FAVORABLE WITH AMENDMENTS – SB1090

MARYLAND CENTER FOR SCHOOL SAFETY - STATEWIDE SECURE SCHOOLS EMERGENCY RESPONSE PROGRAM - ESTABLISHED

EDUCATION, ENERGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

FEBRUARY 28, 2024

Introduction

Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan and Members of the Committee:

My name is Ben Yelin, and I am the Program Director for Public Policy & External Affairs at the University of Maryland Center for Health and Homeland Security. During the interim, our organization worked with the Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS) and the Maryland Department of Emergency Management (MDEM) to conduct a comprehensive, wide-reaching study on the advisability of a Statewide Secure Schools Emergency Response Program, or "panic button" in Maryland schools. I am also a public-school parent, and care deeply about the safety and security of all Maryland students and staff. In that spirit, I write today to recommend a favorable report with amendments to SB1090.

Interim Study - Methodology

As part of our study, we spoke to representatives of state and local school safety officers, representatives from the Maryland 9-1-1 board, local and State emergency managers, and local public safety answering point personnel. Our team also conducted a review of the after-action reports (AARs) of previous high-profile school-based emergencies (mostly active assailant events) to determine whether an app-based or centralized "panic button" or school-based emergency notification system would have been useful in preventing or mitigating the casualties of those events.

Interim Study - Findings

Our report, based on extensive research and stakeholder input, recommended against the use of a statewide panic button system. Our comprehensive research indicated that the burden or cost of implementing such a system, especially in lieu of other needed upgrades to public safety technology, outweighs any potential benefits. Our stakeholders noted that communications failures during previous real-world incidents or exercise play were not due to any inability to contact 9-1-1 at the outset of an event, but rather on other technological failures, such as **insufficient public address systems, poor cellular and Wi-Fi coverage**, and **lack of proper coordination between responding agencies**. Additionally, Maryland, unlike many other states, has a universal text-to-9-1-1 system that could fulfill the same function as the statewide panic button system proposed in the original bill.

Our study of after-action reports from high profile school-shootings supports these conclusions as well. In each of the studied incidents, students, faculty, and staff were able to reach 9-1-1 to request emergency assistance without delay. There have generally not been issues contacting emergency services rapidly, which is the purported problem a new emergency notification system would be

intended to solve. Rather, communications issues centered around interoperability challenges between responding organizations, the inability to communicate with students and staff over a reliable loudspeaker system, and the inability to send real-time text alerts or emails to provide situational awareness, due to poor cellular or Wi-Fi coverage.

Lessons from Robb Elementary School

There is also evidence that a cell phone alert app that notifies teachers, staff, and/or students to multiple kinds of emergencies, such as medical emergencies or emergencies in the local area but not on the school campus, could be harmful rather than helpful in an active assailant emergency. According to the after-action report of the 2022 Robb Elementary School Shooting in Uvalde, TX, the app's notifications were frequently ignored by teachers and staff because it alerted them frequently to nearby non-emergency incidents. Ultimately, this resulted in a delayed response when there was an on-campus assailant because the notification was either heard and ignored, or not received at all because teachers habitually turned off their cell phones at the start of the school day to avoid interruptions.

Interim Study - Recommendations

In lieu of a mandatory statewide system as proposed in the original bill, our study recommended investments that would best address communications shortcomings:

- Improved and reliable intercom/public address systems
- Bi-directional amplifiers to enhance on-site cell/Wi-Fi coverage.
- Interoperability improvements in public safety communications, including Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD)-to-CAD communication.

Conclusion

I am pleased that the sponsor has worked constructively with the Maryland Center for School Safety (MCSS), the Maryland Department of Emergency Management (MDEM) and other stakeholders to craft suggested amendments to the bill that reflect the findings and recommendations of the study. Specifically, the bill, as amended, would provide grant funding to local school districts to address their unique public safety communications needs. The eligible costs under the grant program allow for investments in the some of the very public safety communications upgrades mentioned in our study.

For these reasons, I respectfully request a favorable report with amendments on SB1090 and I am happy to answer any questions.