



### Testimony in Support of House Bill 503

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair Slaby, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the House Education and Career Readiness Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in support of important legislation that can help save the lives of Ohio's youth.

I am Sandy Williams, Chair of the Board of Directors for the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation ("OSPF"). OSPF is a non-profit 501 (C)(3) organization whose mission is to promote suicide prevention as a public health issue and advance evidence-based awareness, intervention and methodology strategies that will support priority populations and healthy communities. OSPF is a key player in ensuring that Ohio is a national leader in cutting-edge, evidence-based suicide awareness and prevention efforts.

The Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation is proud to join Rep. Anielski in supporting HB 503, which modifies HB 543 which became law in 2013. The law currently requires each **public** K-12<sup>th</sup> grade school board to incorporate youth suicide awareness and prevention training into existing in-service training requirements every 5 years for a person who is employed by any school district or educational service center to work in a school as a teacher, nurse, school psychologist or administrator and any other personnel that the board determines appropriate. HB 503 would expand the impact of this bill by requiring both public and **private** school boards to incorporate suicide awareness and prevention training. The Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation has played a key role in making suicide prevention trainings which meet the requirements of HB 543 accessible to school personnel throughout the state. **We must not stop now** in our efforts to promote suicide prevention.

Unfortunately, we have all seen the tragic consequences of unrecognized, undiagnosed and untreated mental health problems in our youth. Specifically, in Ohio suicide is the second leading cause of death for those aged 10-24. Furthermore, at a rate of 1.78/100,000, Ohio's rate of youth suicide (those aged 10 -14) is above the national average rate of 1.69/100,000. These shocking statistics became all too real with the unfathomable loss of six teens since September, 2017 in Stark County due to a "suicide contagion." Sadly, Stark county is not alone in its struggles with suicide among youth. Reports of teen suicides from Muskingum, Morgan, and here in Franklin County, among others, are becoming too common a headline. This reality emphasizes how crucial awareness and prevention trainings are. **We must not stop now.**

Evidenced-based "gatekeeper" trainings are available and in use in many Ohio school districts. A Gatekeeper is someone in a position to recognize the warning signs that another person may be in distress, experiencing poor mental health or contemplating suicide. Gatekeeper trainings, which include role play, have been proven through research to be effective in equipping adults with knowledge, skills and attitudes to successfully identify at-risk youth and refer them to the proper health care professionals. After training, Gatekeepers are able to:

- Recognize warning signs of poor mental health and suicide risk;
- Ask youth and young adults if they are okay/if they are having suicidal thoughts;
- Have helpful conversations with those struggling with suicidality; and
- Refer youth and young adults to appropriate mental health services.

A specific state of the art program is Kognito. Since 2012, OSPF has been awarded 2 consecutive coveted SAMSHA Garrett Lee Smith Grants and is currently in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of its 2<sup>nd</sup> grant. With funds from these grants, OSPF is able to offer a multitude of training modules, free of charge, to schools and communities. OSPF has partnered with Kognito to provide state of the art Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper training. These training modules are easily accessed, evidence based, on-line and available at any time to Ohio educators and students across the state. These on-line modules train school faculty and students to identify and approach at-risk students and master the conversations necessary to motivate them to seek help. Employing Kognito's Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper trainings, OSPF has trained more than 9,000 adults over the past 10 years to assist at-risk youth. **And we must not stop now.** Additional trainings are vital and life-saving.

OSPF is the state's resource for these suicide prevention programs. We routinely work with communities, schools, veteran's organizations, and universities to promote and implement these valuable approaches. However, for sustained change to occur, continuing education, communication and outreach must not only remain in place, but be expanded. **Annual** trainings for all public and **private** school personnel must be implemented. OSPF will continue to augment these trainings by offering resources through social networking, continued learning

opportunities, accessibility, certifications, and program improvement through survey feedback. The Kognito simulations specifically provide the training currently required by HB 543, as well as by proposed HB 503. By offering these trainings free to Ohioans, the ability and capacity of Ohio schools to easily meet the requirements of these bills is greatly increased with no financial cost to schools. Additionally, other free resources, such as the Ohio Department of Education's Safety and Violence Prevention Training curriculum and Sandy Hook Promise's "Start With Hello", enable schools to use multiple training formats in equipping their staff with knowledge in suicide prevention – all without cost to the schools.

We cannot let the progress that Ohio has made slip away. Silence is not an option. Together, we all have more work to do to continue to prevent suicide in Ohio! **We must not stop now.** OSPF strongly supports HB 503 to enhance suicide prevention and awareness by requiring training to be provided in both public and private schools in Ohio.

Chair and members of the committee, thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of this vital matter.

Sandy Williams  
Chair, Board of Directors  
Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation