



HB 96 (Stewart) Operating Budget Proponent Testimony
House Children and Human Services Committee
February 26, 2025

Chairwoman White, Vice Chair Salvo, Ranking Minority Member Lett, and members of the Committee thank you for the opportunity to testify today on an important request for the biennium budget regarding suicide prevention through education, early identification and timely support. I am Steve McIntyre and I am the Executive Director and CEO of LifeAct, a 33-year nonprofit organization devoted to preventing adolescent suicide. LifeAct accomplishes this through its Suicide Prevention program, which serves students in grades 6-12 at no cost to schools in 17 Northern Ohio counties.

LifeAct Suicide Prevention program differs from other youth mental health programs in that our program is delivered to students in their classrooms by specially trained instructors. Our 11 instructors have at least a bachelor's degree and knowledge of adolescent mental health development. The supervising instructor is an Ohio Certified Prevention Specialist (OCPS), six instructors are Ohio Certified Prevention Specialist Assistants (OCPSA), and the remaining four instructors are Registered Applicants (RA), a credential reflective of pursuing their OCPSA certification. This is required to maintain LifeAct's state certification through OhioMHAS as a prevention program provider. This high standard of prevention certification sets LifeAct's instructors apart from other suicide prevention programs.

LifeAct received an earmark of \$250,000 per state fiscal year in the last biennium budget. We want to thank the House for recognizing the importance of our program.

With the enactment of HB 123 in 2023 (which requires public and charter schools to provide one class period each year of suicide and violence prevention education in every grade from 6-12), requests for LifeAct's Suicide Prevention program have grown tremendously. LifeAct delivered a Suicide Prevention program to 28,366 middle and high school students during the 2022-2023 school year. In 2023-2024, we served 39,980 – an increase of 40%. Similarly, the number of students LifeAct connected to help was 3,278 in 2022-2023, increasing to 4,463 in 2023-2024 – an increase of 36%. We expect to meet or exceed these numbers in 2024-2025. During the first semester of the 2024-2025 school year, LifeAct's service numbers were already 20% higher than for the same period last year. Without the state funding we received, we would not have been able to expand our services to more schools across Ohio.



Saving Young Lives through Education

If left untreated, childhood mental illness can lead to a downward spiral of school failure, substance abuse, unemployment, and sadly, suicide. LifeAct's Suicide Prevention program helps identify potentially at-risk middle and high school students and connects them to help. The program is delivered in two 45-minute classes over two days. Day 1 uses the state-approved, evidence-based "Signs of Suicide" (SOS) curriculum. SOS teaches students to recognize the signs and symptoms of suicide and depression and follow the "ACT" process (ACKNOWLEDGE there is a serious concern, show the person you CARE, and TELL a trusted adult). Day 2 consists of LifeAct's signature programming, with guided presentations, group activities, interactive Q&A, and resource information (when/where/how to get help). Students who ask a LifeAct instructor for help are connected to school-based mental health staff (counselor, psychologist, or other designee) for follow-up, which may include referral to treatment. Delivering in-person classes over two days gives students additional time to understand the material, ask questions, and connect with their LifeAct instructor. LifeAct's program staff works with each school ahead of program delivery to ensure school mental health staff is available and on-site the day of the scheduled program(s). All LifeAct students, whether or not they ultimately reach out for help, learn vital mental health information and how to access resources when in crisis.

Empowering Youth to Prevent Suicide

The goals of LifeAct's Suicide Prevention program are:

GOAL 1: TO EDUCATE. LifeAct will deliver Suicide Prevention programs to 6th-12th grade students as requested by schools across the northern Ohio region without charge to participating schools.

GOAL 2: TO MOTIVATE. LifeAct students will be empowered to seek professional help after identifying signs of suicide or mental health issues in themselves, a friend, or family member. Historical data predict that around 10% of the Suicide Prevention students (4,000+ in 2024-2025) will be empowered to reach out to a LifeAct instructor for help. LifeAct instructors will connect these at-risk students to a school-based resource (counselor, psychologist, or other staff) for follow-up and to determine the best course of action.

GOAL 3: TO RESOURCE. All Suicide Prevention program students (approximately 40,000 this school year alone), will receive a pen printed with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline number and a wallet-sized crisis card outlining life-saving preventive actions and local mental health resources, including LifeAct's website with links to 988 for text, chat and phone support.



Making A Life-Changing Impact

Last school year, LifeAct's Suicide Prevention program taught Grades 6-12 students mental health knowledge and skills designed to last a lifetime. Our students are not the only beneficiaries since the school program empowers students to take appropriate action if they see a friend or family member showing signs of depression and suicide. In addition, the students who come forward to a LifeAct instructor are connected with the appropriate school-based mental health staff or resources, who can determine the best course of action for each student. Finally, LifeAct's Suicide Prevention program provides a gateway to better mental health by reducing the stigma associated with asking for help. Early intervention and treatment are crucial to getting students on track to lead healthy, productive, and mentally balanced lives.

Building Capacity to Meeting the Demand

The demand for LifeAct's Suicide Prevention program is increasing as awareness of youth suicide as a priority public health issue continues to grow. LifeAct is committed to meeting every request to deliver programs. Our Suicide Prevention program is offered without charge to schools to remove any economic barriers and provide health equity.

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

1. LifeAct is a certified OMHAS prevention provider, providing an OMHAS/ODE-approved evidence-based curriculum, Signs of Suicide (SOS), delivered by our professional staff, who are trained and supervised by the LifeAct team and hold a prevention certification in the state of Ohio.
2. The 2024-2025 school year is the 25th anniversary of LifeAct's first Suicide Prevention program. Schools trust LifeAct to deliver effective and engaging programs to help save young lives. Some schools, including the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, have partnered with LifeAct for over two decades.
3. Our instructors deliver programs in-person, making themselves available for questions and support.
4. Our program is designed to empower teens to play an active role in their own mental health. They will be the first to know when they – or a friend – need help.
4. LifeAct does not charge schools for its programs, allowing schools to satisfy the HB 123 requirements without utilizing district funds.

Our Request

Please support the continuation of a \$250,000 earmark in State Fiscal Year 2025 and 2026 for LifeAct's Suicide Prevention program, as we continue to be called upon by school districts throughout the northern Ohio to deliver our life-saving programming.



We believe the in-person classroom setting with our instructors helps initiate dialogue and also allows for the student to have the autonomy to come forward with a concern. Additionally, mental health 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, justice 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 program helps to identify students who may not otherwise have been on the school's "radar" as needing mental health support and follow-up.

Conclusion

LifeAct's goal is to reverse the alarming rise in teen suicide, which has reached a level that the U.S. Surgeon General called youth mental health "the crisis of our time" in 2023. We greatly appreciate your consideration of this important funding request on behalf of Ohio's children. We respectfully request your support of our amendment, so we may continue to serve thousands of Ohio students and not have to cut back on our services at a time when suicide prevention is so vital for our state's young people.

I welcome an opportunity to answer any questions you may have at this time.