

To: South Hadley Selectboard  
South Hadley School Committee

From: Mark McLaughlin, Interim Superintendent  
Jennifer Voyik, Assistant Superintendent  
Lisa Wong, Town Administrator  
Chuck Romboletti, Assistant Town Administrator

Date: October 27, 2023

Re: South Hadley Joint Town-School Mental Health Emergency Response

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**General Background:**

Surveys have shown that the State, and in particular, our youth, has been experiencing a mental health crisis exacerbated by the pandemic, and shortage of resources.<sup>1</sup> The state conducts a comprehensive Youth Health Survey every other year. The most recent report from 2021 reports that the rate of both high school and middle school youth who intentionally injured themselves increased in 2021 compared to 2019<sup>2</sup>. The Association for Behavioral Healthcare released information about how the Mental Health Healthcare crisis is exacerbated by, among other things, the lack of resources and increased response times to get community and school based help.<sup>3</sup> South Hadley has been responding to this issue as outlined below.

**Community Strategies:**

- A. Public Safety: The police received a \$30,450 grant in 2022 from the MA Department of Mental Health under the Co-Response Jail Diversion Program to enhance clinical support for police officers responding to mental health crisis and wellness concerns for adults, children and families. The Police have a Police Access and Community Engagement (PACE) team as well as a Crisis Intervention Team (CIT). Officer Cindy Boyle has received the Law Enforcement Exemplary Performance Award from the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health. The South Hadley Police Department has been awarded a contract to develop a statewide Crisis Intervention Team Training and Technical Assistance Center (CIT-TTAC) - a major initiative that demonstrates excellence and forward thinking.
  
- B. Public Health: The Selectboard approved the Intermunicipal Agreement with Holyoke and Chicopee on October 24, 2023 for the Public Health Excellence for Shared Services Grant. As the Lead Municipality, South Hadley will work towards increasing capacity to address numerous public health issues linked to mental health. The Planning and Community Development Department just received a Municipal Vulnerability Grant that will examine social equity strategies, and is leading an update to the Housing Production Plan, all initiatives that support public health and wellness for the community. The Master Plan approved in 2022 links housing and mental health.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.masslive.com/opinion/2023/02/theres-a-behavioral-health-crisis-in-mass-heres-how-to-get-help-viewpoint.html](http://www.masslive.com/opinion/2023/02/theres-a-behavioral-health-crisis-in-mass-heres-how-to-get-help-viewpoint.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.mass.gov/doc/results-of-the-massachusetts-youth-health-survey-2021/download](http://www.mass.gov/doc/results-of-the-massachusetts-youth-health-survey-2021/download)

<sup>3</sup> [www.abhmass.org/images/resources/ABH\\_OutpatientMHAccessWorkforce/021522\\_ABH\\_survey\\_release\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.abhmass.org/images/resources/ABH_OutpatientMHAccessWorkforce/021522_ABH_survey_release_FINAL.pdf)

- C. Opioid Stabilization Fund: The Town has chosen to engage in legal action against numerous parties involved with the opioid crisis. As a result, the Town will receive over \$1 million in total funding through 2038. Town Meeting overwhelmingly voted to create an Opioid Stabilization Fund at the May 10, 2023 Annual Town Meeting, and will vote to transfer \$143k in funding the town has already received into that fund at the November 15, 2023 Special Town Meeting. An internal working group composed of the Town Administrator, Police, Board of Health and Schools have already begun to meet to develop a robust framework of engagement and analysis on an issue that is very much linked to the Mental Health crisis.
- D. Food Insecurity: It has been observed that many of the students and families dealing with mental and behavioral health issues also face food insecurity. More dialogue and stronger partnerships are just starting. For example, the Selectboard voted to grant Neighbors Helping Neighbors with \$5,000 in American Rescue Plan Act funds in 2022.

**School Strategies:**

- A. Therapeutic Classrooms: Approximately 10 years ago, these classrooms were added to Plains and Mosier school as the increased need for a separate space for those students that have experienced trauma and other mental health issues. In 2018, the middle school added a therapeutic classroom and in 2019, the high school started their first therapeutic classroom. In December 2021 a second classroom was added due to rising need.
- B. A school adjustment counselor specifically for the TTC program at the high school was added in January 2022 as the increased need for support from a clinician rose above the capacity that the staffing level could currently support.
- C. In summer 2023, the district hired a full time Mental Health Coordinator whose responsibilities, among other, include implementation of a comprehensive district advisory program, the development and implementation of a District Mental Health Committee comprised of staff, administrators, community members and students. Responsibility for the coordination of site based and district mental health professional development programming for educators, support to schools and staff for long term mental health programming and crisis supports, modeling and coaching of best practices, and real time support to each School Adjustment Counselor (SAC).
- D. In Fall 2023, advisory programs were added to the school day at Michael E. Smith Middle School, Plains and Mosier, supplemented by concrete and specific goals and plans designed to address and support connection, reflection and overall student mental health. At the high school, advisory has been redesigned as part of its commitment to rigor, continuous growth and social emotional wellness.

**Recent Events:**

On Monday, October 23rd and Wednesday October 25th incidents involving students in the Transitional Therapeutic Classroom (TTC) at South Hadley High School resulted in significant injuries to multiple staff members and some students. Despite the many proactive steps taken by the town and the schools to address the growing mental health crisis, the incidents this week are the result of a combination of factors that, combined, are contributing to an increasingly unstable environment within that program and the broader school community. Among those factors:

- Significantly increased number of students experiencing complicated mental health challenges over a five year period
- Insufficient staffing to address current and trending increases in student mental health challenges
- Significantly increased wait times for out of district therapeutic placements throughout the region, resulting in increased offloads to school personnel
- Even with the Student Opportunity Act passing and increased funding through Chapter 70, state funding for schools is still too low to meet state and federal FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) requirements
- Changes in state laws (expulsion, suspension) increasing the number and kind of behavioral offenses that must be managed within the school setting
- Behavior related response and intervention responsibilities that can only be addressed by certified administrators

Incidents at the high school this week, while particularly troubling, are not unique. From the start of school through this week, high school administration has spent most of their time during a “typical” school day addressing and attending to the needs of 4% of the high school population, limiting time available to support growth in curriculum, instruction, educator professional development and related typical school site responsibilities.

The circumstances we face are the result of social and clinical factors that are common throughout our region, the state, and nationally. The growing challenges facing public schools everywhere, as a result of severe social emotional illness, is no longer unique. It has become our daily reality and requires a commitment to matching resources to the challenge we face for the sake of student and staff safety and the right of all students to access education to their fullest potential.

**Response:**

In light of the events of this week, school personnel from the high school, mental health, health services, student services, and Superintendent’s office met with town administration, police, and public health to discuss a community response to the complex issue highlighted by the recent incidents. The team discussed immediate and longer term strategies to systemically address these challenges as the impacts of the kind of severe emotional dysregulation increasingly observed in our schools and the greater South Hadley community.

Given the circumstances faced by our community, we are requesting that the School Committee and Selectboard have a joint and robust discussion, to vote on immediate resources, and to jointly develop a comprehensive, multi-year and flexible strategies to assist staff in doing their important work and to support the changing needs of our students, families and individuals who need our services.

**Short Term Discussion:**

The purpose of this meeting is to present the challenge faced by our schools and other town agencies related to the surge in mental health challenges and to request the funding necessary to allow the high school, in this instance, to adequately structure and staff the TTC program. We believe these conversations should be ongoing, adaptable and involve a broad set of stakeholder engagement. The points below are the ones the Town and School Administrative team recommend immediate discussion for the School Committee and Selectboard.

1. Need for Assistant Principal - This position will assist and support students and colleagues during times of acute crisis thus containing and minimizing schoolwide impacts. There are 523 students currently enrolled at the high school. The Town and School administration has performed a cost benefit analysis and risk analysis to determine that this is the most effective option to move forward with. The Assistant Principal position has the broadest range of duties, and can therefore be proactive and responsive to the range of complex issues the school faces each day. Related to the mental health crisis, the Assistant Principal is tasked with: searching bags, implementing disciplinary measures, bullying investigations, Title IX investigations, communication with parents on behavioral issues, establishing and running behavior hearings, attending all IEP meetings, enact school improvement plan, run school council, coordinate Chapter 74 programs, and run restorative practices throughout the day. With many of these duties listed, often only the Principal and Assistant Principal positions are allowed to legally respond, and even the School Resource Officer is prohibited from direct engagement with students in many situations. Please note this does not include the comprehensive list of educational, vocational, administrative and operational duties an Assistant Principal would undertake in support of the Principal, students, staff and the community.
2. Classroom program re-design - Class size for the high school TTC classroom currently meets state ratio requirements, but does not allow for program flexibility, resulting in many occasions in which students not yet ready to transition to wider programming are required to prematurely, if temporarily, engage with the wider school community. This typically happens during contractually mandated teacher prep time, when TTC students, without the benefit of additional trained personnel, must leave the TTC classroom to attend classes outside the more managed environment required by their unique needs. Current staffing also does not allow for students in the TTC program to be separated from students in the Behavior program, resulting in frequent triggering behaviors adversely impacting students with

discrete needs and program requirements. Hiring an additional teacher and support personnel will allow the high school to reduce the number of students in each classroom and will also give the district the ability to keep this program completely separate from the larger school population, as it is intended to be, until such time as students are ready to transition to more typical programming.

3. Provide more clinical support: Additional social and emotional support for students that are dysregulated or need someone to talk to during the day. A school adjustment counselor would provide support not only to the TTC classroom, but also to students that are in our Zen Den and Restorative Justice classroom. This additional support will help reduce the frequency and severity of incidents like those experienced this week and which have occurred with greater frequency over the past few years. An additional clinician would also decrease wait time for in-need students, expedite the creation of Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) and facilitate the conduct of 45 day assessments. This position would also assist in the coordination of wrap around services and would participate in crisis intervention.

**Action Item:**

School Committee:

1. To move to amend the FY24 School Committee Budget to include the addition of an assistant principal at the high school in the amount of \$61,000.
2. To move to amend the FY24 School Committee Budget to include \_\_\_\_\_ in the amount of \_\_\_\_\_\*

Selectboard:

1. To move to to amend the FY24 Operating Budget to \_\_\_\_\_\*
2. To move to approve the 2023 Special Town Meeting warrant as amended (Note: the operating budget change is now Article 3, and all other subsequent Articles have been re-numbered)

\*See Attached spreadsheet for Funding Options