

Ohio Chapter

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American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



May 10, 2023

Testimony of William Cotton, MD, FAAP

Senate Health Committee Hearing on House Bill 33

Chairman Huffman, Vice Chair Johnson, Ranking Member Antonio and members of the Senate Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on HB 33. My name is Dr. William Cotton and I am here today on behalf of the 2,900 members of the Ohio Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (Ohio AAP), a statewide organization that promotes the health, safety and well-being of children and adolescents so they can achieve their dreams. With membership of more than 2,900 Ohio pediatricians and residents, Ohio AAP is the state's strongest network of education and advocacy professionals focused on pediatrics. In 2022, Ohio AAP members impacted more than 1 million children through quality improvement programs and education.

Today I am here as the co-chair of the Ohio AAP's Advocacy Committee to talk to you about some areas in the budget, but I am also here as a retired pediatrician that saw first hand the mental health crisis we are facing, and as a former emergency medicine doctor who saw the effects of caregivers not storing their firearms safely, to ask the state to consider an amendment to the budget to support the work of the Store It Safe program.

Let me first tell you a story from one of our members: *Brian is a 15 year old male 10th grade student. He is on the student council, an honor roll student and an offensive lineman for the HS football team. He has been dating the same girl for the past 2 years. On August 9th he sees his primary care provider for a sports physical. At this visit, anticipatory guidance is discussed including he is overweight (95th% for age), sports readiness (hydration, stretching, heat safety), driving safety, and he is asked questions about his home life, school activities, drugs, etc. Unfortunately, what wasn't discussed was safe storage of firearms and other lethal means, recent stressors and coping skills. On August 16th, while working in the ED, Brian is brought to the ED. He has a single gun shot wound to his head and he is pronounced dead upon arrival. Only if lethal means storage was discussed, learning that he and his girlfriend were fighting and likely going to break up, and understanding that his grades were faltering and he struggles with coping skills. This horrific situation could have been avoided if the right questions were asked and the appropriate interventions were put into place.*

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In response to unintentional firearm injury to children, Ohio AAP leadership established the Store It Safe program in 2015. The program brought together organizations and individuals with different viewpoints about firearms to develop unified, nonpartisan messaging, resources and approaches to reduce unintentional firearm injuries and deaths in children, then expanded to address suicides by firearms in adolescents. Over the years, the program has grown to include a wide variety of education, advocacy, quality improvement and community initiatives.

Store It Safe is the ONLY Program that brings together injury prevention/safety advocates and firearm/gun-owner rights advocates to thoughtfully address this crisis. When the program began, it was started with the invaluable input and support of the Buckeye Firearms Association, where we came together to find the common ground that we all felt would make an impact in saving lives, and that is storing the firearm safely.

This proposal includes NO mandates! It's incentive-based, not penalty-based!

The Ohio AAP Store It Safe (SIS) program is unique in its comprehensive approach. SIS trains healthcare providers to screen for depression and suicide, discuss lethal means, distribute safe storage lock boxes, and provides resources for families. Our tools and resources are ready to deploy – and, through our broad networks, we can reach youth across the state, from rural to urban regions. In addition, we are partnering with hospitals and community providers to expand this reach, along with the firearm industry to have these materials available where firearms are purchased.

The mental health crisis is an epidemic throughout Ohio and the US and pediatricians are on the front lines. Through SIS, we are working to identify the at-risk groups early on and provide barriers for all families to help reduce senseless suicides and deaths.

In order to continue and expand this important work, Ohio AAP and its SIS partners are requesting \$1.5 million per FY, \$3 million total, via fiscal earmark for:

- Continuation of quality improvement work and additional SIS program spread
- Funding lock boxes for the QI program and community/hospital systems
- And a robust Statewide campaign around Store It Safe messaging with evaluation to reach rural and urban settings.

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We have piloted this program in practices for the past year, and we have the data that shows this program works. As part of the program, all adolescents are screened for depression and suicide, counseled and provided resources when indicated and offered means to store lethal means safely. This is done in a NON judgemental way, and no information is tracked around who owns firearms or who takes the boxes. Both depression and suicide screens are necessary since close to 35% of teens may screen positive for suicidality yet not for depression. In our first year, we found 41% of teens screen positive for depression or suicide. In addition, it is recommended that all screened youth and caregivers are recommended to store all lethal means in the home out of reach since teenagers are impulsive and untrustworthy. In our program, by the end of our training period, lethal means storage was discussed with 100% of teenagers and more than 75% of those screen at-risk were offered services.

Although Store it Safe was initiated in the pediatric and family medicine office setting first, this work can and should be done with all groups and individuals that interact with adolescents, and we ask for your support for this amendment.

In addition to Store It Safe, the Ohio AAP would also like to briefly highlight some other issues in HB 33 that we either support or would like to see restored. I am happy to discuss them more through questions:

- Governor DeWine's budget proposal included language that would have made booster seat and seat belt violations a primary offense as well as a statutory prohibition on the sale of flavored tobacco products in Ohio; we urge the Senate to restore both of these provisions, which were removed by the House
- We are supportive of the proposed sales tax exemption for baby products and would urge the Senate to harmonize this language with Senate Bill 39 to ensure more products are covered; this will provide much needed relief for families across Ohio
- Finally, we support House-added provisions related to mental health training for coaches as well as implementation of a seizure safe schools law for Ohio. These are two policy proposals that will positively impact Ohio children.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I am happy to answer any questions.

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