



CINDI DUCHOW

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 99th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

(608) 266-3007
Toll-Free (888) 534-0099

Rep.Duchow@legis.wi.gov
RepDuchow.com
P.O. Box 8952
Madison, WI 53708-8952

Assembly Committee on Education

Public Hearing, AB 528

October 24th, 2019

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for holding a public hearing and giving me the opportunity to testify on Assembly Bill 528. This bipartisan legislation will award grants to support peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs in high schools across our state. AB 528 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. AB 528 creates grants 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 and increase the perception of adult support in a positive manner. Overall, the peer leaders coming out of these programs enhance the protective factors that help reduce suicide in our student populations.

AB 528 calls for the Department of 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.

By increasing awareness among students and giving schools the tools they need to promote peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs, AB 528 can help address the tragic matter of suicide challenging our state.

Thank you Committee members for your time and consideration of Assembly Bill 528. I would be happy to answer any of your questions.

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

Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Education

Assembly Bill 528

Thursday, October 24, 2019

Thank you Chair Thiesfeldt and committee members for taking the time to hear Assembly Bill 528. 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.

Assembly Bill 528 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.

Assembly Committee on Education
October 24, 2019

**Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Testimony in Support of 2019 Assembly Bill 528**

Thank you Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the committee for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of 2019 Assembly Bill 528 (AB 528). My name is Grant Huber. I am the Legislative Liaison at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and with me today is Brenda Jennings, Assistant Director of the Student Services, Prevention, and Wellness Team.

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 CDC 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 testify in support of AB 528. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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/sspwp/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>



ROB STAFSHOLT

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 29th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

(608) 266-7683
Toll Free: (888) 529-0029
Rep.Stafsholt@legis.wi.gov

P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708-8953

AB 528 Talking Points

- Thank you for allowing me to testify on Assembly Bill 528
- At the request of a number of my constituents, I am here to testify in support of this important piece of legislation.
- As previously mentioned, the bill provides funding in which schools can apply for to start peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs.
- These “Hope Squads” can play a vital role in keeping our students and children safe.
- ****Story of constituent Conversation****
- We must do all we can to establish these groups and give our students yet another tool to use in times of need.
- Trained sponsors, like what we have in my area of the state, have proven to be successful in reducing suicides.

TO: Assembly Committee on Education
FROM: Jodi Bloch, Director of State Government Relations, Children's Wisconsin
DATE: Thursday, October 24, 2019
RE: Support for AB 531 & AB 528 — Youth suicide prevention efforts

Chairman Thiesfeldt 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 AB 531, 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 AB 528, 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. Therefore, we encourage you to consider amending the bill to increase the grant amount per school accordingly.

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 AB 531 and AB 528. 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.

2019 Assembly Bill 528

My own personal experience from a small town and high school with few resources informs the work I do supporting schools through my role today. I was selected as one of the Natural Helpers group members by my peers in high school. We took this selection seriously and helped our school grow closer through what we gained from the program. We learned to talk openly and honestly about things like depression, self harm, eating disorders, and suicide. We learned that mental health is just as important as physical health and were able to teach that to classmates and teachers alike.

My friend died by suicide when I was a sophomore. These programs do not "fix" suicidal thoughts nor do they put the expectation on students to prevent all suicides. However, they do encourage us to do everything we can to remind one another of reasons for living. After my friend died, it was those in our student group who had the skills to be there for struggling classmates. We obviously weren't the only ones with skills and empathy, but we had the extra training to be supportive. Our teachers were able to identify who was struggling and who might be a good person in the group for them to talk with. I remember processing my friend's death with our advisor in the group and planning how we would support our peers in the coming days. This group was such a strong support network in our school.

My experience in a program like this won't be the same as everyone's, but these programs based on peer to peer support and include trainings specific to resilience, mental health, and suicide will strengthen today's high school schoolers.

We have options: Hope Squad, Sources of Strength, Signs of Suicide, Talk Saves Lives, More Than Sad. It's good to give schools a menu to choose from because programs are not one size fits all.

It's important to vet a program for its evidence, and I would strongly encourage the use of evidence-based programs. However, some programs, some of which are culturally specific, are still new and only evidence informed. We should plan to monitor and evaluate the impact of programs to ensure they are making the impact we hope for. I don't have the answers for evaluating all programs, but it's an important piece of suicide prevention to consider and pursue.

I also don't know an average cost for all programs, but one costs \$6,000 for four years plus a \$500 membership fee and initial training costs. \$1,000 per school will possibly get a school started, but this will not make a huge impact. Schools will need to look elsewhere for funding. I would advocate for this amount of funding to be increased.

* In my role with MHA as the lead on our 51 local health department learning community for adolescent suicide prevention, we have a small amount of funds allocated towards resources for local health departments to assist their local school districts. This is a critical partnership. Schools cannot be expected to do this on their own. We should play attention to existing community efforts and see where we can build upon the work already being done. *This funding would complement existing efforts.*

Finally, DPI should have the most influence in how this support to schools should look as they have been doing this work and supporting schools and students. I look to them for guidance on how to move forward. *In addition to Assembly Bills 529 + 531*

I support Assembly Bill 528 for peer to peer high school programs and I offer myself as a resource as needed. Thank you.

Leah Rolando, MSW

Suicide Prevention Specialist

Mental Health America of Wisconsin

600 W. Virginia St., Suite 502

Milwaukee, WI 53204

Main Office: 414-276-3122

Direct: 414-336-7970

Pronouns: she/her/hers



Mental Health America
of Wisconsin

Prevent Suicide Wisconsin

Prevent Suicide Greater Milwaukee