Ohio House Behavioral Health and Recovery Supports Committee

Proponent Testimony on Sub. HB 523

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Chairwoman Carruthers, Vice-Chair Pavliga, and members of the House Behavioral Health and Recovery Supports Committee thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony in support of Sub HB 523. My name is Tony Coder, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation. We are a 501c3 non-profit focused on the prevention of suicide.

In Ohio, we lose five people every day to suicide. That means that as the sun goes down today, there will be five families that will be wondering what happened, how did they get there, and what is next for them. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people ages 14-24 and the leading cause of death for children ages 10-14. The impacts of COVID have worsened the situation and, although the number of suicides decreased at the beginning of the pandemic, which we predicted, the research is also correct that the aftermath of natural disasters and, in this case, a global pandemic has brought higher numbers of suicides in many counties across Ohio. I have heard from Mental Health and Addiction Board Directors about the increases in suicides in some counties over the first three months of 2022 – large increases – with one county already surpassing its' suicide numbers of an average year in just three months.

With more awareness and need around mental health and suicide, we need a stronger system built upon person-centered care and the ease of navigation for families. As someone who has had a son who has struggled with suicidality, to piggyback on Governor DeWine's State of the State, our system needs much, much improvement. When my son had his struggles with suicide and ended up in the ER and a 13-day stay in a mental health facility, even though I had worked in the behavioral health system, I had no idea what to do and what next steps were in my son's journey.

I will also tell you of a story of a man who called me a couple months ago. He had called the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline and had not gotten help. He was struggling with thoughts of "shooting up a grocery store" and thought killing himself would save others. He would not give a name or location, but after discussing his feelings with him and promising that I wasn't able to tell where he was from. After a 15-20 minute conversation, he finally told me the city that he was living in. I was able to call the Board with him on the phone and they were able to connect him with help. This man called me a few weeks later, told me more about the issues that he was facing at the time of the call and about his progress. Knowing that we made the connection and not only his life but also possibly the lives of others.

I'm here today in support of HB523, as we need to empower the Boards with the improvements in this bill to effectively coordinate and organize efforts at the local level. Without Boards having the ability to be the "hub" at the local level, organizations will struggle with working collaboratively and

effectively, to serve the individuals and families who are struggling at the local level. Also, more specifically, with individuals and families who have lived experience on the Board of Directors at the Mental Health and Recovery Board, we also get better services for citizens within a county. It is one thing to read about the behavioral system but to experience the system gives a better view and better understanding of the system itself.

Therefore, without collaborative and collective work, we will continue to lose this battle. And empowering the Mental Health Boards to execute that work will save lives. Without this, we will lose more lives and more families will be going through an unimaginable but, also, very preventable, tragedy.

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Should you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them.