I work closely with our district administration, our building and security staff, and our mental health professionals to ensure that our schools are safe and that our students are ready and able to learn on a daily basis. Our approach is grounded in a few key components:

- We emphasize prevention and work to align these efforts with incident response and intervention procedures and services
- We attend to both physical and psychological safety, and have made mental health supports integral to our overall school safety program.
- We work toward consistency in training, practices, and supports across the district
- We foster a team approach and collaborate closely with our community partners

Today I am going to focus primarily on our crisis prevention and intervention efforts but I want to reinforce that school-wide prevention and wellness promotion, like our bullying prevention programs, are foundational elements to school safety as well. Educators cannot simply respond to problems once they occur. We need to work toward creating the conditions for learning that help prevent them.

Our building crisis team includes a variety of school staff including: building administrators, teachers, nurses, social workers, school psychologists, custodians, secretaries, and safety officers. Our district crisis team includes representatives from curriculum, special education, mental health, health services, risk management, human resources, operations, discipline, food service, transportation, and crisis intervention and safety. We handle all kinds of emergencies from water and power outages, staff and student deaths, maintenance issues that close sections of a building, fires, lockdowns, natural disasters, family reunification, etc.

**Importance of Mental Health**

Attention to mental health is critical to our work in Waukegan. I mention this first because I think it is an issue that educators and policy makers across the country have not focused enough on. I am proud that a core component of our district crisis team is the mental health response team. I am thankful for our
superintendent and other key administrators for demonstrating the leadership to help make this possible. This team of approximately 30 school counselors, psychologists, and social workers is available 365 days a year to support students and staff who are at risk for or have experienced a crisis. Our team has assisted hundreds of students and staff members at all grade levels cope. We have responded to multiple types of crises, including student and staff mental health emergencies, deaths involving car accidents, prolonged illnesses, suicide contagions, and murders. One of the unique aspects of school crises is that the adults in the school can be just as emotionally or physically impacted as the students. As a result of the traumatic impact, students may not be in an emotionally stable place to learn, and affected adults may not be able to provide instruction immediately after the event. Our school and district mental health response teams work collaboratively to determine the level of impact and provide psychological interventions to those in need. When necessary, we make referrals to community service organizations for students who need long-term support because of their level of trauma. We must remember that, although an initial mental health response after a crisis may be enough for some staff and students, there may be others who need an intensive intervention depending on the severity of the traumatic experience. These mental health supports have been a core element in our district’s crisis and emergency preparedness plan. We have learned that quality intervention and recovery supports are critical to restoring learning and mitigating the potential negative long-term impacts of a crisis event.

**Balancing Physical and Psychological Safety**

In this regard, any effort to address school safety should balance building security and physical safety with psychological safety. I have witnessed that administrators often struggle to find an appropriate balance between physical and psychological safety in schools as they want schools to be warm and inviting places, yet not accessible to just anyone. By working together, we can create this balance. For example, I work with building administrators to review areas of physical and psychological safety and prepare for a potential crisis. A helpful step in this process is to conduct a vulnerability assessment. In terms of physical safety, we assess items such as having locked doors, lighted hallways and stairs, sign-in/sign-out procedures, student supervision, and proper building communication systems. We also conduct appropriate screenings and background checks for adults who work in the building. For psychological safety, we focus on the emotional and behavioral well-being of the students and staff. This includes, among other things, building trusting and respectful relationships among students, staff, and families; implementing programs like positive behavioral supports; and having social–emotional learning standards. Importantly, this is a team approach. We must work together to engage all members of our crisis teams and school staff to reinforce building safety (e.g., checking to make sure doors are locked) and to create a school environment that supports students’ well-being. It is natural for people to want safety to be as simple as having a metal detector, but it isn’t. It takes this kind of a balanced approach and ongoing hard work.

**The Importance of Planning and Training**

Essential to effective safety and crisis management are training and planning. Both must be relevant to staff and student learning, make maximum use of existing staff resources, and be proactive and ongoing. In Waukegan, we have used a Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) grant to help develop our plan and do emergency response training, which I will talk more about later. We use the PREPgRE School Crisis Prevention and Intervention Training Curriculum published by NASP for our ongoing district-wide crisis team training. PREPgRE encompasses both planning and preparation that support crisis team development and procedures and mental health supports for students in the aftermath of a crisis. Every member of our mental health response team is trained in PREPgRE.

I cannot stress enough the importance of having a crisis plan that people are well trained to follow. Developing a crisis plan and annually revising it is an important task for each school district to complete. At the onset of a crisis event, people will either respond “productively or unproductively.” Unproductive responses can include freezing or even making the problem worse. A crisis plan and relevant training
greatly increase the likelihood of a productive response. In broad terms, the goals are to contain a threat, get people to safety, minimize chaos, and engage necessary supports as quickly as possible. This takes a clear understanding of what to do, knowledge of who’s in charge, coordination, communication, and practice. Indeed, crisis preparedness is a dynamic process. A crisis plan needs to include how to respond to multiple types of emergency protocols, including conducting evacuations, lockdowns, sheltering-in-place, family reunification, and responding to mental health needs and the media. Protocols that tell people how to respond to incidents typically show people what to do in the first 15 minutes of a crisis. In addition, a mental health protocol provides guidelines to assist schools in starting the recovery process after a crisis event. These need to be practiced and reviewed regularly.

In Waukegan, the district crisis team helps train building-level teams and conduct crisis drills. Members of the building crisis teams are trained on the Incident Command System (developed by FEMA) and the district’s emergency protocols, as outlined in our school crisis plan. My staff and I also review building-level site plans, conduct tabletop drills with the building teams to increase their knowledge on emergency preparedness, and work with staff to develop an after action report to review what went well and what needs to be changed within the crisis plan to improve responses going forward. Similarly, the district mental health team meets monthly to review crisis responses and to revise the mental health plan as necessary.

I would like to note that before my school district started to use the PREPaRE model, we decided how to respond to a crisis that affected student and staff from a mental health perspective based on whatever we determined at the moment. This made our job much more difficult and stressful. PREPaRE has provided our district the research-based guidance, framework, and tools to respond effectively and consistently, putting our resources to best use. Because of PREPaRE and our district-level capacity, ongoing training of staff is possible, which helps ensure sustainability of crisis planning and response initiatives for the future. I thank NASP for having the insight to develop a crisis prevention and intervention curriculum that allows for consistency and sustainability, ensuring our short-term investments have long-term outcomes.

**Working With Emergency Responders and Community Providers**

Of course, no school district can ensure school safety and respond to crises completely on its own. Safe and successful learning environments are fostered through collaboration among school staff, emergency responders, and community service providers while also integrating existing initiatives in the school. The district crisis team also collaborates with local emergency responders to review, and as necessary, revise our crisis plan annually. We have established close relationships with local police, fire, and our local emergency management agency. Maintaining these relationships has helped the district in conducting our annual emergency drills, responding to emergencies in the district, and recovering after a community crisis response. Our local emergency responders work with us when crises happen in our community as well. This year, we have had a number of situations in our community that have led to several buildings being placed on soft lockdown. Some of the schools had soft lockdowns multiple times this school year. The police representative who assists and observes our annual lockdown drills teaches the building staff some of the lessons learned during the soft lockdowns to help the other buildings train better during the lockdown drills.

We also collaborate closely with community mental health providers. For example, our district introduced a suicide prevention program a few years ago in response to three student suicides that had occurred over 2 months in one of our buildings. With the help from the community mental health providers, we were able to gather almost 40 mental health professionals to assist us in conducting the suicide prevention program that week. They provided their services at no cost to the district. We could not have conducted the program without their help. Schools must establish viable relationships with their local emergency responders and community mental health providers before a crisis event. A crisis event should not be the first time that a school meets the representatives from their local support agencies.
Collaboration must be sustainable over time with an actively engaged team that includes a range of school personnel (i.e., school mental health professionals, administrators, and school security personnel) and community responders and providers.

**Conclusion: What Congress Can Do?**

Efforts to improve school climate, safety, and learning are not separate endeavors and must be designed, funded, and implemented as a comprehensive school-wide approach. There are a number of federal grants that have allowed schools to increase access to mental health supports and improve crisis prevention and response capabilities. Several of these grant programs are highlighted in your briefing packets; however I want to highlight one that was effectively implementing in my district. In 2009, my school district was the recipient of the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

The REMS grant provided training for all of our staff on emergency response, pandemic/influenza planning, continuity of operations planning, conducting emergency drills, conducting building vulnerability assessments, gang prevention, and student threat assessments. The grant also provided funding for my district to conduct a full-scale emergency drill which allowed our building- and district-level emergency crisis teams to respond to an emergency response scenario with local emergency responders.

Each school year, I work diligently to help my school district prevent, prepare, respond, and recovery from crisis events. The REMS grant truly helped my district improve our crisis response and training efforts. Although our district was making good strides toward crisis preparedness before the REMS grant, the grant help to move the district to the next level. It helped us to provide copies of crisis plans to each staff member. The grant also helped us to develop videos that illustrate our emergency protocols that we share with all staff to help train them on the emergency protocols. The knowledge gained and materials provided have had a long-standing effect on the district’s culture around crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. Due to budget cutbacks at the federal, state, and local levels, school districts need additional funding and support to promote crisis preparedness and training efforts. When a school has to choose between training staff on a new reading or math curriculum versus crisis preparedness training, training on the academic curriculum typically wins. Schools have to make tough choices in tough economic times and should not have to choose between academics and safety.

With more funding across the country, school districts can become better prepared to respond to emergencies. We shouldn't have to wait for a crisis event to occur to realize that a school is not prepared. Creating safe, orderly, and welcoming learning environments is critical to educating and preparing all children and youth to achieve their highest potential and contribute to society. Thank you for your dedication in supporting safe and successful schools across the nation.