

**Ohio Senate
Senate Finance Committee
Senate Bill 357
Megan Burke
Mental Health & Addiction Advocacy Coalition
December 6, 2022**

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, my name is Megan Burke, and I am the State Program and Policy Director for the Mental Health & Addiction Advocacy Coalition (MHAC). Thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony for Senate Bill 357.

The MHAC is a statewide organization engaged in local and state level policy work, that actively advocates to increase awareness and improve the lives of those impacted by mental illnesses and substance use disorders. With over 130 member organizations located around the state and in our Northeast and Southwest Ohio Hubs, our membership includes mental health and addiction service providers; Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health (ADAMH) boards; major medical institutions; for-profit businesses; faith-based groups; institutions of higher education; and government entities, among others.

The MHAC commends the intent of this bill, to address gun violence in Ohio, and prevent mass shootings that devastate communities and leave an impact on many Ohioans for the rest of their lives. More than 1,500 Ohioans died by gun violence in 2019, an average of four people every day. Suicides were 62% of the gun deaths and homicides were 36%. The firearm homicide rate has increased around 50% in the last 8 years, while the firearm suicide deaths increased by 30% during the same time.¹

A survey commissioned by the American Psychological Association after the August 2019 mass shootings in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas found that nearly 80% of Americans experience stress following a mass shooting. In addition, the survey found that one-third of American adults say they fear going to certain public places due to mass shootings. Preventing mass shootings is necessary to prevent not only death and injury from gun violence, but to prevent the long-lasting trauma and impact that people feel after being exposed to such violence.

Gun violence takes both a human and economic toll, and we have a moral obligation to address it. The total estimated economic cost of gun violence in the U.S. is \$229 billion each year. Each gun death, on average, costs society over \$6 million.² Each nonfatal gun injury, on average, costs society an estimated \$583,000. Efforts to address this abhorrent trend are necessary and timely.

Before I talk about provisions in the bill, I would first like to speak to the false narrative around gun violence and mental illness. First and foremost, we should do everything we can to prevent furthering

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the stigmatization of seeking help for a mental health concern by connecting it to violent behavior. According to the Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, "the data suggests that a history of legal problems, challenges coping with severe and acute life stressors, and the epidemic of the combination of nihilism, emptiness, anger, and a desire for notoriety are more useful to focus" for prevention of mass shootings.³ Although one may note that those facing mental illness may experience any of the listed factors, there is a historical link that wrongfully associates mental illness with immorality, which reinforces prejudice for those who struggle with mental illness. The media too often blames mental illness as the root cause of mass shootings. This is untrue. People with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators of violence.

S.B. 357 contains several thoughtful approaches to prevent acts of mass violence. The behavioral risk assessment proposed in S.B. 357 is a way to protect Ohioans. Mental health factors make up a small percentage of overall risk factors.⁴ The behavioral health risk assessment may be requested by a school, employer, or in a community setting. The assessment will evaluate the individual for factors including suicidality, threat making, grievance/injustice collecting, and a major personal catalyst event. We encourage those who will implement the behavioral risk assessments to work with community behavioral health providers to produce an evidence-based assessment to ensure accuracy and efficacy. A common-sense measure in the bill is the improvement of state and federal firearm databases. S.B. 357 will require critical information such as arrest warrants and protection orders be added to the two databases by the close of next day business.

We at the MHAC are most interested in the legislation's intent to appropriate American Rescue Plan Act funds to strengthen Ohio's behavioral health workforce and infrastructure. The \$85M from the HCBS fund will be used by the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services in coordination with the Department of Higher Education to recruit, train, and retain our behavioral health workforce. An additional appropriation of \$90M from the State Fiscal Relief Fund would be used to expand crisis infrastructure and create regional mental health rehabilitation centers. We are at a critical point in history where we all have the ability to create safer, healthier, and vibrant communities for us and our fellow Ohioans to live, work, and lead healthy lives.

S.B. 357 is our chance to lead a thoughtful conversation on how to understand that mental illness does not cause acts of mass violence. I encourage the committee to look for ways to reduce these risk factors and increase resiliency and stabilizing factors. Thank you for your attention and I am available to answer questions from the committee.

Sincerely,
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Resources

1. *Ohio Gun Deaths: 2019*. Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions.
<https://efsgv.org/state/ohio/>
2. *Mass Shootings*. Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions.
<https://efsgv.org/learn/type-of-gun-violence/mass-shootings/>
3. *Is There a Link Between Mental Health and Mass Shootings?* Columbia University Department of Psychiatry. <https://www.columbiapsychiatry.org/news/mass-shootings-and-mental-illness-5>
4. *Beyond the Red Flags: Overcoming Obstacles and Managing Threat*. D-Prep.
www.dprepsafety.com

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