Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 290

Ohio Senate Education Committee
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Neal Zipser
Industry Affairs Manager Knox Company

Chairman Brenner, Vice-Chair Blessing, and Raking Member Ingram: Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of Senate Bill 290 on behalf of Knox Company. My name is Neal Zipser, and I am the Industry Affairs Manager for the Knox Company. We are a Women-owned small business based in Phoenix, Arizona. Since 1975, we have worked with approximately 16,000 first responder agencies, including many agencies in Ohio.

As one of the companies offering the type of boxes required under Senate Bill 290, we are testifying in support of this bill.

Many schools in Ohio are already using KnoxBoxes for fire safety purposes in conjunction with their local fire departments. The fire departments use the box to gain entry to the building, typically in the middle of the night when an alarm goes off and no one is there to let them in. Fire Departments and schools have partnered to place the box at the front door, and, in an emergency, use the jurisdiction's unique key to open the box and locate a master key to the building. This predictable and trustworthy method of entry speeds up response time and reduces property loss.

Based on the success of this model, law enforcement has begun using their own Knox boxes or other key boxes for access to locked school buildings during critical moments. The U.S. Department of Justice report following the Uvalde, TX, shooting also recommends key boxes on school grounds for law enforcement needs. The Partnership Alliance for Safer Schools and The I Love You Guys Foundation, two leading nationally recognized school safety organizations, also support the key box concept for law enforcement.

In states where these boxes are already required for schools, law enforcement collaborates with the school district to install the box in a strategic location, allowing for the best tactical response. For example, public schools in Nashville, Tennessee, have boxes for law enforcement at the gym entrance, which is typically at the back of a school or on the side of the building. This can be a better strategy than running up to unlock the front door, where the shooter may be waiting.

Law enforcement-specific boxes also accommodate the varying needs of what's inside the box. Schools that we work with typically include master external and internal keys, access cards, school layouts, and even tourniquets and Narcan. Law enforcement will no longer have to carry a box with various access cards, mechanical keys, and other items, trying to find the right one when seconds matter. Instead, they will have a single key that can be used to access any of the key boxes for buildings in the entire school district or county.

For those districts that believe they already have a system in place, the key box concept can be used as an extra layer of security – something law enforcement always desires.

Additionally, the boxes do not require power, batteries, or maintenance. This ensures the box would still operate if the shooter shuts down the school's power.

Access is a critical shortcoming in school safety. It completes the response ecosystem of notification and mapping. SB 290 offers a solution that is easy and quick to implement, and is significantly less costly than many other safety devices. The benefits of many of the safety devices and technologies today, such as panic devices, are compromised if the good guys can't quickly gain access and mitigate the incident.

Please note that we are not the only company offering key boxes. Other companies like ours offer boxes that meet the UL 1037 standard, providing school leaders with peace of mind that the boxes will not be vandalized or compromised.

Ohio has an opportunity to join the growing list of states that are looking to ensure law enforcement has access when and where they need it. Currently, Texas, North Carolina, Minnesota, Utah, and Missouri have passed key box legislation, while other states, including Pennsylvania, Michigan, New York, and New Jersey, have pending legislation.

Another benefit of having the keys and cards readily available is the reduction in property damage that would be caused by forced entry. At the school shooting at UNLV a couple of years ago, more than 500 doors were damaged or broken by law enforcement in an effort to gain entry to locked doors. This costs the school district considerable money to fix, not to mention the constant reminder of the incident when the students return to school.

Additionally, "swatting" incidents or hoaxes continue to increase nationally, and Ohio is certainly not immune, as evidenced by the false threat at Wilson Middle School in Newark in September and similar incidents at Fairfield High School and at St. Mary's schools earlier this month. Law enforcement key boxes can help reduce costly and unnecessary property damage caused by swatting incidents and false alarms.

Make no mistake about it. Seconds do matter. Ensuring law enforcement has access when and where they need it most is a cost-effective, common-sense solution that should be part of all schools' emergency response programs.

Thank you again for your time and efforts in keeping Ohio schools safe. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.