



recognizing depression • preventing suicide

Thursday, May 13, 2021

Dear Senate Finance Members:

I am Jack Binder and the CEO of LifeAct, a 28-year nonprofit organization devoted to preventing adolescent suicide through proven educational intervention. Its evidence-based programming, delivered to 28,523 middle and high school students in their classroom in 2018-2019, teaches youth to recognize the signs of suicide and to seek assistance. 2,884 (10.1%) of those students came forward seeking additional support.

Two years ago, I testified before this Committee seeking an earmark on behalf of LifeAct. We are grateful to have received your support in the last biennium, and we want to thank this body for recognizing the importance of our program. The earmark was requested to assist the LifeAct program to grow and extend their services to more schools across Ohio, but then the pandemic hit. Without the state funding we received, we would not have been able to adapt our program delivery & platform to accommodate the changes brought about by COVID - virtual, hybrid & in-person education. Not only were we able to continue our program delivery, we added new content and support for adults, remote students and school personnel.

As we recover from school closures and the overall impact of the pandemic on our children, LifeAct services are in greater demand than ever. As such, **the Ohio House included an earmark for LifeAct in their version of HB 110. We respectfully ask for the Committee's support for the provision in the Senate version of HB 110.**

Unfortunately, we now need to address our **next pandemic – already in progress! A Mental Health crisis.** Specifically, teen & adolescent anxiety, depression and suicide ideation.

Prior to COVID

- *Suicide was the leading cause of death, after accidents, in youth, teens and young adults (ages 10-34) according to the 2019 Centers for Disease Control (CDC) statistics ⁽¹⁾.*
- *Nationally, the suicide rate for youth, teens and young adults increased 53% between the years 2007 -2019.*
- *The State of Ohio saw a 24% increase in suicides from 2008 – 2017 for all ages.*



- *The percentage of Cleveland, Ohio high school students who have attempted suicide is the second highest among the 21 urban school systems surveyed in the United States in 2018. This survey reported that 18.6% of these students have attempted suicide, which was more than double the National Average of 7.4%.*

National data indicates that the numbers may be holding steady over the last 2 years, which hopefully indicates that the efforts of many organizations, such as LifeAct, are having a positive effect, however, data from hospital ER departments has indicated a large increase in mental health-related visits for adolescents. Data from Emergency room visits for **University Hospitals, Nationwide Children's Hospital** as well as **Cleveland Clinic Children's** indicates a very large increase in pediatric mental health visits. As high as a **34% increase** over the prior year.

EFFECTS of COVID

It is clear, based upon the statistics, that our teens have already been overwhelmed before COVID. This pandemic has added gasoline to an already hot fire.

Let me share some statistics with you based on the National 4-H Council survey undertaken during the height of the pandemic in Spring of 2020:

- **70% of teens reported struggling with mental health during the pandemic**
- **61% reported it has increased their feeling of loneliness**
- **55% of teens experienced anxiety**
- **43% of teens experienced depression**

This is a warning that we need to heed. Our teens were struggling before COVID but the isolation, loss of socialization, learning and maturing at critical times in their development, will have significant, long-term effects.

Pre-Covid, our evidence-based programming was delivered in-person by our professional instructors, to as many as 29,863 Ohio middle and high school students in a single school year. This classroom-based program teaches teens to recognize the signs of depression and suicidal ideation, in themselves and in others. Empowering these teens with knowledge and courage facilitates early identification and timely referral for professional services.

Our Request

LifeAct has been called upon by school districts throughout the State of Ohio to deliver our life-saving programming. As we expand to meet this demand we need to identify, train, equip and supervise a much



larger number of professional instructors. This will include additional supervisory capacity as well as increased technology expense.

We believe the funding included in the House version of the budget would enable our organization to TRIPLE our program delivery throughout the State of Ohio. Additionally, the tangential benefits of mental health training and depression awareness education extend well beyond just preventing suicide. A major societal cost is the burden that those with undiagnosed or untreated mental illness levy on the public and private infrastructure, healthcare system, correctional system and the cost of lost productivity from unemployed or under-employed individuals. Untreated mental illness also has a negative impact on families and future generations that is very significant.

LifeAct's goal is to reverse the alarming rise in teen suicide, which nationally has increased every year over the last decade. It does this by developing and delivering innovative, research-based suicide prevention programs for young people that reduce the stigma of mental illness and teach suicide prevention knowledge and skills designed to last a lifetime. To date, over 230,000 Ohio students have taken part in a LifeAct Grades 6-12 school program since the high school version was launched in 2000. During this time, LifeAct has referred more than 12,000 youth to a professional mental health resource for intervention or treatment.

We believe that these objectives are in the greatest of interest for the residents of Ohio – and especially our children. We greatly appreciate your consideration of this important funding request on behalf of Ohio's children.

Sincerely,

Jack Binder, CEO at 216-464-3471 or ExecDir@lifeact.org



About LifeAct

SAVING YOUNG LIVES THROUGH EDUCATION

LifeAct is a 28-year nonprofit organization devoted to preventing adolescent suicide through proven educational intervention. Its evidence-based core programming, delivered to a record-breaking 29,863 Northeast Ohio middle and high school students in their classrooms last school year, teaches youth to recognize the signs of suicide and to seek assistance. That same school year, 2,504 of the 29,863 participating students came forward to a LifeAct instructor for help. These “at-risk” youth were immediately connected to a school or community-based professional mental health resource for further intervention and treatment.

LifeAct’s school programs use compelling real-life scenarios, role-play, skits, small group activities, technology-driven presentations, and interactive Q & A to engage youth in real-time dialogue while learning about suicide and strategies for prevention. Trained, credentialed instructors visit schools, community centers, and other educational settings to deliver LifeAct’s proven curricula. LifeAct instructors are key to helping students recognize the warning signs of suicide -- theirs or a friend’s -- and motivating them to come forward to get help. Untreated, childhood mental illnesses can lead to a downward spiral of school failure, substance abuse, unemployment, and sadly, suicide.

EMPOWERING YOUTH TO PREVENT SUICIDE

TO EDUCATE

Objective: Deliver LifeAct’s middle or high school suicide prevention program to at least 30,000 Northeast Ohio youth, with a secondary goal to focus on those in urban/inner ring schools.

TO MOTIVATE

Objective: Motivate at-risk youth, usually at least 8% by past years’ results or 2,400 students of the expected 30,000 students in 2019, to reach out to a LifeAct instructor for help for themselves or for someone they know. LifeAct’s skilled instructors establish a rapport and trust with youth/teens, who are empowered to be proactive to call on caring adults for help.

TO CONNECT

Objective: Link each of the 2,400-plus middle or high school students who ask for assistance to a professional mental health resource before dangerous behaviors can set in and result in irreparable damage. These at-risk students will be referred to a school-based mental health resource or to one of LifeAct’s two care network partners: FrontLine Service or Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital of University Hospitals system.

TO RESOURCE



Objective: Provide every 2019 LifeAct program middle or high school student with 24/7 crisis tools to connect to help after the course in the form of help cards, LifeAct pens with hotline information, as well as access to LifeAct’s Youth Advisory Board social messaging, and LifeAct’s website with 24/7 crisis or text chat. Website visitors can access “In Crisis,” “I Might Need Help,” or “My Friend Might Need Help” portals to be connected to appropriate mental health resources.

MAKING A LIFE-CHANGING IMPACT

Two independent studies have shown that participation in a LifeAct school program is significantly related to a lessening of risks associated with suicide among adolescents. LifeAct’s school programs have been recognized as “evidence-based” and are listed on the Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs and the Ohio Mental Health Network for Schools Success’ Quality and Effective Practice (QEP) Registry. LifeAct and its programs are also now listed on the Ohio Mental Health Network for Schools’ Success “Pockets of Excellence” website.

Last school year, LifeAct’s school programs taught the 29,863 Grades 6-12 students suicide prevention knowledge and skills designed to last a lifetime. These students were not the only beneficiaries since the school program empowers students to take appropriate actions if they see a friend or family member showing signs of depression and suicide. In addition, the 2,504 students who came forward to a LifeAct instructor during or after the course received *early* professional crisis intervention. Finally, LifeAct’s school programs provided a gateway to better mental health by lowering the stigma of seeking and receiving professional care. Early intervention and treatment are crucial to getting students on track to lead productive lives and stop the multi-generational impact of ongoing mental illness.

BUILDING CAPACITY TO MEETING THE DEMAND

The demand for LifeAct’s school program is increasing as awareness of youth suicide as a priority public health issue is growing. LifeAct is committed to expanding its school program service footprint throughout Ohio. Its programs are offered without charge to schools to remove any economic barriers to participating schools. Currently, LifeAct receives minimal public sector funding (< 10%) so annual support from individuals, corporations and foundations and two special fundraising events is critical to meet its \$642,771 school program 2019 budget.

The unique factors that make the LifeAct program so successful are:

1. Our Evidence-based program is delivered by our trained professional staff who are trained and supervised by the LifeAct team. We do not distribute our curriculum - **we distribute our educators.**



2. Our instructors deliver the program in-person, making themselves available for questions and referrals (> 2,400 student referrals last year).
3. Our program is designed to empower the teens to play an active role in the solution. They will be the first to know when they – or a friend – need help