



## **Senate Bill 527: Grants for Suicide Prevention Programming Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families**

### **Testimony of Senator Joan Ballweg November 1, 2023**

Good afternoon, Chair James and members of the committee, and thank you for holding a hearing on SB 527.

Suicide rates are continuing to rise at an alarming rate. According to the Department of Health Service's 2022 *Suicide in Wisconsin: Impact Response Report*, the rate of suicide in Wisconsin has increased by 32% from 2000-2020. The report also estimates that for each suicide death, another 135 individuals are affected by the loss, which means that in 2020 over 116,000 Wisconsinites grieved the loss of an individual.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to realize it is not just the impact of deaths by suicide that affect our communities. Unfortunately, too many quietly struggle with suicidal ideation and engage in self-harm or even attempt suicide. Of particular concern are our youth, where one in six Wisconsin public high school students reported suicidal ideation.<sup>2</sup> However, many people who are struggling do not have access to resources. In rural counties of Wisconsin, suicide rates are higher than in urban counties<sup>3</sup>, and yet rural areas often have less access to mental health services. We must provide resources to meet people where they are, which is what this bill addresses.

Under this legislation, the Department of Health Services is required to award grants to local mental health organizations or coalitions for suicide prevention programming by using \$250,000 per year from the federal community mental health services block grant. An organization receiving a grant is required to match the grant at a value equal to at least 20% of the grant, and grant amounts will be limited to no more than \$25,000 per organization in a particular fiscal year. The goal is to increase the number of local mental health coalitions and to support current efforts of volunteers that are directly engaged in their communities through peer support, education initiatives, community workshops, and navigation of services available to individuals.

This is modeled after the success of the Monroe County Mental Health Coalition, which is a partnership of local government, education, health, and law enforcement entities. In the 14<sup>th</sup> Senate District, which I represent, the Adams County Human Services Department and Sheriff's Department team up to do this work. But, their efforts are funded by donations and brat frys. We should do more to support these activities in every county across the state.

We know that suicide is a complex and growing problem in our state, but we also know that we can make strategic and targeted investments to support communities and those who are considering suicide.

Thank you for your consideration, and I am happy to answer any questions.

<sup>1</sup> Suicide in Wisconsin: Impact Response Report (December 2022): <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02657a-22.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Suicide in Wisconsin: Impact and Response (September 2020): <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02657.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Suicide in Wisconsin: Impact Response Report (December 2022): <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02657a-22.pdf>



# NANCY VANDERMEER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 70<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

TO: Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families

FROM: State Representative Nancy VanderMeer

DATE: November 1, 2023

SUBJECT: Testimony in support of Senate Bill 527 - relating to grants for suicide prevention programming

Thank you Chairman James for holding a hearing on Senate Bill 527 today. This bill would award grants to local mental health organizations for the purpose of suicide prevention. Using the grant money, mental health coalitions and organizations will be able to train teachers, first responders and families in a variety of ways, including on how to assist individuals in crisis and refer them to find additional appropriate assistance. Additionally, the grant money could help organizations implement suicide prevention programs, have sufficient staffing and resources for mental health programming and education, and more.

Under this proposal, the Department of Health Services is required to award grants, using federal funds from the community mental health services block grant, to local mental health organizations or coalitions for suicide prevention programming. An organization receiving a grant is required to match the grant at a value equal of at least 20% of the grant, and grant amounts will be limited to no more than \$25,000 per organization in a particular fiscal year. This legislation was initially introduced in 2019 as part of a broader package of bills recommended by the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention. In 2019, AB 530/SB 504 passed the Assembly 92-3, as amended. In 2021, Assembly Bill 210/Senate Bill 253 passed unanimously out of the Assembly Committee on Mental Health and the Senate Committee on Human Services, Children and Families.

As alluded to initially, this particular proposal seeks to grow the number of local mental health organizations and coalitions throughout Wisconsin. Local mental health organizations provide help and resources to those in our communities experiencing mental health issues and suicidal thoughts. They are staffed by mental health professionals and volunteers who direct people to services that are available to them, provide education to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health, and teach community stakeholders such as police, teachers, and family members how to assist when a person is in crisis. Often, mental health organizations hold workshops, community meetings, or lessons in schools to raise awareness about mental health and what help is available. In addition, mental health coalitions offer peer support to people



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suffering from a mental health issue by offering an outlet for someone to talk with a trained and compassionate listener.

The idea for this bill came from testimony received by the task force modeled after the Monroe County Mental Health Coalition's work. This community coalition provides education focused on reducing stigma and promoting awareness about suicide's warning signs throughout the community. The coalition is a partnership with local government, education, health, and law enforcement entities so they can better help residents in crisis. Local mental health organizations have great potential to be a frontline resource for individuals struggling with suicidal thoughts throughout our communities. With the help of these grants, more localities will be able to start a mental health organization or strengthen an existing one to help eliminate stigma and save lives.

Thank you again for the opportunity for a public hearing on this bill and to share testimony with you today. I respectfully ask that you join Senator Ballweg, myself, and our other colleagues who have signed on in support of this legislation, in supporting this legislation.



State of Wisconsin  
Department of Health Services

Tony Evers, Governor  
Kirsten L. Johnson, Secretary

**TO:** Members of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, Substance Abuse Prevention, Children and Families

**FROM:** HJ Waukau, Legislative Director Wisconsin Department of Health Services

**DATE:** November 1, 2023

**RE:** SB 527 relating to: grants for suicide prevention programming

The Department of Health Services (DHS) would like to submit written testimony for information only on Senate Bill 527 (SB 527), regarding grants for suicide programming. SB 527 would require DHS to award individual grants of up to \$25,000 (not to exceed \$250,000 in total) from the federal Community Mental Health Services Block Grant, to specified entities for the purposes of suicide prevention programming. Recipients of the grants would also be required to provide at least 20 percent in matching funds or in-kind services in order to be able to receive grant funds under the bill. If they do not meet the funding requirements, they would not be able to be awarded funds under SB 257.

DHS oversees and administers a wide array of mental health and substance use disorder treatment services for Wisconsin, much of which are under the administration of DHS' Division of Care and Treatment Services (DCTS). This spectrum includes but is not limited to: crisis services, addiction treatment and recovery, mental health treatment, administration of seven state-run facilities, intellectual disabilities, grant administration, and suicide prevention. DCTS also oversees a series of federal block grants designed to provide resources to fund multiple mental health and substance use disorder treatment services. For state fiscal year 2024, DCTS currently administers \$14,811,489 from the federal block grant, as awarded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The block grant funds initiatives for community aids, children's mental health, family and peer supports, recovery and intervention, training activities, data and evaluation, protection and patient advocacy, and state operations. Within the federal block grant DHS currently oversees a \$225,000 grant to Mental Health America for the purposes of suicide prevention.

SB 527 would require DHS to award funding from the federal block grant for the purposes of suicide prevention programming. DHS supports more funding for suicide prevention and as a part of Governor Evers' "Year of Mental Health" supported a \$1,000,000 GPR allocation for suicide prevention programming. However, this funding was removed from the budget by the Joint Committee on Finance in Omnibus Budget Motion #10.<sup>1</sup> While dedicating more funding for suicide prevention is a laudable goal, the manner in which SB 527 would allocate funding would require DHS to take funding away from a current recipient of block grant funds. Each area

<sup>1</sup> Legislative Fiscal Bureau, last accessed October 26, 2023, [https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/jfcmotions/2023/2023\\_05\\_02/000\\_budget\\_motions/motion\\_10\\_omnibus\\_budget\\_motion](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/jfcmotions/2023/2023_05_02/000_budget_motions/motion_10_omnibus_budget_motion).

and awardee are critical components in Wisconsin's efforts to improve mental health for its residents and reallocating funding would destabilize existing programs and services. It would be incredibly challenging for DHS to pick winners and losers for scarce resources particularly when current recipients were awarded funds through competitive grant applications.

Additionally, the size of the grants, no more than \$25,000, is rather small compared to other initiatives overseen by DHS. DHS is concerned potential partners and awardees would find DHS contracting requirements excessive for this amount of funding and it would provide a barrier for smaller organizations who would otherwise be interested in applying for suicide prevention programming. It is DHS's experience that match requirements for grants have a chilling effect on potential applicants. SB 527 would also put an additional burden on fiscal and procurement staff at DHS given the small total dollars compared to the staff efforts needed for ten new contracts. As drafted DHS anticipates there would be many new vendors that would need help with navigating the requisite procurement and payment systems. DHS estimates these efforts would require 1.0 FTE in order to successfully administer the program.

To help address these concerns DHS recommends the creation of a statewide suicide prevention program in-line with what was proposed by Governor Evers in the 2023-25 budget. Such a program could coordinate suicide prevention efforts, develop and provide educational materials and public awareness campaigns on suicide prevention, conduct suicide prevention trainings for those interacting with at-risk individuals, coordinate with relevant stakeholders on addressing barriers to services, and centralize suicide prevention resources online. In lieu of a statewide suicide prevention program DHS recommends that it be allowed to award a single contract to one entity, which could then coordinate and manage the smaller individual grants. DHS also recommends removing both the match requirements for awardees and the caps on grants amounts. This would encourage a broader-based pool of potential applicants and provide greater flexibility for the awarding of funding.

DHS thanks the Committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony for information only and is happy to answer questions and address follow-up as needed.



# MONROE COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

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October 31, 2023

Senator Ballweg,

I am writing in support of SB 527, a bill that would award suicide prevention programming grants to communities in Wisconsin.

Monroe County receives roughly 800 crisis contacts each year through our 24/7 crisis line. Many of those contacts were able to safety plan at home with a trusted support and additional resources. The county medical examiner reported that in 2022 there were fourteen deaths caused by suicide and in 2023 there have been six.

Monroe County has established a Suicide Prevention Task Force to focus efforts on preventing and reducing the amount of deaths caused by suicide in our community. The mission is to provide resources, education, and postvention services to the citizens of Monroe County by raising awareness of services available to individuals and their loved ones. The task force is in process of planning a mental health fair, suicide awareness walk, and prevention advertisements to play in our local movie theater. These events will help us reach a larger amount of community members that may not be familiar with identifying mental health symptoms or how to access support.

Additional suicide prevention programming funds would allow more opportunity for our task force to reach a broader range of community members and further our mission to prevent suicides in our county.

Thank you for the efforts that you have put forth with this bill.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alicia Braun".

Alicia Braun  
Clinical Administrator  
Monroe County Department of Human Services

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The mission of the Monroe County Department of Human Services is to serve people, with an emphasis on Monroe County residents, by Empowering participant responsibility and choice toward safe and independent lifestyles through the delivery of services in response to assessed needs.

It intends to achieve this mission through providing public awareness, resource and referral information, economic support, and direct provision of services in a fiscally responsible manner.