
Prevention Action Alliance

Educate. Empower. Advocate.

House Bill 96

Ohio House Children and Human Services Committee

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February 26, 2025

Chairwoman White, Vice-Chair Salvo, Ranking Member Lett and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide interested party testimony on House Bill 96. My name is Fran Gerbig, and I am the Executive Director of Prevention Action Alliance (PAA). PAA is a statewide nonprofit prevention agency based in Columbus, Ohio and has been in existence for over thirty years. Prevention Action Alliance is dedicated to leading healthy communities in the prevention of substance misuse and the promotion of mental health wellness. Our organization offers an abundance of resources, training services, grants, and advocacy opportunities for those who are active in the prevention and mental health fields. The Prevention Action Alliance organization and its staff actively participate in numerous advisory committees, boards, and membership organizations. These include esteemed groups such as the RecoveryOhio Advisory Council, SAMHSA Region 5 Prevention Workgroup, the Great Lakes Prevention Technology Transfer Center (PTTC) Network, the Problem Gambling Advisory Board, the Coalition for Healthy Communities, the Chemical Dependency Professionals Board, and various advisory boards and partnerships with the Ohio Center of Excellence Behavioral Health Prevention and Promotion-among others.

In the context of the continuum of care, prevention refers to efforts aimed at addressing health concerns prior to the diagnosis of an individual. Prevention is typically categorized into three main types: universal, selective, and indicated. Universal prevention is designed to benefit the entire population by providing general health education and awareness of potential risks, regardless of individual risk factors. Selective prevention targets specific subgroups that are identified as being at higher risk for health issues, often based on demographic or behavioral factors. Indicated prevention focuses on individuals who exhibit early signs or symptoms of a problem, often identified through screening or assessment, with the goal of intervening before the issue worsens. Prevention programs and policies are effective across all stages of life, from infancy to adulthood. Evidence-based prevention offers benefits to everyone, demonstrating that it is never too early—or too late—to address substance misuse and mental health concerns¹.

Community Prevention Coalitions

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/addiction-and-substance-misuse/index.html>

We strongly support OhioMHAS and Governor DeWine's proposal to expand community prevention coalitions and to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Ohio's current prevention initiatives. Community prevention coalitions play a critical role in addressing local substance misuse and mental health challenges by implementing evidence-based programs tailored to the unique needs of each community.

Currently, 136 prevention coalitions are active across Ohio, with approximately one-fifth of these coalitions receiving federal funding through grants such as the Drug-Free Communities (DFC) grant, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act (CARA), and the Sober Truth on Preventing Underage Drinking (STOP) Act². The effectiveness of prevention efforts is highly contingent upon identifying and addressing specific community needs. What proves successful in one community, such as Montgomery County, may not be as effective or relevant in others, such as Tuscarawas or Franklin County. Therefore, prevention strategies must be customized to reflect the unique characteristics and challenges of each community.

By conducting a thorough evaluation of existing community prevention coalitions, we can not only enhance and strengthen current efforts but also provide valuable guidance to communities that currently lack coalitions. The insights gained from this analysis will help in the development of at least three additional prevention coalitions, offering communities the opportunity for improved outcomes and an overall investment in their long-term well-being. Evidence-based interventions that address substance misuse and mental health across the lifespan can yield up to \$65 for every dollar invested in prevention³. This proposal represents not only an opportunity for communities to thrive, but a sound investment in the future of Ohio's residents.

At Prevention Action Alliance (PAA), we are proud to support coalition work through our Statewide Prevention Coalition Association (SPCA). SPCA strengthens Ohio's prevention coalitions, professionals, and community leaders by offering resources, technical assistance, education and training, networking opportunities, toolkits, and advocacy support. As a network of over 60 community coalitions, SPCA is dedicated to preventing substance misuse and promoting mental health wellness. Together, we share solutions, offer mutual support, and demonstrate solidarity in the ongoing effort to improve the well-being of Ohio communities. This proposal will only enhance the work of SPCA and be an incredible tool for all coalitions in Ohio.

Youth-led Prevention Groups

We are also supportive of the initiative to examine existing youth-led prevention groups and create at least three new youth-led groups in underserved areas. Along with community prevention coalitions, it is imperative that youth have a voice and seat at the table, especially when the work is designed to support them. Youth have an incredible insight into what is going on in the world around them. They can create events, messaging, and materials that appeal to other youth. Their work is imperative in and outside of the classroom. As some of the most impact prevention occurs with the youth, we cannot do prevention work in a silo. Many community prevention coalitions partner with schools, faith groups, and

² <https://drugfree.org/reports/rethinking-substance-use-prevention-an-earlier-and-broader-approach/>

³ <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/preventing-drug-misuse-addiction-best-strategy>

other youth-serving organizations to enhance the voice of the youth and push their priorities within the community.

The Ohio Youth Led Prevention Network (OYLPN), coordinated by PAA, connects youth-led substance misuse prevention and mental health promotion initiatives statewide. OYLPN empowers youth through resources, professional development, and a collaborative network to strengthen prevention efforts. The OYLPN Youth Council, composed of high school students, works with adult allies to address substance misuse and mental health, creating community impact through youth-driven initiatives. The We Are Change Rally, held annually, brings over a thousand youth together to promote healthy lifestyles, reduce stigma around substance misuse, and encourage positive community change.

Data Collection

Prevention Action Alliance fully supports the enhancement of the grant reporting structure and evaluation processes at both the local and state levels. A key component of the prevention field is the Strategic Prevention Framework (SPF)⁴, which emphasizes the importance of assessment, capacity building, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Evaluation and data collection are essential in prevention efforts, as they demonstrate the impact of programming. Unlike treatment or recovery services, prevention specialists cannot assert that a student would have engaged in certain behaviors, such as alcohol consumption, had the intervention not been in place. Instead, they rely on trend data and specific information from targeted communities or statewide. When applying for grants, coalitions must demonstrate both qualitative and quantitative evidence of meaningful change. These data insights not only help inform local coalitions about emerging trends but, when applied statewide, can reveal broader patterns and progress across Ohio. Ultimately, this can foster impactful collaborations and further strengthen prevention efforts across the state.

Cannabis Revenue Fund Distribution & 988

When Issue 2 passed in 2023, it was stated that 25% of the funds would be allocated toward mental health and addiction services. However, the current budget only supports the 988 service. We recognize the value of 988, which has proven to be a vital tool—handling 456,008 contacts (calls, chats, and texts) from July 2022 to January 2023 with an impressive average response time of 25 seconds in Ohio⁵—it is important that this critical service must remain fully funded. It is a lifesaving resource that should not be undercut.

Furthermore, we recommend investing in prevention education using cannabis revenue. It is important to note that the risk factors for substance misuse are shared for suicide and mental health disorders. Therefore, investment in evidence-based prevention education which builds upon protective factors and resiliency skills will not only positive impact substance misuse, but also protect against suicide and other mental health disorders. For every dollar spent on prevention, an estimated \$18 in savings can be generated⁶. We propose that \$750,000 of these funds be allocated for evidence-based, age-appropriate prevention education for K-12 students, colleges, and universities. This should be implemented in partnership with relevant state departments and agencies, including the Department of Mental Health

⁴ <https://www.samhsa.gov/technical-assistance/sptac/framework>

⁵ <https://mha.ohio.gov/get-help/crisis-systems/988-suicide-and-crisis-lifeline-in-ohio/about-988/03-988-by-the-numbers>

⁶ <https://drugfree.org/reports/substance-use-prevention-agenda-2022/>

and Addiction Services, the School-Based Center of Excellence for Prevention & Early Intervention, the Department of Education and Workforce, and the Department of Higher Education. Prevention education extends beyond cannabis and other substance use prevention, fostering participants' ability to make autonomous decisions that prioritize their health, safety, and well-being. It is also essential that school-based prevention education and activities are a key component of this initiative.

Prevention education should not only focus on cannabis, but also on substance use prevention more broadly, fostering students' ability to make decisions that prioritize their health and well-being. OhioMHAS, along with the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, must collaborate to identify evidence-based best practices for prevention. Research shows that scare tactics and one-off assemblies are ineffective⁷, which is why we recommend the establishment of an independent committee of Ohio Certified Prevention Consultants to review, vet, and recommend proven prevention curriculums. These curriculums should provide an age-appropriate understanding of a variety of substances, their risks, development of refusal and resiliency strategies, ensuring that prevention programs are implemented with fidelity across schools in Ohio. Selected programs must not only be evidence-based but be responsive to the communities' unique needs and meet the fidelity standards to provide positive outcomes.

Closing

Prevention Action Alliance believes these investments in prevention and mental health services will yield significant benefits for Ohio's communities. We strongly support expanding community prevention coalitions and youth-led prevention groups to address substance misuse and mental health challenges, tailoring strategies to each community's needs. It is important to note that there is no direct state funding for implementation or operation costs for community coalitions in Ohio nor do prevention services receive reimbursement for services by insurance providers. Additionally, we urge the including of funding to OhioMHAS for cannabis addiction services and evidence-based prevention programs, ensuring that prevention education fosters autonomy and well-being through data-driven, best-practice approaches.

Thank you, Chairwoman White, Vice-Chair Salvo, and Ranking Member Lett and members of the House Children and Human Services Committee for the opportunity to provide written testimony on HB 96. I would be happy to answer any questions or provide additional information at this time.

⁷ https://pttcnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/WhatDoesNOTWork_9_2024_FINAL.pdf