

Patrol shift changes at schools cut

BY RICK BRAND
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Suffolk police officials have ended a pilot project to improve student safety by making schools relief points for patrol cars after a violent threat was aimed at police involved in the program, though not at a school.

Stuart Cameron, chief of department, told the county legislature's public safety committee last week that the pilot project was terminated Dec. 20.

Ending the project followed an incident in which a suicidal man who had been arrested previously and committed for treatment "made direct threats to the sector car operators in [the] Kings Park area that he was going to come back to the relief point and shoot them."

"We immediately relocated the relief point out of the school and back to the fire department," said Cameron. He said the individual was committed again for treatment.

"Because we immediately removed the relief point, we do not believe there was any danger to the school," Cameron said in response to Newsday questions.

Cameron said the man, whom police did not identify, "did have access to weapons, to both long guns and handguns, which were taken away from him."

After consultations, school officials agreed that "the potential drawbacks are greater than the benefits we would derive in safety," Cameron said of the program.

Cameron said the police department will "encourage sector car operators to visit the schools on a frequent, but irregular basis."

That is "better for security, rather than permanently relocating relief

points to the school," he said.

Relief points are used for patrol shift changes.

The pilot program, which began in early October, involved Kings Park, Smithtown East, Hauppauge and Sachem North high schools, all in the Fourth Precinct.

Police officials say the idea arose as a way to speed up response times and bolster deterrence at schools after mass shooting incidents including the one at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in February 2018.

Cameron said the department encountered other issues that made operations more difficult than at local firehouses, which operate around the clock.

In some cases, snowplowing of school parking lots didn't occur immediately on weekends and holidays, and some lots had gates that could hamper access.

Also, the beginning and end of duty tours often coincided with school openings and closings, Cameron said.

"The last thing we want to do is create circumstances where police have trouble responding to an emergency," said Ken Bossert, head of the Suffolk School Superintendents Association.

The county legislature's Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory (D-Copiague) called the department's decision "prudent."

But he said a "middle ground" might involve using firehouses near schools to help speed response.

"I appreciate that Chief Cameron made the effort," said Legis. Robert Trotta (R-Fort Salonga), who introduced a resolution in September directing police to use schools as relief points when practical. "But maybe in the future, circumstances might change."

'TARGETED' IHOP

Police say gunfire at Ronkonkoma eatery believed to be gang-related

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Gunfire erupted Monday afternoon inside a busy Lake Ronkonkoma IHOP filled with nearly two dozen customers — a frightening episode that ended with one man shot and another in custody facing charges, Suffolk police said.

The chaotic scene, which unfolded about 1:24 p.m. inside the restaurant at 339 Portion Rd., was initially described to police as an "active shooter," but late Monday, police said they believed it was an "internal" dispute between Bloods gang members.

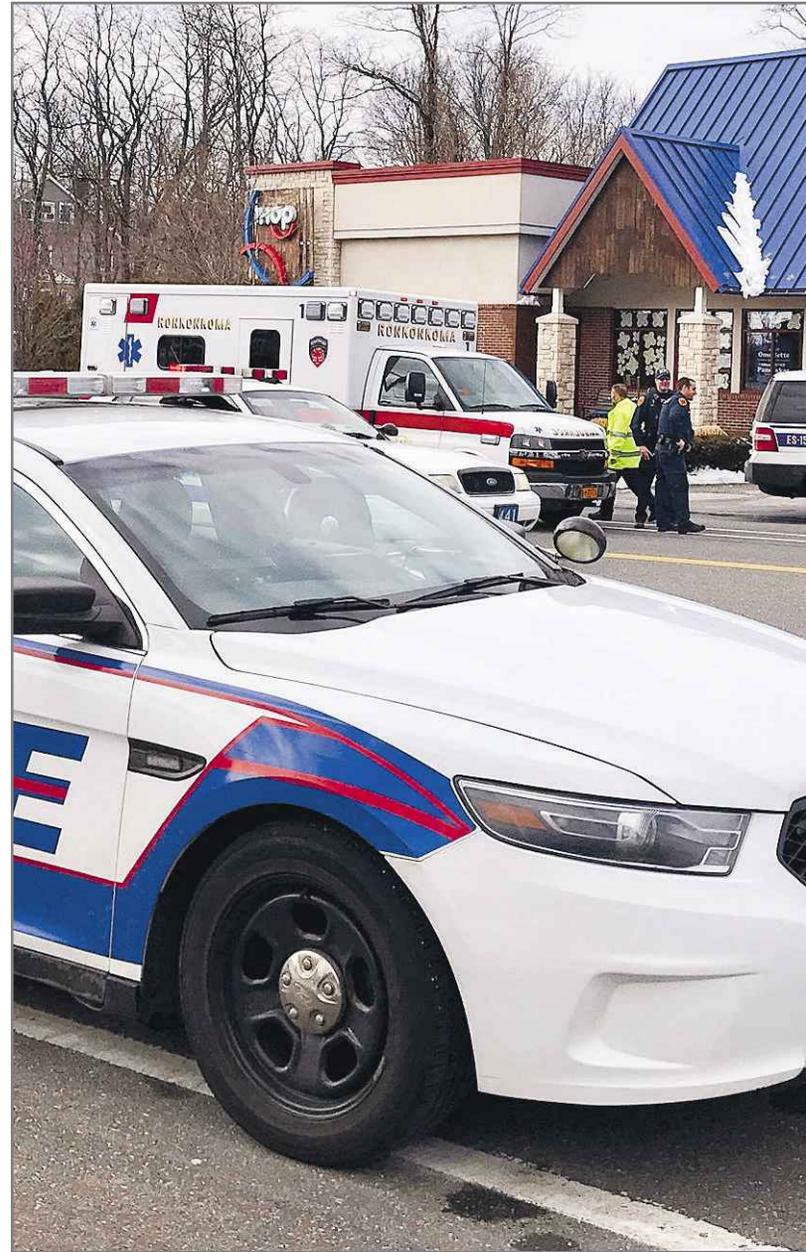
Less than two hours later and eight miles east in Coram, three men were shot in two separate incidents that police also suspect involved Bloods members or their associates. Monday night, investigators were still checking if all three shootings were related.

In the IHOP shooting, multiple shots rang out as frantic customers hid throughout the restaurant, fearing for their lives and calling 911, authorities said.

There were about 20 patrons in the restaurant, including the family with a child in a high chair sitting directly across from the shooter, police said. None of the other customers were injured but a bullet fragment hit the sweater of one female patron without penetrating her body, Cameron said.

"It's very clear that the potential for this could have been dire," he said. "It could have been much worse. The potential was definitely there for it to be much worse."

The 911 reports drew a massive police response within two minutes of the calls. But later police officials and Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone quickly sought to assure the public that this had not been an "active shooter" situation.



One man was hurt and another arrested after a shooting Monday at

"We believe this was a targeted shooting and we believe the suspects had an interaction before the shooting," Suffolk Police Chief of Department Stuart Cameron said at a news conference Monday. "We do not believe this was a random act or that there is any reason for the public to be concerned other than the fact that it occurred in a crowded restaurant."

The shooting occurred at 1:24 p.m. after a man, sitting with a group of people, got up from their table and approached another group of patrons at a sec-

ond table, Cameron said. Moments later, a person sitting at the second table fired multiple shots at the victim, who was hit once, Cameron said.

The suspect fled but was apprehended by a Sixth Precinct officer around the corner from the restaurant at Portion and Holbrook roads, police said. Several other people who had been sitting with the suspect were detained by police but have not been arrested, officials said.

The victim was taken to Stony Brook University Hospital in a private vehicle and was in