

State cop offers free active shooter training to schools

Posted by [TBN Editor](#) On 03/09/2018

Prince Frederick, MD - The fear that a violent incident similar to the one that occurred Valentine's Day at a Florida high school could happen in Southern Maryland prompted a second community meeting to discuss the issue. The latest session was held Wednesday, March 7 at the Prince Frederick Volunteer Fire Department. While several parents, teachers, concerned citizens and local elected officials spoke during the meeting, one of the more memorable individuals addressing the meeting was a graduate of Calvert County Public Schools (CCPS). The speaker, Tfc. Casey Ruth of the Maryland State Police (MSP) (pictured, above), graduated from Northern High School in 2008. She is currently assigned to the MSP's Leonardtown Barrack. Ruth is an instructor in civilian response to active shooter events (CRASE).

Ruth made a pitch for CRASE training. "Training is coming and everybody is going to have to do it," the trooper stated. School administrators who may not think the training is a good idea also need to consider that not utilizing it when available could make the local school system vulnerable to a law suit should a school shooting occur.

According to Ruth, "hiding" is a bad idea when an active shooter is roaming school halls seeking victims. If found hiding and "playing dead" in hopes that the shooter will move on, those who are quietly huddled will likely be shot multiple times. Conducting a "lockdown" after a shooter has breached school security is also not going to work. Ruth said the first three minutes of a school shooting incident are the most critical since that is the average time it takes police to arrive at the scene. Ruth said several Maryland counties are opting for CRASE training, but so far the response in Southern Maryland has been tepid. The trooper said she would provide the training for local schools for free.

On Thursday, March 8, the Calvert County Board of Education (BOE) held a discussion on school safety during its regular business meeting. Community Resources and School Safety Specialist Larry Titus reported that schools are required to conduct six emergency drills per year with students, however "active shooter" is not one of the drills. Titus stated the active shooter drills were "a little bit more dynamic" than the other required exercises. Director of Student Services Kimberly Roof said many of Calvert's elementary schools have done "hide and quiet" drills instead of lockdown drills. Board President Tracy H. McGuire said she read about a study that shows that active shooter drills "actually traumatizes children" because its foundation is "you can expect to be attacked in this place." Roof confirmed that staff does receive "multiple different types of training" on how to react if a gunman breaches a school building's security. The latest training was provided to administrators last summer and CCPS officials are in the process of providing the training to teachers. "We haven't been able to get to every school but they are on the books," said Roof.

Board Member Dawn Balinski, who attended the previous night's meeting and heard Ruth's remarks, stated "It was widely expected that we would move on that [training] immediately," Balinski said. She added that some elementary school teachers who attended the Wednesday night meeting indicated "they were unsure of what they were supposed to do." Balinski suggested CCPS officials "have a conversation" with the community about conducting the training "potentially into each school and each classroom."

As with the meeting that took place at Dunkirk Volunteer Fire Department one week after the Florida tragedy, the March 7 forum was presented by Keep Calvert Schools Safe. Among the individuals who stood to address the crowd of over 100 was a school bus driver what he should do if a student who shows signs of the prototype school shooter should be riding the bus. Calvert County Sheriff Mike Evans acknowledged that there is no documented procedure for school bus drivers to follow but promised, "we will come up with a plan for bus drivers."

State and local officials have promised citizens that money to install effective security devices in public schools has been allocated and is on its way. Thomas Ridenour (pictured, right), the BOE's student member, stated that most CCPS students are opposed to arming teachers and turning schools into "airports" with metal detectors and scanners. The initiatives proposed to address mental health issues that certain students may have, is widely favored by local students, Ridenour said. The initiatives include adding counselors to school staffs.

Two teachers who addressed the Wednesday night meeting gave slightly different perspectives of the issue of dealing with the possibility of an active shooter compromising the safety of students and staff. Plum Point Elementary School teacher Theresa Young said that she was a graduate of Columbine High School in Colorado and Dave Sanders (pictured, right), a teacher and coach who died during the 1999 massacre at the school, had been her mentor. Young was teaching in Colorado at the time and in the aftermath of the tragedy security measures were put in place. "We had doors, I felt well-prepared," she said. When she moved to Calvert County five years ago, Young admits she was surprised by the lack of security measures in place. "I think school violence is scary and unpredictable," Young said, adding that the community needed to work with leaders to take steps to instill a feeling of safety.

Another teacher, Dawn Stiffler of Dowell Elementary School, urged parents, teachers and administrators to contact county and state officials to install better security devices in every school. Stiffler said she never expected considering strategies like active shooter drills when she began her teaching career. "I am not in denial that this could happen in our schools and you shouldn't be either," said Stiffler.

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