



Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services

Testimony of Tony Coder, Executive Director  
Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation  
March 9, 2023

Chairwoman Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Finance Subcommittee on Health and Human Services. Thank you for allowing me to share my testimony with you. My name is Tony Coder, and I am the Executive Director of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation.

The Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation is a non-profit organization that works to prevent one of our most preventable causes of death: suicide. OSPF works with providers, educators, loss survivors, local community organizations, employers, health plans, public and private partners, and families across the state. OSPF also supports postvention services. The goals of postvention responses are to facilitate healthy grieving and healing from the suicide loss at both an individual and community level, and to prevent the future suicides of other high-risk people exposed to the suicide loss.

The issue of suicide is not an easy one to talk about. However, in Ohio, nearly five people die every day by suicide. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for youth ages 10-19, and the leading cause of death for children ages 10-14, with a child dying every 33 hours. But this is not just a health issue that is exclusive to children. In fact, nearly 80% of Ohio's suicides are 35-65-year-old adults, and the highest rate of suicide lies with people over 75. In addition, we lost 230 veterans to suicide in 2021 in the Buckeye State. This is not an issue about weakness, character, financial stability, color, religion, or anything else – this is a health issue that can be vastly impacted by simply building a system of care to support individuals who struggle with mental health issues and other issues that can impact suicide. Although about 90% of all suicides are by people who have a diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issue, there are other risk factors that need to be considered:

- Relationship issues
- Financial problems
- Work or school challenges
- Substance use
- Social isolation



- Access to lethal means
- Barriers to healthcare
- Historical trauma

I also serve as the Chair of the American Association of Suicidology, the oldest organization focusing on suicide prevention across the United States. I have seen firsthand that Ohio is not alone, as every state in the country has seen a sharp rise in suicide over the past decade. All states share another piece of this issue – the lack of building out the crisis system of care for people with mental health concerns.

OSPF strongly supports Governor DeWine's budget initiatives impacting mental health services and suicide prevention. Working to build the system is key to improving the rates of suicide in Ohio. I will re-visit what Governor DeWine said in his State of the State earlier this year, "Despite the good intentions of the past, our country has never fully built a community mental health system...The promise then was that a system of care would be built so that these men and women, and others with untreated mental illness, would live with dignity and receive treatment in their communities.

That promise was never fully kept -- not nationally, nor in Ohio -- and the community system of care was never fully built. But, with your help, we have started to make progress."

We agree with the Governor and building the system begins with funding 988, the new National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline that became active in July 2022. In the first month of 988, calls increased by 39%, and texts increased by 603%, averaging 7,000-10,000 calls and texts per month.

Recent studies show that approximately 80% of calls can be handled via 988 without the person needing emergency services, which alleviates strain on 911, first responders, and hospitals if callers can be stabilized by utilizing 988.

The importance of 988 is paramount to getting people into the care that they need. I stated earlier that nearly five people died daily in Ohio to suicide. In addition to this, last week an average of 37 people a day came into Ohio emergency rooms with a suicide attempt and an average of 225 people a day came into Ohio emergency rooms with suicidal thoughts or ideations.

While we are strongly supportive of the Governor's recommended allocation in House Bill 33, continued and sustained funding for 9-8-8 is critical. OSPF supports funding measures however the legislature sees fit. We have even started the process of discussing what future funding might look like beyond this budget. States are coming up with creative ways to fund this program from



monthly phone line fees totally less than \$5 a year to standing line-items in state budgets to fund this crisis line. Polling data shows that Ohioans of all ages, political affiliations, and in every corner of the state want to see a long-term funding plan in place. Because this issue is so important, they support any effort made to sustain the hotline permanently. We are honored to work with many of you, your colleagues in the Senate, and other interested parties to ensuring every Ohioan has access to quality care to prevent suicides.

OSPF is also supportive of funding for suicide prevention in the budget, which is currently listed at \$16 million over the biennium. Funding mental health treatment and suicide prevention programs goes further than just improving quality of life – it can also increase Ohio's opportunity to improve economic growth. We are beginning our work with Cardinal Health and the Cardinal Health Foundation, as well as the Ohio Chamber of Commerce and Ohio Business Roundtable to address mental health needs for Ohio's employers.

Continued support of Programs like VitalCog which provides suicide prevention training in the workplace, QPR (Question Persuade, Refer) Sources of Strength and others ensures all communities and Ohioans from all backgrounds have access to critical lifesaving training and information for prevention.

Lastly, funding in this budget will help support the implementation of the Suicide Prevention Plan for Ohio which OSPF coordinates through funding from the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. The plan is a 3-year for all Ohioans rooted in research and best practices that aims to reduce suicides every year, until not one life is lost. The State Plan is created by a group of roughly 35 diverse stakeholders across Ohio, including suicide prevention experts, providers, MCOs, State Agencies, coalitions, suicide loss survivors, and others.

One major theme of the plan is to improve systems to facilitate early identification of those considering suicide, and how to respond effectively and appropriately in the least restrictive way. The plan will be implemented at the individual, local, and state level.

The issues of mental health wellness and suicide prevention are crucial to creating a productive workforce, healthy families, and healthy communities. With five people lost to suicide every day in Ohio, these losses traumatize families and communities, prioritizing funding for mental health and suicide prevention in the 2024-2025 budget is key to ensuring strong and healthy communities across Ohio.

Thank you for listening to my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have for me.