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Senate Majority Policy Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the mental health challenges facing our youth and the online threats that are exploiting those vulnerabilities. My name is Andrew McCloskey I am a law enforcement officer with Caernarvon Township Police Department and a Task Force Detective with the District Attorney's Office in Berks County, Pennsylvania, and I serve as the Threat Manager for the Berks County Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Team (BTAM). I am here today to speak with you about my role as a law enforcement officer and the Berks County BTAM Team Coordinator who has investigated targeted acts of violence through my official duties. My statements to you are based on my professional experience and the training I have received in BTAM as a member of the FBI's Community Anti-Threats Officer (CATO) Program. My experience has shown me that the fastest-growing threat to our young people is not always a single ideology or a single platform—it is the combination of a profound lack of identity, community, belonging or a sense of purpose and the online spaces that prey on that need.

The Mental Health Crisis and the Search for Belonging

Too many of our young people today lack a sense of identity, community, belonging, or purpose. They are suffering from a deeper absence of well-being—what amounts to a mental health crisis. Everyone wants to feel that they matter. When that need is not met offline, young people turn online for friendship, acceptance, and connection. They seek it on social media, in online gaming, in chatrooms, and across other digital networks.

The internet has made the world much smaller. It has also made it easier for those who are hurting to become targets. Once they turn online looking for that sense of belonging—that virtual “hug” or feeling of acceptance—they are frequently exploited.

They are extorted, groomed, coerced, threatened, or radicalized. The same platforms that offer community can also deliver predators who understand exactly what these young people are searching for.

Online Threats: Nihilistic Violent Extremism, the True Crime Community, and 764

One of the most serious and rapidly growing dangers is nihilistic violent extremism, or NVE. NVE involves the unlawful use or threat of force or violence in furtherance of political, social, or religious goals that derive primarily from a hatred of society at large and a desire to bring about its collapse by sowing indiscriminate chaos, destruction, and social instability. Within this broader ecosystem—often called “The Com”—two communities have become particularly dangerous for vulnerable youth.

The True Crime Community, or TCC, is a subculture that has developed across social media platforms since the 1999 Columbine High School massacre. Participants obsess over mass killings, studying the backgrounds of perpetrators and the details of how attacks were carried out. For some members, this interest is more than curiosity. The TCC provides a powerful sense of belonging and normalizes violence. Young people already struggling with a lack of well-being and identity become easy targets for radicalization. They are encouraged, and sometimes directly assisted, in carrying out acts of violence.

Another group within this NVE environment, commonly referred to as “764,” uses similar tactics against the same vulnerable population. Members groom and coerce minors, encourage self-harm and suicide, and exploit children into producing child sexual abuse material. Both communities thrive by offering the belonging and purpose that many of these young people cannot find elsewhere.

The Most Effective Response: Multidisciplinary Threat Teams

The Berks County BTAM Team is one of a growing number of County BTAM Teams in Eastern Pennsylvania which have been established in partnership with the FBI's CATO Program and our state partner agencies. In Berks County, we have found the most effective way to combat this threat is through multi-disciplinary BTAM teams. Based on my experience in Berks County, I would strongly recommend every county in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania establish a multi-disciplinary BTAM team, which is led by a designated threat manager. These multi-disciplinary BTAM teams should include representatives from the following professions: Law Enforcement (local, county, state and federal), the District Attorney's Office, Probation and Parole (Adult & Juvenile), Mental Health Services, Social Service, Co-responders, Children & Youth, and the local educational institutions (K-12 & Higher-Ed) as needed.

In Berks County, we have built exactly this model. Our team was stood up with the assistance of the Special Agent Eric Patterson, who serves as the Primary Threat Management Coordinator and CATO Program Coordinator for the FBI Philadelphia Field Office. Through the FBI's CATO Program, Special Agent Patterson and his colleagues in FBI-Philadelphia, have trained hundreds of law enforcement professionals across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Members of the FBI's CATO Program receive specialized training in mitigating threats, identifying individuals on the pathway to targeted violence, and recognizing those who primarily need mental health intervention rather than criminal prosecution. CATO Program Members attend monthly operational meetings and trainings, which are led by BTAM subject matter experts from across the United States. In Berks County, we have seen the benefit of this advanced training having positive outcomes. We have stopped acts of targeted violence and been a part of the multi-disciplinary solution to move a person of concern off of the pathway to targeted violence towards a pathway to recovery.

In Berks County, our multi-disciplinary BTAM team includes members of law enforcement, the District Attorney's Office, and four professionals from the mental health

and treatment community. This collaborative approach has been successful. We have been credited with the prevention of multiple planned attacks. In one case, we stopped one of the most thoroughly planned and serious attacks in the nation. The only remaining step was the subject's chosen attack date, which was imminent.

The individual was struggling with a lack of well-being and turned to the internet in search of community, identity, and purpose. The communities they found included the True Crime Community (TCC) and 764. They became obsessed with prior school shootings. Firearms—including fully automatic, functioning 3D-printed firearms—were provided through an online platform. They possessed school floor plans, explosive contraband, and a manifesto similar to those of prior attackers. Their plan and manifesto were refined with online assistance from members and followers of the TCC.

In football terms, this individual was on the goal line. The evidence collected in the case was right out of a horror movie. It was the scariest yet most rewarding case I have worked in my law enforcement career. Lives were, without a doubt, saved because of our multidisciplinary team. The only difference between this case and Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, Uvalde, and many others is that we had a dedicated multidisciplinary team, which had law enforcement officers that have been involved in the FBI's CATO Program with extensive training in BTAM. This approach is the only reason we don't have another yearly date to mourn.

We have also worked numerous cases in which juveniles were being encouraged to commit suicide or were groomed and extorted into producing child sexual abuse material. In each of these situations, the multidisciplinary structure made the difference.

Having law enforcement, mental health professionals, the District Attorney's Office, and Probation involved from the beginning creates a more complete picture. Individuals in treatment do not always tell the full story. Law enforcement can review social media,

internet search history, and other digital evidence, and can conduct interviews that help connect the dots. You must first collect the dots before you can connect them. Early involvement of the District Attorney's Office and Probation allows cases to move more smoothly, while mental health professionals bring the clinical expertise needed for proper assessment and treatment. Each member contributes a different piece of the puzzle, and the result is better threat mitigation and better outcomes for the individual.

The Need for Statewide Support

Unfortunately, many counties lack the funding to properly establish and sustain these teams. Assessments and treatment can be costly, yet they are essential to an accurate evaluation, effective threat mitigation, and long-term recovery. Without dedicated resources, counties cannot consistently identify individuals on the pathway to violence or provide the collaborative response that has proven successful in Berks County and elsewhere.

I urge this Committee to support the following recommendations: expand preventing targeted violence bystander awareness programs throughout Pennsylvania, expansion of BTAM teams across Pennsylvania, including the creation of a standardized BTAM curriculum for every member of a multi-disciplinary BTAM team, funding for BTAM team threat managers, multidisciplinary participation from county agencies, review of existing legislation which prohibits information sharing within a multi-disciplinary BTAM team structure, and the expansion of the FBI's CATO Program throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Protecting our youth requires more than reactive policing. It requires proactive, collaborative teams that can identify those who are suffering, interrupt the pathway to violence, and connect them to the help they need before they become either victims or perpetrators.

I would also encourage the members of this Committee to hear from members of the

Pennsylvania Threat Assessment Steering Committee (PA-TASC), which is being led by the Pennsylvania Office of Homeland Security.

PA-TASC Steering Committee Members, which include Special Agent Patterson (FBI-CATO Program Coordinator), have participated in the drafting of a statewide preventing targeted violence strategy which is being authored by the Pennsylvania Office of Homeland Security.

A number of my recommendations delivered during my testimony today comes straight from their preventing targeted violence strategy document.

PA-TASC Steering Committee Members have been grappling with these complex issues in collaboration with additional subject matter experts in the field of BTAM throughout the United States.

Thank you for your time and for your attention to this critical issue.