

OHIO'S VOICE FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION



HB123 – School Violence  
Senate Education Committee  
Proponent Testimony - Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation  
October 29, 2019

Chairwoman Lehner, Vice-Chairman Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify as a proponent for House Bill 123. I am Tony Coder and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF), a non-profit 501c3 organization that believes that suicide is a preventable public-health issue and works with communities, schools, healthcare systems and the general public to promote mental health wellness which will, in turn, reduce suicides in Ohio.

The number of people dying by suicide in Ohio is reaching figures that we have not seen in this state, with nearly five people dying by suicide every day in the Buckeye State. According to the Ohio Public Data Warehouse at the Ohio Department of Health, in 2017, 1,744 people took their own lives and the suicide rate has increased 24% from 2008-2017. Sadly, youth are not immune from this issue, as suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth ages 15-19. The lack of education on mental health issues, the lack of easy access to care and trauma experienced by young people are all contributing factors to youth suicide and these issues are being discussed, whether we like it or not, by youth with one another through conversations and on social media.

When I first took the position of Executive Director of OSPF in February of this year, I found that Ohio is the only state in the nation to not have a plan to combat suicide. Therefore, OSPF has brought together state leaders from 27 organizations, including the Office of Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, The Ohio Department of Education, the Ohio Department of Health, the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, veteran-serving organizations, managed care companies, providers and a host of others to develop the State Suicide Prevention Plan, which will be released in early 2020. A primary focus of the plan is to work with schools on providing evidence-based programs and strategies to help reduce youth suicides. We know that evidence-based practices are scientifically proven procedures that have been evaluated and are shown to affect change, save lives and reduce the need to use a “trial by error” or scare-tactic approach, which could actually increase harm.

More importantly, OSPF is a proponent of this legislation because of the very personal, human factor with this issue. A little over three weeks ago, I attended the funeral of Nick Makin, a young man whom I never had the chance to meet but I do know that he had just graduated from Ben Logan High School, a school in Logan County, and had begun his work at The Ohio State University – Lima. This vibrant, popular young man took his own life. As I sat in the church while people offered condolences to Nick’s family, I watched as distraught youth who were crying at the loss of their friend, fell into Nick’s father’s arms. In all of his emotional pain, Nick’s dad was literally supporting these young people as they passed by Nick’s casket. They would then go to one another for comfort and, what looked like the high school football team, were huddled together to comfort one another. As I watched this tragic scene unfold, I wondered to myself: how school would be the next day – what questions did these kids have and how were they going to cope with the loss of their friend?

This very scene is the most important reason that the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation supports the passage of HB123 – not only because young men and women like Nick needed to understand these tough life issues before tragically dying by suicide– but also for these young people attending Nick’s funeral who had to go back to school the next day or who have discussed it via social media over the past few weeks.

This subject is literally life or death. At OSPF, we come across people every day that have survived a suicide attempt. These individuals tell us that they didn’t want to die—they just wanted their pain to end and they didn’t know where to go, what to do, or who to turn to. Evidence-based programs that teach mental wellness, coping strategies and resiliency are key to providing the much-needed education that will prevent them from seeing suicide as the only way to end their pain and suffering.

As someone who works with mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and grandparents of those who have lost a loved one to suicide, we urge you pass House Bill 123, as we believe that this bill would be a good step to educate youth with solid information that could literally save a life.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you might have.