

Ohio Chapter

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Testimony of Melissa Wervey Arnold House Finance Committee Hearing on House Bill 96 March 11, 2025

Chairman Stewart, Vice Chair Dovilla, Ranking Member Sweeney and members of the House Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today in HB 96 regarding the Store It Safe program related to the Ohio Department of Health. My name is Melissa Wervey Arnold 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 reach their full potential. Our organization is the state's strongest network of pediatric professionals impacting over 1 million children through our programs and education each year.

As the CEO of the Ohio AAP and as a mother of teenagers, I have seen the dramatic increase of adolescent suicide over the past 10 years, making it the second leading cause of death in people 10-25 years old in the US. I have seen first hand the mental health crisis we are facing and I have worked with providers who have had to counsel families after the aftermath of a child who has completed suicide. The statistics are staggering:

- In 2023, 16% of high school students made a suicide plan
- 1 in 5 teens have thoughts of suicide each day
- 85% of suicide attempts with a firearm are fatal
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death in adolescents

Each day, 28 U.S. children and teens—the equivalent of a high school classroom—die from firearm injuries, 40% due to suicide. One study reported that 64% of families with guns store them inappropriately and accessible to children, and of the youth who completed suicide by a firearm, 82% used a gun from their home. And finally, with the expansion of cannabis sales in Ohio, in 2024 Ohio Poison Control Centers responded to over 1,400 cannabis related poisoning exposures with pediatric exposures accounting for 75% of these exposures. Among young children less than 6 years of age, 88% were treated in a healthcare facility and 64% were hospitalized. Nearly 1 in 4 hospitalizations required care in an intensive care unit.

That is why I am here today to ask the state to consider an amendment to the budget to support the work of the **Store It Safe** program, a program that focuses on reversing the trend of irreversible actions due to suicide and the safe storage of lethal means to prevent intentional and unintentional deaths in children and adolescents. In 2015, Ohio AAP leadership established the Store It Safe program. 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

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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. But as the program grew, we quickly saw the need to not just talk about storing firearms safely, but also additional lethal means such as over the counter medications, Tylenol and even cannabis. The “it” in Store It Safe, is bigger than just firearms, and the conversations and guidance provided to families in the program can be life saving.

We have piloted the quality improvement portion of the program in practices for the past 3 years 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.

This proposal includes NO mandates, and it is incentive-based - not penalty-based. To date, more than 130,000 Ohioans have already been reached by the SIS program, 1,600 healthcare providers were trained in the SIS program, 14,000 adolescents have been screened for depression and suicide during healthcare visits and over 3,500 lock boxes have been distributed. And finally, we were able to increase lethal means discussion rates from 28 percent to 100 percent and suicide screenings increased from 13% to 71%.

The state’s continued support of this program is critically important in the scale and spread of this work. In order to continue and expand this important message, Ohio AAP and its SIS partners are requesting \$1 million per fiscal year in the state budget (\$2 million total) via fiscal earmark to:

- 1) Establish **Store It Safe** as the state’s brand when discussing lethal means safe storage
- 2) Continuation of the Quality Improvement work and additional SIS program spread
- 3) Funding lock boxes for the QI program and community/healthcare systems, and
- 4) A robust Statewide campaign around Store It Safe messaging with evaluation

Although Store it Safe was initiated in the pediatric and family medicine office setting first, this work has been expanded in cities, emergency departments, inpatient mental health facilities and many other community agencies all sharing the same message, “if you have a fireman or other lethal means, store it safely.”

Thank you Madame Chairwoman, and I am happy to answer any questions.

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