Good Afternoon, Chairman Day and members of the House Select Committee for School Safety. I am Dr. Peter Garland, acting chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. On behalf of the System, I want to thank you for selecting Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania – one of our member institutions – as the site for this hearing. We hope to use this opportunity to demonstrate to you, to our students and to their families that the safety and security of our campuses is among the top priorities of the leadership of the State System.

There are two major aspects to our efforts: targeting our resources in the most aggressive way to assure our campuses are among the safest locations in the Commonwealth and overseeing intensive training and planning in the area of emergency preparedness.

Let me begin with our focus on campus safety. Based on statistics provided as part of the Uniform Crime Report, which is produced annually by the Pennsylvania State Police, our universities experience 70 percent fewer Part 1 – or serious crimes – than the state average. In some areas of the state, our crime rates are 1/10th that of the overall region. Crimes involving the use of weapons, including firearms, are among the lowest of all incidents reported.

Overall, the number of serious crimes being committed on our campuses is half of what it was in 1986 and is continuing to decline. While those numbers are significantly lower today than they were 25 years ago, our universities are committed to remaining vigilant, and to constantly enhancing their efforts to further prevent and respond to criminal activity and emergencies.

Each of our campuses has a fully trained police force. Our officers must pass the same or even more stringent certification requirements as all other police and security officers in the Commonwealth.

PASSHE spends more than $20 million a year on law enforcement and security. Combined, the PASSHE universities employ about 200 police officers and an additional 55 trained security guards. The universities work closely with the municipal police departments in their communities and the State Police to provide for the safety and security of our campuses. At times, they work with federal law enforcement agencies, as well.

We regularly assess our readiness to deal with emergencies of all kinds, including active shooter events, pandemics and mass sheltering, as well as major weather events and flooding.
We constantly review and reassess our emergency operations plans and procedures, and routinely test those plans. In doing so, we also attempt to learn from events that happen around the country and to implement lessons learned. For example, a few years ago we reassessed the procedures we follow at large events after a shooting occurred during a dance at a neighboring university. That reassessment resulted in policy changes on managing events, additional use of equipment such as metal detectors, and supplemental training for our police and security personnel.

Our university emergency personnel have extensive expertise that is frequently sought out by other university, municipal, state, and federal agencies. In addition to these internal resources and reviews, we also use external resources to help with planning and reviewing our procedures. These include the State Police and consultants.

Several years ago, we completed multi-hazard mitigation plans at each of our universities. During that process we utilized a consultant with nationally recognized expertise in this area to assist in the development of the plans and in the completion of detailed threat risk assessments for natural hazards and man-made risks. Currently, our universities are the only universities or colleges in Pennsylvania with their own Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and PEMA approved plans.

We have made significant improvements on our campuses to prepare for emergencies and to prevent criminal behavior, including the installation of improved lighting and additional surveillance cameras, and lockdown capabilities. In recent years, we have been fortunate to receive Homeland Security Grants that have allowed us to purchase specialized equipment and to provide additional training.

Even with those resources, I am sure you are aware that you can never be too safe, and additional funding for further facilities improvements and emergency personnel can always be put to good use.

To be certain that we continue to enhance our public safety and security, PASSHE’s Board of Governors announced in April the formation of a task force comprised of representatives from both internal and external constituency groups to study all aspects of university police and safety operations, including campus crime trends, funding and staffing levels, reporting compliance, staff training, safety, threat assessment and university policies and practices. The group has recently begun its work and we look forward to learning more about what is going well and what can be done better. The goal in all of this is to assure our students, parents, employees and campus visitors that our universities remain safe.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for us is balancing the open-campus environment expectations of a public university system with the acceptable forcefulness of the police presence.
Our campuses do not have clearly defined, fenced, gated, and patrolled perimeters, with strict command and controlled occupancy. They are open, free-flowing spaces that are usually integrated into the surrounding community to the point that it is often hard to distinguish where one starts and the other ends.

On any given day, we may have major events that are open to the public, such as concerts, speaking engagements and sporting events, or even protests. We are major assets in our communities and we wouldn’t have it any other way.

Our police officers serve a constituency that includes a large population of mostly 18- to 25-year-olds. Their unique charge is to serve these young adults in such a way that fosters both trust and respect. The success of our officers is measured in the cooperation and willingness of the campus communities to assist them in creating a safe environment.

In closing, I would like to reassure you that we continue to improve our planning and our readiness to deal with major hazards and threats, and we maintain an open mind toward implementing new ideas to help reduce our risks.

At this time, we would be happy to respond to any questions you might have.