



Chairwoman Lehner, Vice Chair Brenner, Ranking Member Fedor and all members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide supporting testimony on House Bill 123. My name is Annie Stephens. I grew up here in Ohio, I'm raising my two young children here, and it will always be my home. Until recently I was the Ohio School Outreach Coordinator for Sandy Hook Promise, responsible for all program implementation across Ohio. I am now SHP's Account Manager for Northeastern United States, still focusing greatly on our work here.

While I am an advocate of and believer in the SHP model and our no cost Know The Signs programs, House Bill 123 does not prescribe that districts use them to meet the requirements of this legislation. We certainly hope that many will, but we also understand that all might not. While there are other groups and organizations that provide meaningful trainings that could meet the parameters of this legislation, I will be focusing my remarks today on the scope and impact of Sandy Hook Promise, namely here, in Ohio so far.

I have been with SHP since 2015 and my role has been to broaden awareness about our no cost Know the Signs programs and be a guide for Ohio school districts that implement them. I've done this in a variety of ways and at various levels. I first introduced them building-by-building, then brought them district-by-district, and now I'm working side-by-side with state-wide partners, all the while engaging with our youth clubs. SHP programming has reached schools in each of your communities, and in almost every county in Ohio. I'm proud to say we have trained well over 1 million students and adults in our state alone. We've trained over 7.5 million across the country.

Oftentimes after a tragedy, we learn that somebody wasn't surprised by it. They come forward to say that they'd known something bad was going to happen or saw indications of trouble ahead. They didn't know what to do with that information though. Sandy Hook Promise's Know the Signs programs educate and empower students and the adults who work with them to recognize warning signs of someone in crisis, so they can get the help they need before a tragedy happens.

It starts with community and community starts with a simple hello. Everyone can take part in creating a safer school atmosphere, by fostering a sense of connectedness and looking out for one another. Our Start With Hello program empowers students to be the ones to intentionally reach out and connect with their lonely, or withdrawing peers and have a meaningful interaction. Something as simple as sitting next to someone sitting alone in the lunchroom or asking how their day is going, can make a big difference to someone experiencing the hardships of extreme loneliness and social isolation. By building a school community that looks out for one another, social isolation is reduced and warning signs are identified faster.

Building on the foundation that Start With Hello fosters, our Say Something program empowers middle and high school students to tell a trusted adult when they notice warning signs and



signals of threatening behavior, with a heavy emphasis on social media. Since students are the eyes and ears of the school now more than ever, we need to equip them with tools to recognize threats, act immediately and say something to a trusted adult who can then take action. Students who Say Something know the difference between getting someone the help they need and being “a snitch” and they take the brave step of coming forward because they’ve learned that’s *what you do* as a part of your community.

We also know that suicide and suicidal ideation are an all too pervasive problem for Ohio students. Suicide is preventable, when we know the signs and it is critical to train not only teachers, but students, in suicide prevention. This legislation will ensure that teachers and students are annually receiving life-saving, evidence-based training on suicide awareness and prevention. Programs that explain how to identify the signs and signals of depression and the risk factors of suicide and self-injury are needed throughout the state, and we must encourage students to Say Something to a trusted adult should they notice those signs in themselves or others.

We understand that not every student feels comfortable having a conversation with an adult about a threat or warning sign they came across. Sadly, not every child has a trusted adult. Keeping this in mind, this legislation would require each school to identify an anonymous reporting system. SHP’s reporting system, the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System, has a user friendly application, that allows students to utilize their medium; where kids communicate in their style and can even share screen shots to make a tip. All tips are immediately triaged by SHP’s trained crisis management center team and sent back to school district personnel and law enforcement (as appropriate) and as designated by the school district before the program is launched. Our Anonymous Reporting System fits hand in glove with the Say Something program so students not only have the tool but know how and when to use it.

For lasting impact, schools embed the messages of Start With Hello and Say Something in a new or existing club. This provides sustainability, immediate relevance, and gives students an opportunity to use their unique youth voice as a constructive and effective response to what’s happening around them. We call them SAVE Promise clubs (SAVE stands for Students Against Violence Everywhere) and spending time with them is the most rewarding part of my work and where I find inspiration.

There are nearly 200 clubs supporting and sustaining our violence prevention messages in their schools in Ohio alone and 2600 nation-wide. Some clubs are also a school’s SADD chapter or student leadership, like the Centerville City School Board Of Education’s Student Representatives who take an active role at the board level. Some are stand-alone clubs like the SAVE Promise Club at Toledo’s Woodward High school that has blazed a trail of youth leadership for all of Toledo Public Schools which has adopted Start With Hello as the district’s



anti-bullying and harassment curriculum and are starting up SAVE Promise Clubs in every Toledo Public School this year.

There are pockets where districts have embraced Start With Hello and Say Something and the youth are doing their part to create a culture of inclusion beyond the barriers of school bells and buildings, a culture of upstanders who look out for one another every day. While the initiative of these communities is certainly remarkable, there is no policy to reinforce this good work or to direct others to follow suit. What a lifesaving difference that could make for years to come if there was!

We also empower adults with evidence-based supports in this prevention space.

When an student reports a threat of any kind, be it to an anonymous reporting system or to their trusted adult, it's critical that the adult receiving it knows how to respond and that there is a threat assessment team in place to approach it in a balanced and measured way. We help school districts assemble threat assessment teams that are comprised of a mix of administrators, school safety personnel, and mental health professionals. We then train these teams in our Safety Assessment & Intervention program which was designed by Dr. Dewey Cornell from the University of Virginia's Virginia Youth Violence Project and the principal author of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines.

During this training, teams look for existing gaps in their current safety policy and code of conduct. Teams learn how to quickly determine the seriousness of any threat and develop an individualized plan to get to the root cause of the threatening behavior which will get that student back on the right track, while also keeping the rest of the school community safe. The program's framework is an effective alternative to the zero tolerance model. It helps reduce a district's response time in determining if the school safety plan is necessary and helps prevent tragedies upstream because teams address less serious threats that would otherwise fall in a gray area of their protocols- too serious for this response, but not serious enough for that one.

The Ohio Department of Education has received a federal DOJ STOP School Violence Act grant and partnered with SHP to bring this program to every district across the state that desires it over the next three years. I manage the day-to-day planning and implementation of the projected 145 day-long Safety Assessment and Intervention trainings across the state for district multi-disciplinary school based teams. In fact, last week we had trainings in Hillsboro, this week in Mentor, and we have trainings planned in Ottawa, Columbus, and Dayton next month. We look to have 62 trainings by the end of this school year alone.

I've felt encouraged by the growing enthusiasm that districts have for this important program but there is nothing currently in place that requires districts approach both serious and less serious-but potentially predictive threats proactively like this program's framework empowers them to do. Right now many schools don't know quite what to do with a reported threat that



isn't serious enough to enact an emergency safety plan and school staff are left to "keep an eye on" students until the threats intensify and escalate. House Bill 123 would require this training, or one like it, and would give it a broader foundation than what the grant can provide.

As the keeper of our Ohio story I'm here to say with confidence that we know that these programs work. Schools that implement our programs experience an immediate impact in school climate and in reporting especially. Early on, when I'd hear about an intervention that was made in the days or sometimes hours after a training at a school, I'd remark about the timeliness of the program. *What luck and amazing timing* that a student was empowered to come forward and save the day. After seeing these incidents happen time and time again, I've come to realize it's not luck or timing. Plain and simple, the schools that haven't implemented prevention programs like ours yet and haven't experienced a tragedy of some kind are the lucky ones. In Ohio and across the country, school shootings and suicides have been averted as well as other threats of violence and victimization. Recently, the counselor at an Ohio intermediate school reached out to me to tell me that on the day after their Say Something training a club student came forward about a potential threat- that their friend had brought a knife to school and that the counselor herself was the intended target. There was obvious relief in her voice but also pride that, when tested, her students stepped up and made a big difference.

It's been my pleasure to work with school counselors, superintendents, school resource officers, student leaders, school nurses, parents, school boards members, law enforcement, community leaders and now the Ohio Department of Education, who have all been on the leading edge and understand the value of prevention while also reinforcing brick and mortar supports. Champions who understand that our programs don't only avert school shootings, the nexus of our story, but help the little boy who might have been cyberbullied over the holiday break had their friend not said something, or the teenager who might not have recognized subtle changes and warning signs in her friend who was cutting and found her help.

As an Ohio mom, and the Northeastern Region's Account Manager for Sandy Hook Promise I recognize our need for evidence-based practices to support and empower our kids when it comes to behavioral health and violence prevention. I'm proud of our communities who have led the way in this space. Prevention can be hard work and the enormity of its impact can be difficult to measure but we know that it changes and saves lives and it shouldn't be found in just many schools in Ohio, but in *every* school in Ohio.

Chair Lehner, members of the committee, I appreciate your time and attention today and would be happy to answer any questions.