



Luther S. Olsen
State Senator
14th District

TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Senator Luther Olsen
DATE: Tuesday, November 19, 2019
SUBJECT: Testimony for Senate Bill 496

Thank you members of the Senate Committee on Education for holding a hearing and allowing me to testify in support of Senate Bill 496 (SB 496).

This bill was drafted as part of the package of bills that came out of the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention. The task force was created earlier this session and held six public hearings throughout the state, it was charged with evaluating the current resources available for suicide prevention as well as identifying areas that could be improved upon.

The number of lives that are taken by suicide is going up not only in the state, but across the nation. For many people who are struggling it is easier to discuss personal problems with someone who isn't a close friend, parent, or relative and for young people it can be even more confusing knowing where to turn in times of need. The anonymity that a phone helpline provides along with the kind reassuring voice on the other side has helped to save numerous lives.

This legislation is based on a suggestion that was brought to the task force's attention by a family that was affected by youth suicide. It will require that all future student identification cards that are distributed by schools include the telephone number for the one of the national suicide prevention hotlines that provide free, confidential, emotional support to people who call in. This bill does not require schools to print identification cards if they do not already do so. It is our hope that by printing this information on the back of school IDs it will help raise awareness and potentially save the lives of students who are in emotional distress and need help.

Again, thank you members of the Senate Education Committee for holding a hearing today. I ask for your support on SB 496 and am available to answer any questions that you may have.



TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Jodi Bloch, Director of State Government Relations, Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Tuesday, November 19, 2019
RE: Support for SB 496 & SB 498 — Youth suicide prevention efforts

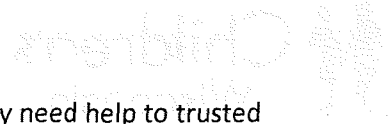
Chairman Olsen and members of the committee, thank you for bringing these bills forward for a hearing enabling the opportunity to provide feedback on legislation aimed at youth suicide prevention.

Children's Wisconsin (Children's) would like to acknowledge Speaker Vos, Chairwoman Ballweg, Vice Chair Doyle and all of the members of the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention for their work on this important and pressing topic. Statistics show that Wisconsin's youth suicide rate is consistently higher than the national rate: in Wisconsin, 3.4 youth per 1,000 take their own lives, compared to 2.5 youth per 1,000 nationally. Hospitalizations for mental health are also significantly higher in Wisconsin: 223 per 100,000, compared to 199 per 100,000 nationally. We know that a shortage of providers in Wisconsin, and across the country, contributes to the difficulty families have in accessing mental and behavioral health care. We also need to focus on prevention through identifying mental health concerns earlier, providing care sooner and in more places meeting kids and families where they are at, and reducing the stigma around accessing mental and behavioral health care.

We know these things to be borne out not just in the facts and statistics, but also through our experience treating and caring for kids and families. Addressing the mental and behavioral health needs of kids and families and addressing barriers to care is critically important to reducing youth suicides in Wisconsin. That's why one of Children's top priorities is to integrate mental and behavioral health (MBH) care throughout the different patient access points: from primary care to specialty care to the emergency room. We experience firsthand the difficulty in hiring MBH professionals which is why we developed an innovative MBH therapist fellowship program. We know that we need to reach kids where they are, which is why we are committed to growing our partnership with nearly 50 schools to provide MBH services across the state, from the Chippewa Valley area to Racine and in between. We also partner with other providers to find ways to collaborate to provide better care. Children's partners with ThedaCare and Ascension health systems to deliver much-needed MBH services to kids and families in the Fox Valley area through Catalpa. We can't be as impactful as we need to be without our partners, including our elected officials.

We recognize that a multifaceted, collaborative approach is needed to help prevent youth suicides and improve mental and behavioral health care access. We know that we need to improve the care and support offered to children and teens in crisis. Including suicide prevention and crisis hotlines on student identification cards, as outlined in SB 496, can help ensure students have easy and quick access to potentially life-saving support. Additionally, including this information could help to reduce stigma around accessing mental health care services and reinforce that students are not alone and that their school community cares about and supports them.

The importance of peer influence in a young person's life is well-documented. Peer-to-peer programs have demonstrated positive outcomes and increase the protective factors within a school environment. Peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs educate student leaders on mental health topics and signs of depression and suicide, increase the connection to and positive perception of supportive adults, and help reduce the stigma of mental illness.



Peer-to-peer programs encourage students to seek help and refer others who may need help to trusted adults. Additionally, these programs can help promote a more inclusive and supportive school culture. While we support the programming outlined in SB 498, we believe that the grant amounts awarded to schools by the Department of Public Instruction should be increased. Our school partners indicate that \$1,000 per school is not sufficient to cover the start-up costs of peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs; costs per school are approximately \$5,000.

Children's is glad to serve as a resource on this important public health matter facing our state, and in particular, our most vulnerable community members. Thanks again for holding a hearing on SB 496 and SB 498. If you have any questions, comments or concerns after the hearing, please feel free to contact me via email at jbloch@chw.org or via phone at 608-217-9508.