



Robert P. Astorino, Westchester County Executive

NEWS RELEASE

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ASTORINO PRESENTS SAFER COMMUNITIES ANTI-VIOLENCE BLUEPRINT 10-Month Collaborative Effort Yields Insights and Path to Achievable Results Professional expertise drawn from a wide range of local volunteers

County Executive Robert P. Astorino today unveiled the **Safer Communities Blueprint**, a resource guide to prevent and stop the spread of violence in our communities, whose initial focus is on addressing the correlation between chronic school absenteeism and at risk behaviors by young people.

“This is just the start,” he told more than 100 people at a meeting at the White Plains Library. “The Blueprint is designed as a dynamic document that we will continue to add to. We are already looking forward to examinations of elder abuse and domestic violence.”

The *Safer Communities* initiative was launched in January when Astorino brought together schools, civic groups, and the county’s departments of Public Safety, Health and Community Mental Health to develop a multi-pronged plan to address violence – from root causes to consequences – in response to the tragic school shootings in Newtown, Conn.

The Blueprint is an ongoing compilation of best practices that have proven successful in preventing violence combined with a list of resources that are available locally. The 40-page document was produced over the last seven months by the *Safer Communities Action Network*, a group of 40 volunteers drawn from around the county with a wide variety of professional expertise working alongside the departments of Health, Community Mental Health and Public Safety.

The initial focus on school absenteeism and suspensions was recommended by the Action Network, which concluded that efforts in Yonkers and Mount Vernon to reduce school absenteeism had been beneficial and should be expanded.

“The Blueprint shows how communities can come together to solve problems,” Astorino said. “Westchester was able to draw on local expertise from people who were willing to give freely of their time to make our county a safer place to live and raise our children. The result of their work is that we now have a path to follow for preventing violence and taking advantage of resources that can help with a wide spectrum of

problems, ranging from bullying, to domestic violence to mental illness. We can't stop every act of violence. But we can tap our collective strengths every day."

The Blueprint was unveiled at the Fall Forum, a gathering of more than 100 mental health professionals, educators, law enforcement officials and community leaders. Jonathan Fast, MSW, PhD, an expert and author on adolescent violence, discussed the importance of the Blueprint and how it can best be used by local communities.

"The Safer Communities initiative represents a unique countywide effort to combat bullying, terroristic attacks, domestic violence, street crime, and other forms of violence using cutting-edge knowledge derived from best practices in public health," Fast said. "That so many people of different professions—law enforcement, academic researchers, educators, health workers, and others—could collaborate so productively over a short period of time is a testimony to excellent organization and dynamic leadership."

The Blueprint employs a public health approach to violence, treating it as if it is a disease. Emotion is replaced with evidence-based data that is applied against what is called the SAFER methodology.

- Surveillance: Define the problem
- Assessment: Determine the causes
- Focus: Target interventions
- Evaluation: Measure results
- Repeat: Continue and enhance what's working; drop what's not working.

Since January, the *Safer Communities* initiative has focused on a variety of collaborations among school districts, nonprofits and county and local governments to prevent violence in practical and cost-effective ways. To date, the *Safer Communities* initiative has included:

- The School Safety Symposium on February 20 at SUNY Purchase, where former NYC Police Commissioner William Bratton served as the keynote speaker. More than 350 teachers, superintendents, police officers, firefighters and other first responders participated in what is believed to be the largest single gathering of school and law enforcement officials in county history.
- The county's departments of Community Mental Health and Health and New York Medical College brought together community leaders from the family courts, non-profit groups, mental health agencies, faith-based communities, education and government for an April 9 forum that presented a public health approach to community violence prevention at the Westchester County Center. Dr. Howard Spivak of the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta was the keynote speaker.
- The Department of Community Mental Health arranged on May 29 for 300 mental health professionals to view and discuss *Path to Violence*, a film about a powerfully effective Secret Service program — the Safe School Initiative — that's helped schools detect problem behavior in advance and has thwarted acts of violence.

- County police officers under a new expanded mutual aid protocol assisted Mount Vernon police officers to patrol the city's streets this summer. The joint effort resulted in 234 arrests, 43 of them on felony charges.
- School districts in Somers and North Salem asked Westchester County to help them create dedicated school resource officer posts. On August 12, Astorino proposed legislation to provide school resource officers from the county's Department of Public Safety to the Somers and North Salem school districts. The legislation was passed unanimously by the Board of Legislators, and by September, those police professionals were on the job, making a difference in both school districts.
- The County Executive, County Youth Bureau, Department of Community Mental Health, Yonkers and Mount Vernon school districts and Student Advocacy kicked off a campaign on Sept. 9 to promote "Attendance Matters," a campaign to keep kids in school.

Future challenges to be addressed by the Action Network include bullying, elder abuse, and crisis intervention.

The Blueprint will be available online on Monday at www.westchestergov.com.

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