

School Safety Office on Life Support

Written by Jeff Smith, State Senator District 31
Wednesday, 17 April 2024 17:26 -

http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/sandu_hook_victims_s5.jpg



Senator Smith writes about the work of the Department of Justice Office of School Safety and their role for protecting our schools across Wisconsin.

This legislative session could've been better, but there was one glimmer of hope. The Office of School Safety (OSS) at the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) was a bright spot for lawmakers this past session.

In February 2018, the Parkland, Florida school shooting occurred. The nation was shocked once again by yet another tragic and horrific school shooting. 17 children were killed that day and another 17 were injured with wounds and horrific memories they will carry for the rest of their lives.



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In less than a month after Parkland, Republicans and Democrats in Wisconsin from the Senate and Assembly came together and passed 2017 Assembly Bill 843, which was signed into law by then Governor, Scott Walker (R). Throughout the years of senseless violence, this was the one of the few times we've seen swift and responsive action against gun violence. The newly created OSS was funded with \$100 million for a grant program geared toward helping schools make updates and perform training for school district personnel. Sadly, though, only one full time position was created to staff the office in its infancy.

Fast forward to spring of this year, and now, the OSS is run by 14 full time staff and they are doing incredible work to keep schools safe. However, the funding for the OSS was set to run out in December of last year, so we needed to act fast to keep the OSS afloat. Thankfully, strong bipartisan support from lawmakers helped Assembly Bill 1050 pass through both houses of the legislature and it was signed into law by Governor Tony Evers (D) as 2023 Wisconsin Act 240 on March 28, 2024.

While providing the OSS with the funding they needed to stay in operation was a step in the right direction, it essentially just puts a Band-Aid on the problem. The bill funds the OSS until September 30th, 2025. Normally, we could all agree this was a great action by the legislature and we could laud our efforts, pat each other on the back and say it was a job well done. While Wisconsin sits on billions of dollars in surplus funding, it feels like less of a win and more like putting the program on life support.



Since 2020 when the 24/7 "Speak Up, Speak Out" tip-line started at the OSS, staff have responded to over 10,000 contacts in Wisconsin schools, including 196 tips concerning planned school attacks. Additionally, there were 223 tips for guns and other weapons from schools that resulted in violence intervention and prevention situations for schools. Countless school district personnel and local law enforcement professionals have utilized the OSS for protecting our schools.

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It should come to no one's surprise when most people were shocked to learn the OSS has only been funded until September next year. The work they are doing is making a serious impact for Wisconsin schools and their achievements have been remarkably quiet. Quiet is good, but we need to make sure people know how important their work is for all our students, school professionals and our communities as a whole.

The Office of School Safety is an excellent service and it deserves more than short-term funding offering no guarantees after Oct 1, 2025. I fully expect Gov. Evers to include more funding for this program next year when we begin the budget process in earnest leading up to its final approval in June.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.