

COMMENTARY

Wellness must be a priority for our first responders

Your Turn

Rep. Jacquelyn Baginski
Guest columnist

First responders are the lifeblood of our communities. When we need any kind of help, we call them and they are there, using their training to help us, protect us and even save us.

All first responders experience mental stress from their important work. They quickly assess and react to the most tragic and visceral scenes imaginable. As a result, first responders experience higher rates of depression, PTSD, anxiety and other mental health issues than the general population.

It is worth noting that women in public safety appear to have an additional burden. Suicidal ideation is slightly higher in female law enforcement officers than men. Approximately 22.2% of female career firefighters are at risk for depression, and 38.5% of female volunteer firefighters are at risk for depression. About 60% are drinking more than the American Dietary Guidelines suggest for alcohol intake.

This is especially problematic because we need more women to choose a career in public safety. Currently, women hold only 13% of all law enforcement positions. Recruiting women is particularly challenging because of the additional stress created by balancing a career in public safety and a family.

Providing health and wellness opportunities to first responders – both women and men – promotes the health and success of individuals, enhances the over-



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ANDREW DICKERMAN/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

all safety of the cities and towns they serve, and creates the support structure needed to ensure long, productive, resilient careers.

Thankfully, the public safety community is self-aware, recognizing these challenges and the need for increased wellness services. A survey and analysis done by the FirstNet Health and Wellness Coalition found that both male and female first responders see an opportunity to engage in addressing their health and wellness risk factors

For public safety leaders, wellness must be a priority. First responders are more likely to develop healthy behaviors when it is part of their department’s culture

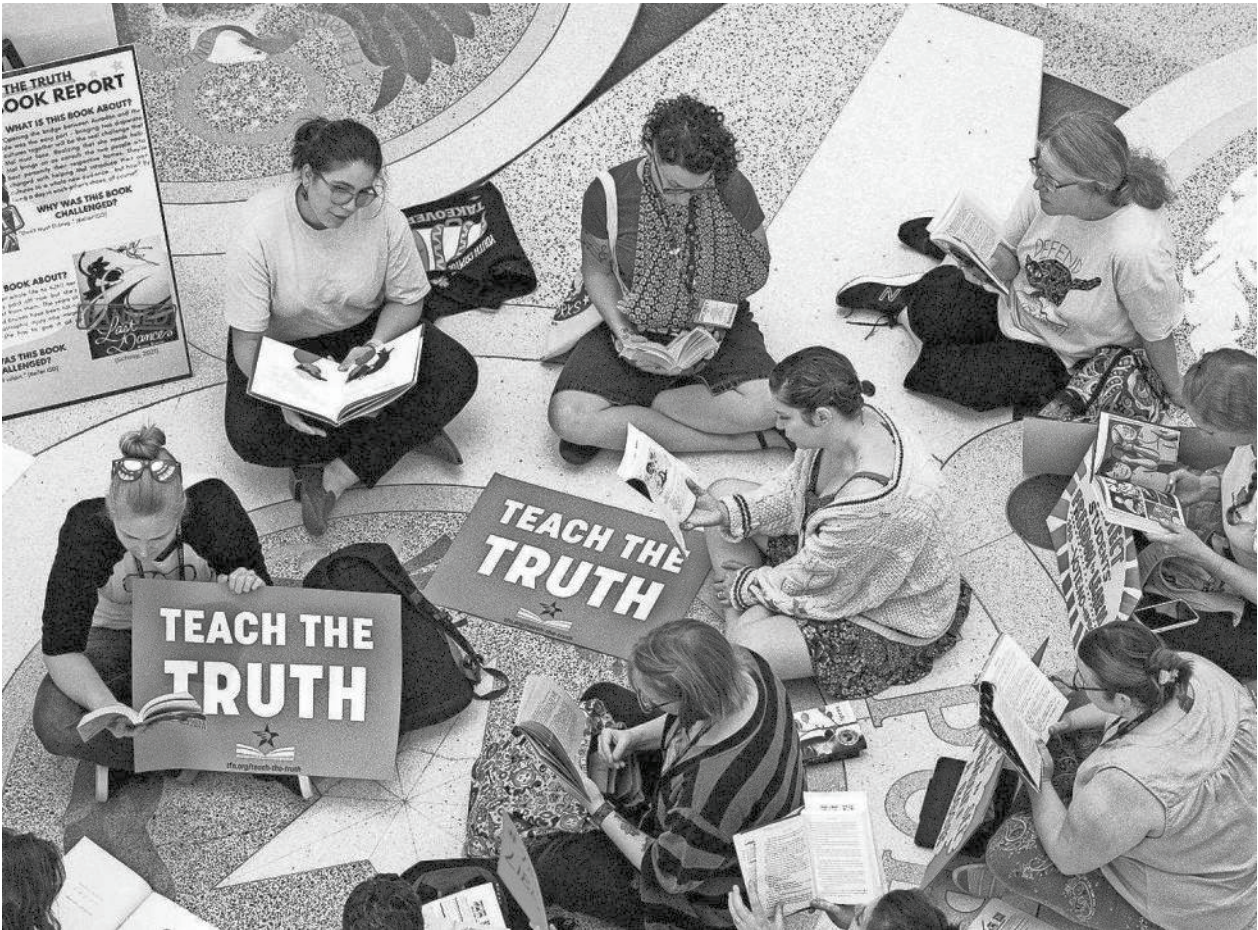
and focus. Implementing health and wellness programs, and being vocal about their need and impact, highlight a department’s willingness to support their responders. And that proactive approach is critical for recruitment and retention – two of the biggest challenges in policing today.

We are fortunate that wellness opportunities are growing in Rhode Island. For example, the Rhode Island Police Chiefs Association recently announced a new health and wellness initiative. Supported by AT&T, the Chiefs Association initiative will launch a warmline for first responders staffed by a clinician with significant law enforcement expertise.

As an animal lover, I am excited to see more police departments embracing the work of comfort dogs to help people in crisis. My friend Cali in Cranston has many colleagues around the state, like Leo in South Kingstown, Brody in Bristol and Gus with the Rhode Island State Police, who help the people in their communities as well as the officers in their departments.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month and is a great opportunity to amplify the importance of first responder wellness, particularly female first responders. This will help us better support all our first responders, inspire women to become first responders and empower them to recognize and develop their potential.

Jacquelyn Baginski is an EMT and is the state representative for District 17 in Cranston. She was recently honored as Legislator of the Year by the Mental Health Association of Rhode Island.



Protesters read in the middle of the Texas Capitol rotunda as the Texas Freedom Network holds a "read-in" last month. Lawmakers were considering a bill that would ban sexually explicit materials from library books in schools. MIKALA COMPTON/AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN VIA USA TODAY NETWORK

Fear of reading is very real in the US

Your Turn

Paula M. Krebs
Guest columnist

While Sen. Jack Reed is leading the national movement to support school libraries with the Right to Read Act, some Rhode Island state legislators in his own party have swallowed the extreme right’s fearmongering rhetoric about reading and are trying to say that lawmakers know better than librarians how to run a library.

In House Bill 6324, Democratic Reps. Samuel Azzinaro, Deborah Fellela, Arthur Corvese, Patricia Serpa, Gregory Costantino, Charlene Lima and Edward Cardillo, along with Republican Rep. Patricia Morgan, identify reading, not guns or violence, as a threat to Rhode Island schoolchildren. They seek to remove books that they identify as “obscene” from school libraries and to send school librarians to jail for allowing children access to those books. The targets of such legislation, in Rhode Island and in so many other states, are books that acknowledge the existence of sexuality, especially books that discuss or depict lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or nonbinary sexual or gender identities.

The Rhode Island legislators label such books “pornographic.” In talking to The Journal about the legislation last week, Rep. Morgan explicitly named particular books. These were not pornography — books that aim to produce sexual arousal. They were books aimed at young adult readers that included discussions of sexuality that is not heterosexuality. And that is why these legislators want to jail librarians — for allowing teen readers to read books that include the possibility of non-heterosexual lives, emotions, dilemmas, experiences.

Fear of reading is very real in the United States at the moment. As the head of an association of literature and language educators, I hear stories every day about attempts to curtail college and secondary school faculty members’ and librarians’ rights to exercise their professional judgment in their jobs. Legislatures in Florida, Ohio, Texas, North Carolina and many other states have decided that they, not professional educators, should get to decide what students get to read, discuss or even say aloud.

I can’t help thinking that Roger Williams would no more approve of throwing librarians in jail than Sen. Jack Reed does.

In Ohio, teachers can’t say that racism even exists. In Virginia, you can’t teach Toni Morrison. If you’re teaching in Florida, the governor has made sure that you “Don’t Say Gay.” In these book-banning states, legislatures, not professional educators, are determining curricular content. Librarians and teachers can no longer assign or make available materials that allow students to think critically about the world around them and their own choices.

And now Rhode Island wants to join that club. As a lesbian mother, I remember when my daughter was in preschool in Providence and how important a book like “Heather Has Two Mommies” was to her. It was important for her to see her life represented and it was important for her schoolmates to see it too. But I also remember how school boards and legislators were trying to ban that book. Poor “Heather” is still at the top of banned book lists, 25 years after my daughter finished preschool, because some folks want to protect children from the knowledge that toddlers with two mommies exist.

Trying to stop someone else from reading about things that make you uncomfortable is a terrible impulse. Rhode Island as a settler colony was founded by Roger Williams on principles of freedom of critical thought. I can’t help thinking that Roger Williams would no more approve of throwing librarians in jail than Jack Reed does.

As Rhode Islanders, we must defend school librarians’ professional expertise, judgment, and rights around these books. If this law is enacted, books about sexual and gender preference will not be the only books to be banned in Rhode Island.

Paula M. Krebs of Providence is the executive director of the Modern Language Association, a professional association for 20,000 language and literature faculty members and researchers.

Missing the forest for the trees: The carbon math of solar panels

Your Turn

Stephen Porder
Guest columnist

The General Assembly is considering competing bills to limit the expansion of solar farms. These farms make emissions-free electricity and help address the urgent threat of climate change. But as The Providence Journal recently noted, “From mid-2018 to last month, 1,178 acres of trees were razed to make way for vast fields of ground mounted solar panels” (“RI struggles to expand solar, protect forests,” News, April 26). Cutting trees to put up solar panels may seem counterproductive. But it makes sense to cut some trees to save the forest.

This is not Orwellian doublespeak. I spent the last 20-odd years studying forests and working to save them. I research their carbon uptake, what limits their growth, and how to restore them.

I also know the threat posed by climate change if we do not rapidly eliminate our burning of fossil fuels. Solar and wind give us the chance to blunt the force of warming and transition to permanent energy independence. So even I, who has spent my career understanding, fighting for and loving forests, see the benefit of a middle ground.

Proponents of solar emphasize that panels produce emissions-free electricity. Opponents reply that trees store carbon in their wood and pull carbon dioxide from the air. Both sides are right. But it’s informative to look at the numbers.

The trees in an acre of Rhode Island forest store the equivalent of about 240,000 pounds of carbon dioxide in their wood. Each year, an acre of forest pulls an additional 11,000 pounds from the air. This is why forests help fight climate change. What about solar panels? They make electricity that would otherwise come from burning fossil fuels. Each year, an acre of solar panels in Rhode Island makes enough electricity to keep about 150,000 pounds of carbon dioxide from fossil fuel-fired power plants out of the air.

This means that were we to clear an acre of trees and burn them (which I’m not advocating), installing solar panels would make up for those emissions in under two years. More importantly, each year thereafter the panels would keep another 150,000 pounds out of the air. An acre of forest would soak up less than a tenth of that.

Forests are more than carbon. They are homes for wildlife. They purify air and water. They are places of recreation, peace and solitude for many — certainly for me. They are also one of the least expensive places to put solar panels. And if we truly want to save our forests, we need solar panels.

In fact, Rhode Island will need thousands of acres of panels to reach our climate goals. Not all should be in forests. We need panels over parking lots, and on roofs. But these are more expensive to install, so for a given amount of money we get fewer panels on parking lots than on the ground. We need all of the above.

Rhode Island has 300,000 acres of forest, almost all regrowing from clearing in the past. Cutting 1% and installing panels would make a big dent in our greenhouse gas emissions and provide cheap, reliable energy not dependent on natural gas prices or supply chains.

Yes, we should preserve the biggest, intact forests — and focus solar around roads and other fragmented, degraded sites. Yes, we need incentives for solar in parking lots. But we can’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Climate change will not wait for perfection.

Stephen Porder is associate provost for sustainability and a professor of ecology, evolutionary and organismal biology at Brown University.