



Robert P. Astorino, Westchester County Executive

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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **ASTORINO LAUNCHES 'SAFER COMMUNITIES' INITIATIVE AS A RESPONSE TO NEWTOWN TRAGEDY**

**Collaborative effort involves local police, educators, clergy, and community leaders  
Former NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton to kick off School Safety Symposium Feb. 27**

Westchester County Executive Robert P. Astorino launched a major initiative today that brings together resources inside and outside county government to protect schools and communities from acts of senseless violence such as the tragedy in Newtown, CT.

Called *Safer Communities*, the initiative is a combination of practical, ready-to-go programs that combat violence by drawing on the expertise of the county departments of Public Safety, Health and Community Mental Health in collaboration with local police chiefs, educators, clergy, civic leaders and elected officials. The goals are to *educate* the public about available services and programs, *enhance* those capabilities and *evaluate* progress on an ongoing and long-term basis.

"After Sandy Hook, every community in the country asked, 'What can we do to prevent this from happening again?'" Astorino said. "As county executive and a father of three young children, I want to be part of the answer. The Safer Communities initiative is a start. Combating violence, because it afflicts our society in so many ways, is a complex undertaking. Our approach is to attack the causes and consequences of violence comprehensively, collaboratively and continuously. Fortunately, most of what we need, we already have. So the major effort here involves creating awareness around existing resources, building relationships to improve communication and acting as a unified team to increase our effectiveness."

#### **School Safety**

The initiative will get under way with a "School Safety Symposium" on Feb. 27 at SUNY Purchase.

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Organized by George N. Longworth, the commissioner of the Department of Public Safety, and the Westchester County Chiefs of Police Association, the event is designed to provide educators with practical guidance on how to make schools safer and enhance coordination between law enforcement and school districts.

William Bratton, former commissioner of the NYPD and former chief of police in Los Angeles, will be the keynote speaker, **kicking off the event at 9 a.m.** Bratton is well known for implementing strategies that have prevented and reduced violent crime wherever he has served. In addition, experts from Westchester County and around the country will detail best practices for improving school security.

Among the topics to be discussed are:

- An Overview of School-based Violence in America – Charles H. Boklan, U.S. Secret Service (Retired)
- Practical Emergency Preparedness for Schools – Matthew A. Miraglia, a noted school security expert
- Police Response to Dynamic Incidents in Schools – Chief Inspector John Hodges, Westchester County Department of Public Safety.

“Familiarity and coordination are two critical tools when preparing for and responding to a crisis,” Longworth said. “This forum will give educators a realistic sense of what they can expect and a chance to strengthen relationships and lines of communications with their law enforcement counterparts.”

Every school leader in Westchester has been invited by County Executive Astorino to attend and to extend the invitation to their administrative teams and Boards of Education.

At 11:15 a.m., there will be a panel discussion focusing on the dynamics among law enforcement, school officials and parents during a crisis and bridging gaps between strategies that look good on paper and real-time decision making in actual situations.

Among the panelists scheduled to appear are Kelly Chiarella, Westchester-East Putnam PTA region director; Isabel Burk, schools safety coordinator for Southern Westchester BOCES; and Louis Wool, superintendent of the Harrison Central School District and president of the Lower Hudson Council of School Superintendents.

“The opportunity to talk about what works and doesn’t work ahead of time and in very realistic terms should be invaluable for all school districts that are in the process of updating security plans,” Wool said. “Insights from law enforcement, parents, educators and other government officials will help us develop the kinds of collaborative solutions we need to be effective.”

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The public is invited to attend the panel discussion at 11:15 a.m. Those wishing to attend will have to present identification and register at the door for entry. Because of the sensitivity surrounding security strategies, the earlier portion of the program will be limited to school and law enforcement officials.

School officials interested in having similar sessions conducted in their districts should contact their local police department or the Department of Public Safety at 864-7858.

### **Community Violence Prevention**

On April 9, the departments of Health and Community Mental Health will hold a “Community Violence Prevention Forum” at the County Center. The county is working with the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on the program, whose emphasis will be to address violence as a public health issue that affects all of our communities.

“The idea is to bring a public health approach to treating and preventing violence,” said Commissioner of Health Dr. Sherlita Amler, MD. “By identifying causes, addressing symptoms, monitoring progress and measuring results we will increase our chances for positive outcomes.”

The leadership forum is designed to attract community leaders – mayors and supervisors, school district leadership, community groups, not-for-profit agency directors and clergy. The forum will provide a national perspective on violence prevention as well as the opportunity to share best practice models with leaders around the county.

“The purpose is to share best practices, identify gaps in the system where schools and communities need some help and then to implement programs to address these gaps,” said Commissioner of Community Mental Health Dr. Grant Mitchell, MD.

One of the post-forum benefits for schools will be to take advantage – if they have not already done so – of the nationally recognized School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS) Program. A collaboration between the Department of Community Mental Health, Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES and the Lower Hudson Regional Special Education Technical Assistance & Support Center brings this data-driven program to Westchester County. SWPBIS creates and maintains safe learning environments in schools by assessing factors, such as high rates of problem behavior that interfere with learning, ineffective disciplinary practices and insufficient support and expertise in addressing problem behavior.

The program has been used effectively in 26 districts and is available to all public, private and parochial schools by contacting the Department of Community Mental Health at 995-5225.