

YSU Witness Information Statement for HB 492

I am writing on behalf of Youngstown State University in support of HB 492. As we have seen at so many institutions of higher education, our young people are struggling with mental health issues that have worsened significantly following the unprecedented events of the past two years. Our student-athletes, in particular, were affected exponentially as they are often under more pressure than non-athlete students due to their multiple competing roles. These individuals face many unique stressors and challenges including missed classes due to practices, competition, and extensive travel, intense physical demands, and possibly most important, the very real expectation to be “perfect”.

Many of YUS’s student-athletes arrive to campus fearful they will be judged for disclosing a previous mental health diagnosis; and, just as often, they are concerned that asking for help will be viewed as a sign of weakness – especially by the coaches they look up to. That stated, over the past several years, we have seen a clear correlation of help-seeking behavior by struggling student-athletes when their coach has knowledge of the importance of mental health and of possible “red flags” where early identification and intervention is critical. At the collegiate level, mental health training and resources has become the expectation of coaches, student-athletes – and their families.

Having coaches at “all levels” who are trained in assessing mental health concerns and making appropriate referrals could be life saving for student-athletes. More specifically, adding a mental health training as part of securing a pupil activity permit, would increase the number of adults in a k-12 athletes’ life who can identify mental health issues and make appropriate referrals for treatment. This has the real potential to positively affect not just for the student athletes they coach, but also other students, colleagues and family members with whom they have contact.

It is essential that coaches and student-athletes view their mental health in the same way they would view physical health. A Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services approved training on Mental Health for Coaches of athletics activities would be in alignment with treating mental health and wellness as equivalent to physical health and wellbeing of athletes. Normalizing critical conversations about mental health with coaches who have significant influence over a large number of individuals will, no doubt, create change and, eventually, decrease stigma.

Our young people are experiencing an unprecedented mental health crisis. Passage of HB 492 will significantly increase the number of caring, influential individuals who can identify mental health concerns and make an appropriate referrals. Our k-12 coaches play critical roles in the lives of young people, many of whom are struggling greatly. Success can only occur with a “team” approach where all hands, including our k-12 coaches, are part of the solution.