

Alberta Darling
Wisconsin State Senator
Co-Chair, Joint Committee on Finance

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Education

Senate Bill 498

Tuesday, November 19, 2019

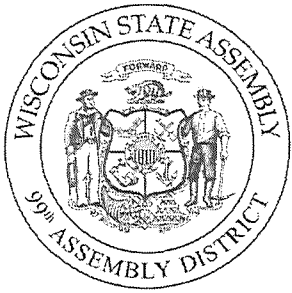
Thank you Chair Olsen and committee members for taking the time to hear Senate Bill 498. This important piece of legislation will fund peer-to-peer suicide prevention grants inside of high schools across Wisconsin.

Suicide is the 9th leading cause of death in Wisconsin. On average, one person dies by suicide every 9 hours in our state. For those between the ages of 10 and 18, suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death. According to the Office of Children's Mental Health, 24% of Wisconsin kids have been diagnosed with a mental illness, yet kids still face serious stigma when discussing their mental health problems. These statistics are deeply troubling and need to be addressed.

Peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs are seeing success across the nation. HOPE Squad and Source of Strength are two leading programs, both of which utilize peer suicide prevention. Peer suicide prevention programs focus on changing the way kids talk about mental health, train peers to identify signs of crisis and seek help, and train student leaders for kids to contact when they need additional support. This model of community engagement and peer support opens doors for students seeking help and changes the culture surrounding mental health in high schools.

Senate Bill 498 provides \$250,000 in FY 2020-21 to support peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs in high schools. Applicant high schools will be eligible for up to \$1,000 grants, which are eligible for renewal up to three times. Priority will be given to schools looking to implement peer-to-peer suicide programs.

Increasing the availability of peer suicide prevention programs in schools will help kids get the help they need. Importantly, these programs will help kids see a support network in their school and help them understand that they are not alone. I would like to thank the student leaders across our nation who have shown that this model can help peers. I hope to count on your support for this initiative.



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Senate Committee on Education
SB 498 – Peer-to-Peer Suicide Prevention Programs
November 19, 2019

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for holding a public hearing on Senate Bill 498. This bipartisan legislation will award grants to support peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs in high schools across our state.

SB 498 is part of a broader package of bills recommended by the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention of which I am a member of. We held six public hearings across the state meeting with countless mental health advocates, medical professionals, families and survivors. We sought to evaluate current resources for suicide prevention and identify opportunities to target and assist at-risk individuals who need our help.

All too often, individuals struggling with mental health and suicidal thoughts do not know who to turn to or where to get help and information. This is especially true for many adolescents and their families. SB 498 would create a grant program for peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs like HOPE Squad and Source of Strength which have had a huge impact on high school students. Trained peer leaders that come out of these programs are much more likely to refer suicidal friends to an adult. These programs also help diminish some of the negative stigma around seeking help. Overall, the peer leaders coming out of these programs enhance the protective factors that help reduce suicide in our student populations.

If passed, SB 498 would require the Department of Public Instruction to create a grant program and award grants for peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs in public, private and tribal high schools. Depending on their needs, schools may be awarded up to \$1,000. By providing a way for schools to apply for financial resources necessary to start these peer-to-peer programs, we can have a direct impact in reducing suicides in our adolescent population.

Increasing awareness among students and giving schools the tools they need to promote peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs, SB 498 will help address the tragic matter of suicide challenging our state.

Thank you Committee members for your consideration of Senate Bill 498 and I ask for your support in passing this important legislation.

Representative Cindi Duchow

**Senate Committee on Education
November 19, 2019**

**Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Statement in Support of 2019 Senate Bill 498**

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments in support of 2019 Senate Bill 498 (SB 498), relating to grants to support peer-to-peer suicide prevention in high schools.

Description of Senate Bill 498

This legislation directs DPI to establish a competitive grant program to award grants for the purpose of supporting peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs in public, private, and tribal high schools. Under the bill DPI may award a high school up to \$1,000. The bill further specifies that DPI may renew a grant for an individual school for up to three additional school years.

This legislation was included in the recommendations issued by the Speakers Taskforce on Suicide Prevention last month. The Department would like to thank the taskforce, and especially Representatives Joan Ballweg and Steve Doyle, the respective Chair and Vice Chair, for their work and leadership to expand suicide prevention efforts in Wisconsin schools.

Background

DPI biennially administers a statewide high school survey provided by the Centers for Disease Control to measure student perceptions. The 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey results show that suicide is a major concern for Wisconsin youth, and that anxiety and depression are common. The survey also points to the fact that young people in distress are twice as likely to turn to peers, rather than adults. Equipping youth to work effectively with friends or other peers who may be suicidal, is therefore an important component of Wisconsin's youth suicide prevention strategy.

Peer-to-peer training is an integral component of many youth suicide-prevention programs. The peer-to-peer model trains students to recognize warning signs in depressed or suicidal peers, and to empower them to report those signs to an adult. Peers are considered to be the most effective receptors of warning signs because they spend so much time together and are able to recognize when someone is acting differently.

HOPE Squad is one example of a school-based peer-to-peer training program. The program is characterized by partnerships between schools and local mental health and community agencies. HOPE Squad students are trained by knowledgeable adults to be active listeners and supported by those adults to help and respond to peers who are struggling with emotional issues, such as depression and suicidality, as well as reporting behavior and concerns to adults.

Another is the Sources of Strengths program. This is a strength-based comprehensive wellness program focused primarily on suicide prevention but also touches on other issues such as substance abuse and violence. The program is based on a relational connections model that uses teams of peer leaders who are mentored by adult advisors to change peer social norms about help seeking. It also encourages students to individually assess and develop strengths in their life. Peer leaders interact with their classmates to have one-on-one conversations and develop materials to promote protective factors in students' lives. The program promotes and focuses on connectivity, school bonding, peer-adult partnerships, and help seeking behaviors.

Key benefits of a Peer-to-Peer training are:

- It reaches young people where they are most likely to seek help. Young people are more likely to turn to peers in times of emotional distress than to adults.¹
- They are a recognized strategy by the US Department of Health and Human Services. Having a program to engage students in suicide prevention is on the Checklist of Suicide Prevention Activities.²
- There is evidence that peer support programs make a difference in reducing risk factors.³

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide written comments in support of SB 498.

¹Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. nd. "Summary Report. 2017 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey." Accessed October 23, 2019. <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/yrbs-2017-final-summary-report.pdf>

²US Dept. of Health and Human Services. n.d. "Suicide Prevention A Toolkit for High Schools." Accessed October 23, 2019. <https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma12-4669.pdf>

³Peter A. Wyman, et al. "An Outcome Evaluation of the Sources of Strength Suicide Prevention Program Delivered by Adolescent Peer Leaders in High Schools", *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 9 (September 1, 2010): pp. 1653-1661. Accessed October 23, 2019 at <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.190025>



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

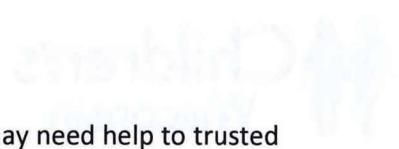
Chairman Olsen and members of the committee, thank you for bringing these bills forward for a hearing enabling the opportunity to provide feedback on legislation aimed at youth suicide prevention.

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.

