

October 25, 2022

Matthew J. Platkin
Attorney General of New Jersey
Richard Hughes Justice Complex
25 Market Street
Trenton, NJ 08611

Re: K-9 Active Shooter Response Program

Dear Attorney General Platkin,

We, the undersigned organizations and individuals, strenuously object to the placement of K-9 Active Shooter Response dogs in our county's schools. Atlantic County Executive Dennis Levinson's offer to finance the acquisition and training of Active Shooter Response dogs at the county K-9 Academy is premature at best, and at worst, illegal, as this offer was brought to neither the Atlantic County Commissioners nor the NJ Attorney General before it was made. Allowing this program to move forward is a violation of N.J.A.C. 6A:16-5.1.b which requires districts to consult with not only law enforcement agencies, but "health and social services provider agencies, emergency management planners, and school and other community resources, as appropriate, in the development of the school district's plans, procedures, and mechanisms for school safety and security."

The proposed K-9 Active Shooter Response program is not aligned with requirements to implement programs that support student development, as a wealth of evidence shows that the presence of armed officers negatively impacts school safety for children. Additionally, Atlantic County Executive Dennis Levinson did not solicit authentic community feedback and Board of Commissioner's approval before offering county funds for school safety measures. We urge the Attorney General to initiate a

cease and desist order to the Atlantic County Executive in order to prevent implementation of this dangerous program that appears to lack oversight.

This letter represents the combined interests of individuals and organizations, including public school parents and educators, community leaders, and mental health advocates based in Atlantic County and throughout New Jersey. We unite to object to the use of K-9 Active Shooter Response dogs in our schools on the grounds that the program will make Atlantic County schools less safe, and will instead cause harm to students, building an environment of fear and control that undermines the sense of community and belonging that actually makes schools more secure. This is especially true for students of color and students with disabilities who are disproportionately affected by increased security and police presence in schools.¹ We also object to the financial costs of the program, for what is being offered as “free” will actually create significant long-term costs to school districts and divert funds away from the programs and personnel proven to make schools safe.

When the idea of initiating a program of K-9 shooting response dogs was proposed at an August 2022 gathering of Atlantic County law enforcement and school leaders, the program was described as a “no brainer,” based on the testimony of Dr. Dina Rossi, superintendent of Cumberland County Technical Schools, where a shooter-response dog is currently in use. K-9 trainer, Joe Nick, reported that 19 school districts rejected his shooting response dog program until Dr. Rossi agreed. Mr. Nick shared that these dogs could not be used for any other purpose, and that they would require hiring trained handlers. He did not share methods for training the dogs, but stated that he held a patent on a method that no one in the country is currently using.

While some attendees appeared moved by the presentation, a number of questions from the community remain unanswered. These include concerns that the dogs will only respond to gunshots and not other loud noises, or that the dogs will attack the correct person when it perceives a gunshot. Students' and educators' potential fears, allergy concerns, the dog's inability to be in several locations at once, the dog's reactions to normal impulsive behaviors in children, the inherent unpredictability of animals², and other potential liabilities were not addressed in the presentation nor in the literature. Additionally, the use of trained K-9s as tools of violence against Black and brown people, including children, has been documented for centuries and persists as both physical and psychological threat. The toxic culture that could result from this experimental program is contrary to a safe and healthy school environment.

While the K-9 response dogs were introduced as "free" resources to Atlantic County Schools, no specific information was offered regarding ongoing costs to the county taxpayers and the school districts. It is estimated that the initial purchase and training of a patrol dog costs between \$20,000 and \$23,000.³ It is unclear where the County Executive plans to obtain these funds after offering a dog and initial training to each of Atlantic County's 22 school districts. Aside from the initial training, we have identified a number of ongoing costs of the program. Costs to the districts will include the salary and benefits of an armed dog handler, ongoing training for both the dog and handler, increased insurance and legal fees, vehicles (including outfitting them for K-9 purposes), all costs associated with the care of the dog (food, veterinary bills, medication, training tools, etc.) and the cost of starting over with a new dog and handler when the dog "retires." Offering "free" dogs to school districts is misleading and false as

this program will cost school districts and local taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars in just a few short years, with no credible evidence of its possible effectiveness.

These expenditures would divert funds away from proven violence-prevention programs and personnel. Comprehensive, trauma-informed approaches are more effective than unproven, quick-fix initiatives. Since 91% of school shooters were current or former students at the school where the violence was perpetrated⁴, prevention efforts should continue to focus on how schools can support students through crises while developing a positive climate and culture for all children. New Jersey is already among the best in the country at employing these methods, maintaining the highest ranking among states for public school education⁵, and the lowest rate of school shootings since 1970⁶. Atlantic County schools do not need K-9 Active Shooter Response dogs, but instead more resources that have already proven effective.

Unfortunately, children's mental health in New Jersey is in crisis⁷, and school-based security interventions should concentrate efforts in this area. In fact, many New Jersey school districts are not compliant with recommendations for student access to counseling:

- 244,111 students in New Jersey do not have access to a school counselor
- at least 40% of all elementary schools in NJ have no school counselor on staff
- among schools that have counseling staff, the student-to-counselor ratio is approximately 417 students per counselor in the primary grades, 309 students per counselor at the middle school level, and 217 students per counselor in high school

- the student-to-counselor ratio in the state’s poorest districts exceeds the standards set for all schools.⁸
- similar shortfalls exist for school psychologists and school social workers (see Image 1).



[Image 1: New Jersey - Hopeful Futures Campaign](#)

This data on school mental health in New Jersey is important because counselors play a primary role in the implementation of evidence-based practices that are recognized to increase school safety. According to David Sciarra, Executive Director of the Education Law Center, “Because counselors promote student well-being in multiple areas, from social-emotional health to anti-bullying and restorative justice initiatives, they are integral members of school staff.” School districts should spend their limited resources on direct services to students: more counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses; more qualified teachers to reduce class sizes; access to integrated schools with high-quality coursework and technology; and clear connections to mental health resources that offer students and families the support they need to thrive.

We recognize the considerable challenges that exist for school and community officials in the position of keeping our schools safe and agree that protecting children from gun violence is a community priority. We also recognize, however, that the

implementation of programs should not rely on fear-based emotion, but on proven interventions; that the selection of programs should include a broad cadre of experts and stakeholders; and that the programs selected should not cause harm to children. Since our public schools are currently among the safest in the nation, we should, as a community, determine what is working and then concentrate our resources and efforts to build upon that success. While K-9 trainer Mr. Nick claimed in August that “no one is doing anything” about school shootings, we know this claim is false; our county educators and families work tirelessly to create secure, nurturing school environments that are key to preventing school violence.

We urge you to act swiftly to reject the K-9 Active Shooter Response program before it begins in Atlantic County, and to ensure future school safety initiatives and expenditures are evidence-based, fiscally responsible, and developmentally appropriate. Decisions that affect our children’s safety must be made by means of a thorough and responsible approach.

Sincerely,

4 Directions Seminars

[ACLU-NJ](#)

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)

[Atlantic County Collaborative for Educational Equity](#)

[Atlantic County Council of Education Associations](#)

[Black Lives Matter NJ](#)

[Bucks County Anti-Racism Coalition](#)

[Building One America. NJ](#)

[Diversity Equal Opportunity Network](#)

[Education Law Center](#)

Hispanic Advocacy Committee for Equity

[Hunterdon Anti-Racism Coalition](#)

[Justice for Families](#)

[Mainland/Pleasantville NAACP](#)

[Make the Road, New Jersey](#)

[MapSO Freedom School](#)

[New Jersey Education Association](#)

[The New Jersey Institute for Social Justice](#)

[New Jersey Policy Perspective](#)

[NJ21United](#)

[NJ Communities United](#)

[NJ Community Schools Coalition](#)

[People's Organization for Progress](#)

[Princeton Students for Prison Education, Abolition and Reform](#)

[Raw-Wisdom LLC](#)

[Save Our Schools New Jersey](#)

School Culture and Climate Initiative

[SEL4NJ](#)

[South Jersey Solidarity Collective](#)

[Southern Burlington County NAACP](#)

[Transformative Justice Initiative](#)

[Wind of the Spirit, Immigrant Resource Center](#)

[The Young Ecosocialists Caucus of New Jersey](#)

CC: Acting Commissioner New Jersey Department of Education

Atlantic County Commissioners

Atlantic County Criminal Justice Advisory Board

Atlantic County Executive

Atlantic County Interim Executive Superintendent of Schools

Atlantic County Sheriff

Atlantic County School Boards and Superintendents of Public Schools

Atlantic County City Councils and Police Chiefs

NJ State Police Troop A Commander

1. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf>
2. https://www.plaintiffmagazine.com/images/issues/2018/07-july/reprints/Polsky_The-inherently-dangerous-nature-of-attack-trained-police-K-9s_Plauntiff-magazine.pdf
3. <https://www.nationalpolicedogfoundation.org/faq>
4. <https://www.theviolenceproject.org/mass-shooter-database-3/key-findings/>
5. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education/prek-12>
6. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colorado-shooting-states-factbox/factbox-u-s-states-with-the-most-and-fewest-school-shootings-idUSKCN1SE2EX>
7. <https://hopefulfutures.us/action-new-jersey/>
8. <https://edlawcenter.org/news/archives/other-issues/new-jersey%E2%80%99s-school-counselor-crunch.html>