

# Madison County ROE hosts third semiannual School Safety Summit

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In early June, Madison County Regional Superintendent of Schools Rob Werden welcomed law enforcement, education, mental health and other community leaders and partners to the third semiannual School Safety Summit hosted by his office – including those who are faced with the daily responsibility of keeping their students, our children, safe. There were roughly 60 people in attendance for this important gathering and discussion.

The summit took place in the boardroom at the Madison County Administration Building in Edwardsville last month with a lineup of panelists that shared expertise, services, best practices, and next steps.

Among them: United States Marshal David Davis, Illinois State Police Director Brendan Kelly, Assistant U.S. Attorney Ranly Killian, FBI Special Agents Nick Ponsano and Rick Box, Madison County State’s Attorney Thomas Haine, Madison County Sheriff Chief Deputy Marcos Pulido and Madison County Mental Health Department Director Deb Humphrey.

As Pulido said, “Networking resources are how we solve problems; it is how we grow.” Haine also noted, “Our main mission is that we are proactive.”

“There’s nothing more important than school safety in our opinion,” said Davis. And as Kelly pointed out, “We can’t be in our own little areas, our own little silos, and not working together.”

Still top of mind for many in the room was the April 12 incident that involved Granite City and Collinsville high schools on SAT Day in what turned out to be part of a nationwide hoax.

FBI Special Agent Rick Box shared that over 20 calls took place in Illinois that day and were tied to a case in Boston. He further noted that the calls originated from overseas and over VPN, and that there were over 200 calls nationwide.

“You might ask why they [the callers] would do this,” said Box. “With this ‘swatting,’ they are looking for media attention and for law enforcement’s reaction. Most often, they start by saying there’s an active shooter inside the school.”

Box said that his office works with local law enforcement and training dispatchers, and with education administrators and their staff in knowing key communication procedures,



The third semiannual School Safety Summit, hosted by the Madison County Regional Office of Education in June, drew in a lineup of panelists to share expertise, best practices, and next steps with local educators and administrators, law enforcement, mental health providers, and other community partners. Shown from left from Madison County are Sheriff Chief Deputy Marcos Pulido, State’s Attorney Tom Haine, Regional Superintendent Rob Werden, Mental Health Department Director Deb Humphrey, with Illinois State Director Brendan Kelly to the far right. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)



Listening as panelists shared their expertise and tips at the third semiannual School Safety Summit hosted last month by the Madison County ROE was an audience of local educators and administrators, law enforcement representatives, mental health practitioners, and other community partners. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

developing a search plan and what the “red flags” are. He shared a list of some key red flags to look for when these calls come in, such as a calm demeanor from the caller and the caller’s inability to answer follow-up questions.

Kelly said that the Illinois State Police has a portal for school officials to have direct access in times of “clear and present danger.”

“The number of schools now reporting ‘clear and present danger’ to us has

greatly increased,” Kelly said. “It was a trickle at first but has doubled in the past year. We can’t ignore these situations. We must respond to each one.”

“We are not omnipresent,” Kelly further said. “We don’t know everything; we need the community to help us.”

Killian said, “Once the calls come into law enforcement, we start turning our assets toward helping determine if the situation is real.”

“We also talk about sexting,” Killian added, “which is a common problem in the school districts.” Sexting is the action or practice of sending sexually explicit photographs or messages via mobile phone and is a dangerous phenomenon among teens. He noted that, with sexting, there are usually two key concerns to look for in an escalating situation: “The suspect will ask the victim for money. Then they will ask for more and more, ultimately trying to meet up.”

Killian further shared that drugs, and especially fentanyl or drugs mixed with fentanyl, continue to be “huge” problem in the county. “In Madison County, we have more people die from drugs than from gun violence,” he noted. He also pointed out that, “The federal system is not designed to deal with juveniles.”

And as for the legal guardian process that often becomes a part of these situations, Killian opined, “The First Amendment and crime are very far apart.”

In a follow-up, the IBJ asked Werden why he started hosting these School Safety Summits. “I started the School Safety Summit right after the tragedy in Uvalde, Texas,” Werden replied. “I felt the need to bring educators, law enforcement, and mental health experts together to discuss what was happening in our schools and reassure students, parents, and community members that we were being proactive in Madison County in regard to keeping our students safe. By studying past incidents, we can be better prepared to mitigate future situations.”

“As we continue to see, school safety is a concern for school staff everywhere across our country,” Werden added. “Issues we face are increasingly more complex than they were even a few years ago. School violence, bullying, drug use, and sexting are on the rise, and we need to give our educators the tools they need to help reduce the number of students who are affected by these issues. By hosting this summit, we bring folks together to discuss and learn from each other about what is working and how to put plans in place for their own schools.”

Werden also spoke to the goals and hopeful outcomes of the ROE-hosted School Safety Summits: “Our goal is to make Madison County schools as safe as possible. If we are able to inform our teachers and administrators about the best practices of school safety, then they can use that information to implement plans that fit their individual school districts’ needs and keep their students as safe as possible.

## Caritas Family Solutions celebrates 76 years of serving others

On July 31, Caritas Family Solutions will celebrate 76 years of serving children and families throughout the Southern Illinois region. The annual Caritas Day event focuses on raising awareness about the nonprofit’s work and how people can help support its mission. Founded in 1947, Caritas is a nonprofit social service agency that works to strengthen individuals’ and families’ social and emotional well-being by creating healthy relationships, loving homes, and strong communities.

Caritas Family Solutions services include foster care, pregnancy care for women, adoption, counseling and independent living for adults with disabilities among other service lines. The agency currently serves approximately 7,000 people annual-

ly, including 2,900 foster children and families throughout the Southern Illinois region.

“Right now, one in ten kids in the state of Illinois are being served by Caritas which gives you an indication of the impact we make across the region,” said CEO Gary Huelsmann. “But foster care is only one part of what we do. We provide essential services that impact vulnerable people at all stages of life. We know our programs and services touch lives and can impact families for generations to come.”

Caritas has offices located in Belleville, Carterville, Mount Vernon, Olney, Glen Carbon, Alton, and Effingham, as well as satellite locations in Highland and Sparta. For additional information, visit [www.caritasfamilysolutions.org](http://www.caritasfamilysolutions.org).

The Caritas Family Solutions logo is at the top right, featuring a colorful icon of three people and the text "CARITAS FAMILY SOLUTIONS". Below it is a collage of various photos showing diverse families, children, and community members. A central photo shows a group of people with the text "Creating LOVING Homes".

Caritas Family Solutions is a premier human services organization committed to creating healthy relationships, loving homes and strong communities.

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