

State Representative Dan Miller

Newsletter



SUMMER/FALL 2018

Serving the 42nd District

Mt. Lebanon, Dormont, Castle Shannon, and Baldwin Township with parts of Scott Township and Brookline



Supporting our Citizens Fire Academy

INSIDE:

- School Safety
- Committee Updates
- Disability and Mental Health Summit

Committee Assignments:

Judiciary • Education, Co-Chair, Subcommittee on Special Education
Children & Youth • Human Services • Labor & Industry

Caucus Memberships:

Autism & Intellectual Disabilities, Co-Chair
Early Childhood Education • Firefighters & EMS • Government Reform
HOPE (Heroin, Opioid Prevention, and Education) • LGBT Equality • Steel

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School Safety

Earlier this year, in response to yet another horrific loss of life at a school, many young people across our country forced their way into the political arena in relation to school safety issues. This is a generation that has never known a school year without active shooter drills, and I applaud those on both sides of the firearm issue who entered the public debate. As a member of both the House Judiciary and Education committees, I thought I would provide a broad update on where school safety issues are in Harrisburg.

There has been a large amount of legislation introduced in the House and Senate that is in some way tied to the school safety issue. I have been classifying and analyzing them in three major categories: school infrastructure, firearm legislation, and mental health.

School Infrastructure

School infrastructure is an extremely broad topic given the sheer number of school districts we have in Pennsylvania, their diverse student populations, and their unique sets of needs. Generally speaking, I have been a proponent of trying to give school districts flexibility in determining what safety measures are most important to them.

For example, some school districts have struggled with their physical infrastructure needs. They lack closed vestibules, security cameras, metal detectors, etc. – the tangible items that, working with local law enforcement, have been identified as integral components of a modern security plan. Many of our local schools have been remodeled in recent years and have already incorporated many of those features, but that is not the case for every school district across the state.

I also consider mental health counselors and social workers to be key components of a school safety infrastructure. This has been the number one identified area of need in almost every conversation I have had with school administrators and school board directors alike. They all want the ability to positively intervene in a child's life, most assuredly in conjunction with the parents and any private support staff. But unfortunately for many school districts, their counselor-to-student ratio is way too high – almost rendering meaningless their efforts to help connect students to resources.

Unlike the federal constitution, the state has an explicit requirement to ensure that every child has an appropriate public education, and I believe this includes making sure that we partner with local districts to address safety infrastructure needs. Whether physical building changes or in relation to mental health and social worker support, the state should provide financial flexibility while requiring accountability for taxpayer dollars.

Firearm Legislation

This is the most-debated aspect of our current safety-related discussion and to be clear, I do not expect the General Assembly to approve some of the sweeping legislation that states like Florida and Connecticut have passed. Similarly, I also do not

expect (nor do I support) the bill that allows districts to arm teachers or school staff will make it to the Governor's desk. I believe that any firearms in schools need to be in the possession of trained police officers. However, several other pieces of legislation regarding firearms have passed the House Judiciary Committee as of this writing and await further action.

Most of these bills would be considered by gun control activists as the low-hanging fruit in the gun debate, while

many gun rights supporters would likely consider them to be unnecessary intrusions into Second Amendment guarantees. While I respect both of these positions, I voted in support of all the measures. The main thrust of these bills was to enhance restrictions on people with adjudicated mental health and domestic violence issues. While we must always look to ensure adequate due process when considering state action involving constitutional rights, I do not believe these bills overstepped. I do though think that there are other bills that are worthy of further consideration, such as the universal background check bill. Unfortunately this bill failed to pass committee by one vote.

Mental Health

Besides the changes referenced above relating to the bills involving mental health commitments or self-exclusion lists, I believe that there are additional steps we can take to improve safety in relation to mental health. I would note, though, that



it is important to frame the mental health risk in perspective, meaning that the vast majority of people with a mental health diagnosis are of no danger to anyone and I want to be sure that we don't further stigmatize people by losing sight of that.

That being said, I believe that we need to do a better job in developing an early intervention program for mental health. We have seen how early intervention has helped many young people with autism or other developmental disabilities advance and make great strides toward learning coping mechanisms and other skills that will increase success and inclusion. Unfortunately, professionals tend to get involved in dealing with mental health issues only after some type of negative or harmful incident has occurred. For too many people that is way too late.

One thing we can do is require depression screens as part of school-age physical forms starting in 5th grade. According to mental health advocacy groups, 50% of lifetime mental illness can be diagnosed by the time a person is 14. Depression screens are simple and quick to administer, and can be completed at almost any pediatrician's office. We can allow parents to opt their children out of these screens, but they can at least have the opportunity to discuss the issue with the doctor. If the screen indicates the possibility of a problem, parents will have the support of their pediatrician as they determine what action might be appropriate. I think most parents would agree that

discovering that their child has been suffering from a depressive episode for the last 18 months is much more important to overall health than finding out that they have a cavity on a back molar.

The reality is that school safety is going to continue to remain on the forefront in Harrisburg as well as in Washington, D.C. and here at home. Clearly, firearm ownership has been determined by the Supreme Court to be an individual right, but the Court continues to allow for legislative action to, at times, limit or restrict ownership. The reality is that the Second Amendment, like all of our amendments, has always been limited in some way or another.

School safety is going to continue to warrant our attention, and there are few easy answers. I was very pleased to support an increase in state school safety funding in this year's budget from about \$9 million in grants to \$60 million. Of course, that's \$60 million for 500 school districts. In comparison, Florida passed a \$400 million appropriation to address school safety. I also hope that Harrisburg will continue to advance and discuss further legislation that can keep firearms out of the hands of those incapable of using them appropriately, but I remain committed to considering such legislation only through a lens of heightened scrutiny.

5th Annual Disability Summit

Our 5th Annual Disability Summit took place in March 2018 at the Beth El Congregation. We were very excited to again offer an extensive array of programs that addressed a wide range of disability-related issues. Our keynote speaker, Pedro Rivera, Secretary of Education, headlined our discussion and talked about the challenges facing local school districts in making sure that every child has an appropriate education and how teachers, parents, administrators, and students must work together to create a robust educational system that prepares every student for their future.

One of my favorite parts of the Summit is our program for 100-plus transition-aged students, which is done in conjunction with the Pennsylvania Youth Initiative. This program is specially designed to help them become stronger self-advocates for their own needs and goals. After a morning of training, the kids put their skills into practice by meeting

in small groups with state and federal officials to let them know about their hopes and concerns for their future. This program led into our Legislative Panel, which brought together a bipartisan, bicameral group of elected leaders to discuss such issues as deafblind supports and criminal justice for juveniles with disabilities. From Congressman Conor Lamb to Sen. Camera Bartolotta, I really appreciate Democrats and Republicans coming together at our event to see what we can do together to advance these issues and increase opportunities for everyone.

While there are similar seminars in our area for people to attend, our event continues to be the largest collection of disability resources in western PA and we have been very blessed by having so many great speakers and presenters. Work has already begun on next year's Summit, so look for more information soon!

In Our Community



Baldwin Township

I'm always happy to join in Baldwin Township's community celebrations. Whether it's the annual Meet 'n' Greet, the Halloween Parade or Breakfast with Santa, the officials work hard to create a fun and welcoming atmosphere for the folks who live in their town.

Brookline

There is always a lot of activity on the Boulevard! I was very excited to work with Brookline Teen Outreach on a mental health fair where we brought in a lot of resources and offered some informative sessions on key information designed to help end stigma and provide opportunities for people. We also sponsored a meet and greet there with Sen. Wayne Fontana, Reps. Dan Deasy and Harry Readshaw, and Brookline's new city and county representatives Anthony Coghill and Bob Palmosina.



Castle Shannon

I always enjoy the great community events that happen in Castle Shannon, but this year we were also happy to have our annual Economic Development Roundtable there, where we talked with local leaders from across the 42nd District about their local goals and initiatives. We also partnered with the police department and Castle Shannon Revitalization Corp. for our annual Castle Shannon shredding event at the fire department.

Dormont

The Dormont Library is always a great place for community events and my favorite this year was our Alzheimer's panel. We brought experts from across the field to talk about the challenges Alzheimer's disease typically bring to the individual and to the family as they struggle to support their loved one through this horrible disease. We will have more to come on this issue that is now the sixth-leading cause of death!



Mt. Lebanon

Safety issues were a paramount topic of discussion in Lebo where we were glad to partner with the police department, FBI and other groups to bring updated information to the district. Given the challenges that we face, everyone has an obligation to be a safety partner and, unfortunately, I anticipate this to be a continuing topic for us to discuss.

Scott Township

In Scott, thanks to our friends at Beth El Congregation and Saint Simon and Jude, we do big events like our Disability Summit and we do small events like teaming up with Commission President Frank Bruckner to congratulate residents on their 100th birthday.



Committee Updates

There are 24 different House committees, each having both Democratic and Republican members. Every representative is given several committees to participate in. Here are some of the issues my committees have been working on this session:

Human Services Committee

Deafblind Support Service Providers:

I introduced H.B. 2069 to codify an expiring grant program that has provided a lifeline for many deaf and blind Pennsylvanians, by providing access to support service providers who facilitate communication and provide sighted guidance. Support service providers are trained to assist deafblind individuals specifically by providing environmental information and acting as a guide and communication facilitator. This program has since allowed many more deafblind Pennsylvanians to access their communities and avoid costly in-home care or nursing home placement. My legislation would ensure the continuation of this program.



Children and Youth Committee

Grandparents as Guardians: The opioid epidemic has increased the number of grandparents caring for their grandchildren, which has led to difficulties in providing for their needs while a parent is in recovery or incarcerated. H.B. 1539 allows grandparents to obtain temporary guardianship, which gives them the legal right to do things like enroll the children in school or take them to a doctor. I was pleased to vote for this bill in the House, and it now awaits action in the Senate.



Joint State Government Commission Study on

Grandfamilies: The House also passed H.R. 390, which directs the Joint State Government Commission to study grandfamilies in Pennsylvania. This study will help identify gaps in services and supports that grandparents need when raising their grandchildren, with the aim of keeping children out of foster care. This resolution was adopted on April 17th.

Judiciary

Expanding Legal Standing in Custody

Cases: Grandparents often step in to care for their grandchildren due to dead or absentee parents, but they do not have the legal standing to take custody of the child. S.B. 844, which I was happy to support, gives legal standing to individuals to file for physical or legal custody when they have sincere concern and a vested interest in the well-being of the children. This bill has been signed into law.



Untested Rape Kit Legislation: Unfortunately, when it comes to sexual assault and rape cases, many victims do not get justice. This often occurs because of mishandled or old physical evidence. This is why I co-sponsored H.B. 1821,

which requires state and local agencies to annually review funding needs and infrastructure, establishes a hotline for hospitals if rape kits aren't picked up in 72 hours, and clarifies ambiguous language on time frames. This bill is currently in the Senate.

Labor & Industry

Unemployment Compensation Appeals:

I was proud to support H.B. 1597, which extended unemployment compensation (UC) appeal periods from 15 to 21 days. It is important that UC claims are decided accurately and fairly, and giving both claimants and employers a bigger window in which to appeal a decision will aid in this endeavor. This bill has passed the House and is now in the Senate.



Employment First: Individuals with disabilities are often paid below minimum wage and depend on the government for assistance. This is why I am a prime co-sponsor of H.B. 1641, which will promote employment of people with disabilities at competitive wages by Pennsylvania employers. This bill will help end their lifetime dependence on governmental assistance by focusing state agencies' efforts on helping them obtain employment and become taxpayers. This bill was signed into law on June 19th.

Education

Career and Technical Education

Legislation: Recognizing that the path to a successful future doesn't always go through a four-year college, I supported a bipartisan package of bills this spring that are designed to strengthen Pennsylvania's Career and Technical Education (CTE) across a broad range of issues. Some of these bills address matters on the instructional side, things like teacher certification and program design. Other bills in the package focus on improving the information that students have available to them, including information about programs and future workforce opportunities. All nine bills in this package are currently awaiting action in the Senate.



School Safety: I recently introduced H.B. 2452, which addresses critical aspects of school safety. This legislation requires all schools to undergo annual safety assessment audits conducted by specially trained law enforcement officers. These audits would examine each school's safety plan, including school security procedures, safety infrastructure and the adoption of threat assessment teams comprised of school staff and administration.

Contacting Rep. Miller

Hearing from you and working to address your state-related issues is an essential part of my job. Thanks for the honor to serve you, and I hope you will make a habit of reaching out! With the recent rise in local activism, I thought it might be helpful to describe our contact system.



Contacting for assistance:

This is where you, your family, your business, etc., need some type of direct help from my office regarding a state-related matter. You can email, call, or stop in, but it's best not to wait if you have a time-sensitive issue!

Contacting about legislation:

Some people just want to let me know their thoughts on a bill or on one of my votes, and that's OK. Others have a general inquiry about a specific piece of legislation or vote and would like to talk to my staff or to me directly about it. It helps us if you let us know how we can best respond to you. And no matter what, don't forget that we can always set up a phone conference to discuss an issue with you – or you can just stop in! Email, call, stop in, or write an actual letter – my office logs it all so that I stay on top of your concerns or thoughts.

Some constituent services we provide:

... I need help with unemployment benefits

If you are having difficulty getting answers from an Unemployment Compensation Service Center, our office can help you get in touch with them – without having to spend a long time on hold!

... I want to ride the bus for free/senior transit pass

Are you over 65? You can ride any Port Authority bus or T for free! Our office is authorized by Allegheny County to register persons 65 and older for the free Port Authority transit card. Stop in with a photo ID and fill out a quick form!

... I want to get an honor citation for a family member or friend

Are you or is someone you know celebrating a major birthday (over 74) or anniversary (25th, 50th, and higher)? Our office is able to obtain honorary citations and have them presented by either Rep. Miller or a staff member to commemorate your special occasion.

... I am having issues with Medicaid/CHIP health benefits

Whether an initial application, renewal or coverage issue, our office can help clarify and submit documentation needed for those programs.



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Upcoming Events



September 13th • 9 a.m. – Noon

Salvation Army Pittsburgh Temple
1060 McNeilly Road, Pittsburgh 15226

Rep. Dan Miller's
**Substance Abuse
Forum**

October 18

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
1066 Washington Road, Pittsburgh 15228
More information to come.