



June 24, 2024

Chairwoman Pavliga  
Ohio House of Representatives  
Behavioral Health Committee

Dear Chairwoman Pavliga,

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony in support of the proposed changes to HB571, which adds requirements for schools to promote 988, the national suicide prevention lifeline. My name is Colleen Oakes, and I am a Montgomery County ADAMHS Board employee. I write today as the Manager of the Montgomery County Prevention Coalition based in Dayton. The Montgomery County Prevention Coalition, or MCPC, is a group of over 350 volunteers focused on reducing substance use and promoting mental wellness in Montgomery County. The volunteers on the MCPC are the individuals who are genuinely boots on the ground, working with our community members every day and seeing the vast impact that mental health disorders and suicidal ideation have on our community. We've seen firsthand the devastating effect of a growing number of suicides in our community – impacting not only those who die by suicide or attempt suicide but also the family members, friends, witnesses, and community members who love every one of these individuals.

In 2023, Montgomery County had the largest number of suicide deaths *ever* – 101 family members, colleagues, loved ones, and friends died by suicide. Nineteen of these individuals were under the age of 25. So far, in 2024, we've seen a 21% increase in suicide deaths. However, **none** of these individuals were under the age of 18. Though we have much work to do to continue to reduce suicide deaths in Montgomery County, we are proud of the reduction in suicide deaths among our young people. This reduction results from several community-level efforts – one of the most noteworthy is our intentional promotion of 988. Our goal has been to reduce the stigma around calling the lifeline, increase awareness of the resource, and share signs individuals should know that may require them to call 988. We believe that the increased awareness of 988 has played an essential role in saving many young people's lives in Montgomery County.

Though we believe strongly in the effectiveness of 988, we have much work to do to spread awareness of the resource. A [2023 Pew Study](#) found that only 13% of US adults had heard of the 988 suicide lifeline nine months after its launch. The study also found notable discrepancies in 988 awareness based on race, college education, and annual income. Twice as many white, non-Hispanic people had heard of 988 compared to their black, non-Hispanic counterparts. Those with a college education and those making \$50,000 or more also had a greater awareness of 988. We must take steps to continue to promote this vital resource, especially to our minority and more vulnerable communities.

When it comes to suicide ideation, one of our most vulnerable populations is our young people. Not only do many mental health disorders begin to manifest in the teens and early 20s, but life also changes,



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and expectations continue to grow – putting our young people, especially, at risk. The demands of increased schoolwork, extracurricular activities, college applications, first romantic relationships, and changes upon high school graduation are challenging for anyone to manage – especially someone already experiencing a mental health disorder. We must provide extra support to this vulnerable group of young people, who also have many barriers to receiving professional behavioral healthcare services.

The changes proposed to HB571 will make great strides in raising awareness for 988 and ensuring our young people know the life-saving resources that 988 can provide. Additionally, the school requirements are relatively easy to implement and require utilizing already existing materials to spread this messaging. The Montgomery County Prevention Coalition commits to assisting schools with implementing these requirements if needed. We thank the House of Representatives for their consideration of this bill, which takes an essential step in reducing suicide deaths for young Ohioans.

We welcome any questions or concerns. Please contact the Montgomery County Prevention Coalition using the information listed below.

Sincerely,

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