



Robert P. Astorino, Westchester County Executive

NEWS RELEASE

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ASTORINO PRESENTS A COMMUNITY VIOLENCE PREVENTION FORUM About 400 community leaders join Safer Communities Initiative; Blueprint for improvement to be developed with participant involvement

Westchester County Executive Robert P. Astorino brought together national and local public health and mental health experts Tuesday, along with about 400 civic leaders, educators, clergy, community leaders and public safety professionals to share ideas about ways to improve violence prevention efforts throughout Westchester.

Astorino kicked off the event at the Westchester County Center, the latest installment in his Safer Communities initiative (www.westchestergov.com/safer-communities).

“There will never be a 100 percent solution to senseless acts of violence, but we can get better at prevention and success hinges on collaboration,” Astorino said. “The goal is to come out of here with a blueprint that will make us smarter; more vigilant and more effective when it comes to stopping senseless acts of violence – whenever and wherever there is a threat. Your experiences and insights will be captured in a report that will become our blueprint for continuous improvement as we go forward.”

Howard Spivak, MD, director of the Division of Violence Prevention at the national Centers for Disease Control & Prevention in Atlanta, provided a national perspective and set the stage for treating violence as a public health issue.

“CDC is committed to stopping violence before it starts,” Spivak said. “Our investments focus on the best ways to prevent violence and apply science for real-world solutions to keep our communities across the nation safe and healthy.”

This forum built on the School Safety Symposium held on Feb. 27 at SUNY Purchase, where former New York City Police Chief William Bratton spoke and which was attended by more than 300 educators and public safety professionals.

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Tuesday's forum broadened the topic of violence prevention to the community at large and was organized by Health Commissioner Sherlita Amler, MD, and Mental Health Commissioner Grant Mitchell, MD. The goals were to *educate* the public about available services and programs, *enhance* those capabilities and *evaluate* progress on an ongoing and long-term basis.

During the panel discussion, county Legislator Virginia Perez spoke movingly about the murder of her younger brother and how she has dedicated herself to raise awareness about how violence affects individuals, families and communities – and how it can be prevented.

“I want to be part of the cure,” she said. “This is my life’s mission.”

Alan Trager, chief executive officer of Westchester Jewish Community Services, who was also a panelist, stressed the importance of having the whole community involved in violence prevention.

“It is important to understand that violence prevention needs to be a community effort along the lifespan; and involves all of us and many systems - including mental health,” he said. “We do need to pay attention to mental illness and mental health issues. The reality is that most people with mental illness are victims of violence and crime, not the perpetrators. Stigmatizing people with mental illness is inaccurate and unproductive.”

The program also included the following:

- Robert Amler, MD, dean of the School of Health Sciences & Practice at New York Medical College, moderated a panel discussion that focused on best practices and service gaps. Other panelists included Astorino; Judge Kathie Davidson, supervising judge for the Family Court Ninth Judicial District; bullying expert Joel Haber, PhD; Yonkers Schools Superintendent Bernard Pierorazio; and the Rev. Dr. Franklyn Richardson, senior pastor at Grace Baptist Church in Mount Vernon.
- Following the panel discussion, audience members participated in four breakout sessions:
 - **Improving Community Partnerships**, moderated by Frank Williams, executive director of the White Plains Youth Bureau, with presentations by Jim Bostic, executive director of the Nepperhan Community Center; Carola Bracco, executive director of Neighbors Link in Mount Kisco and Tricy Cushner, president, Alliance for Safe Kids in Yorktown Heights.
 - **Treating Violence as a Public Health Issue**, moderated by Robert Amler, MD, with presentations by Allison Lake, deputy director of the Westchester Children's Association; Lorelei Vargas, vice president of strategic initiatives at Andrus; and Stephen J. Ferrando, MD, vice chair for Clinical Services New York-Presbyterian/Westchester Division.

- **Building Safer Learning Environments in Schools**, moderated by John McCabe of Putnam/Northern Westchester BOCES, with presentations by Mary Ellen Herzog, assistant superintendent for pupil personnel services at Lakeland Central School District; Ellen Morehouse, executive director of Student Assistance Services; and Michael Sellet, regional safety coordinator for Putnam Northern Westchester BOCES.
 - **Strengthening Family Safety Nets**, moderated by John Befus, deputy commissioner for the county Department of Social Services, with presentations by Judge Davidson, supervising judge for the Family Court 9th Judicial District; Kevin McGuire, commissioner of the county Department of Social Services; and Amy Siniscalchi, director of programs for My Sister's Place.
- Led by Commissioners Amler and Mitchell, participants regrouped to discuss breakout session highlights and develop action plans, which will be compiled into a report to serve as a blueprint for next steps. An action network was established at the end of the forum and more than 140 audience members signed up to part of it.