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School Safety Hearing Testimony

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Diane P. Barber, Director

Chairman Baker and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. My name is Diane Barber. I am the director of the PACCA, the Pennsylvania Child Care Association (PACCA), a statewide non-profit, membership organization located in Lemoyne.

PACCA exists to be a strong and effective voice for quality early care and education programs, and to give leadership and support to those organizations that assist the Early Childhood Education community, families, and children in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

PACCA's membership includes nearly 1,800 center, group and family child care providers employing nearly 20,000 staff and caring for over 200,000 children aged birth through school-age. PACCA's membership also includes individuals, organizations, and businesses that provide services or products to the child care provider community.

As Chairman Baker opened the February hearing, "the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut has compelled a fresh reexamination of how Pennsylvania deals with the issue of violence in schools."

My testimony today is primarily to raise awareness.

As we talk about our schools and how we can keep our children safe, we must also think about how our "partners" are included in our plans. Today's schools are community hubs. Few schools today are open only from 8 am to 3 pm each day and only used by members immediate school community – sports, clubs, parent-teacher conferences.

Community partners may operate the before and after school program, Boy & Girls Scouts may meet, churches may hold services, little theater groups may use the auditorium. We need to think about how we bring our community partners to the table in our safety planning and response to emergencies.

Intruder crimes in schools rarely occur, but it has happened here in Pennsylvania. The consequences are painful and can be tragic. Earlier in my career, I was employed by a child care organization that operated most of its 23 early childhood and school-age child care programs in operating school district buildings. On a hot summer day in July of 1994, a disturbed young woman entered one of our school-based centers through an open rear door being used by school district employed contractors. She entered our preschool classroom and confronted the teacher with a gun. The woman was a longtime acquaintance of the teacher although the teacher had had no contact with her in years. The teacher tried to get her assailant to leave the classroom. Unfortunately the woman opened fire. A teacher's aide in the room of 3,4 and 5 year olds shielded the children while the shots were fired. No children were physically hurt. However, as you can imagine it was horrific. I was part of the administrative team sent to the site to relieve the center's teachers on the day of the memorial service. As I walked a four year old boy to the

rest rooms, he turned to me and said – “This was where Miss Diane was shot.” I will never forget the look on his young face.

Following the incident at Sandy Hook Elementary, I asked a coworker if she had spoken to her son’s afterschool provider about their emergency plans. The next day she reported back, that after talking with program’s staff she found that while the program had an emergency plan, the child care staff were not aware of the school district’s plan. As you can imagine, we were both disturbed. Tragedies can happen at any time of the day -- before school, during school, afterschool, in the evening.

Pennsylvania’s child day care regulations have a number of specific requirements designed to prepare staff, children, and families in times of emergencies. They require:

- Each licensed child care to have an emergency plan.
- Every facility person must receive training regarding the emergency plan at the time of initial employment, on an annual basis and at the time of each plan update.
- The emergency plan must be posted in the facility at a conspicuous location.
- A copy of the emergency plan and subsequent plan updates be sent to the county emergency management agency.
- Written notification of the center’s emergency plans must be shared with parents upon enrollment.
- At least every 60 days, the staff and children must participate in a fire drill and evacuate the building – weather permitting.

The general supervision requirements of licensing require that children be supervised at all times. Low staff to child ratios, low group sizes, and children assigned to specific staff members – all are designed to keep children safe. Additionally, emergency contact information for each child must travel with the child – inside the building, on the outside playground or on off-site excursions.

However, while licensing puts pieces in place to help protect children in child care, in an emergency our child care providers cannot plan or respond independent of their community – and for many, their most immediate community is the school. We must work together to ensure the safety of all our children regardless of time -- in-school or out.

PACCA’s recommendations:

- Require coordination of emergency plans between school and community partners using school district facilities. Additionally, reach out to those partners who may be located within the immediate geographic community.
- Include community partners in school district sponsored training in how to recognize and respond to security threats.

Again, thank you Chairman Baker for this opportunity. We can never be too prepared when it comes to the safety of our children.

