



Assembly Bill 210: Grants for Suicide Prevention Programming  
Assembly Committee on Mental Health  
Testimony of Senator Joan Ballweg  
April 28, 2021

Good morning, members of the committee, and thank you for holding a hearing on AB 210.

Suicide rates are continuing an alarming trend. In Wisconsin, the rate has increased by 28% from 2000-2019, and for every one of those years, the rate at which Wisconsin residents died by suicide has stayed higher than or equal to the national rate.<sup>1</sup> Preliminary data gives reason to be concerned that the suicide rate for 2020 will have increased due to COVID, too. The CDC survey in June of 2020 designed to capture the mental health challenges relating to COVID-19 indicated 40.9 percent of U.S. adults were struggling with some type of mental health or substance abuse, representing significantly higher rates than those reported in 2019.<sup>2</sup>

It's important to realize it is not just the impact of deaths by suicide that affect our communities. Unfortunately, too many quietly struggle with suicidal ideation and engage in self-harm or even attempt suicide. Of particular concern are our youth, where one in six Wisconsin public high school students reported suicidal ideation.<sup>3</sup> However, many people who are struggling do not have access to resources. In rural counties of Wisconsin, suicide rates are higher than in urban counties<sup>4</sup>, and yet rural areas often have less access to mental health services. We must provide resources to meet people where they are, which is what this bill accomplishes.

In 2019, I chaired the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention that produced nine different proposals based on feedback we received from the six public hearings held across the state. This proposal provides \$250,000 each year for the Department of Health Services to award grants up to \$25,000 to organizations or coalitions for suicide prevention programming if the recipient matches at least 20 percent of the grant. The goal is to increase the number of local mental health coalitions and to support current efforts of volunteers that are directly engaged in their communities through peer support, education initiatives, community workshops, and navigation of services available to individuals.

This is modeled after the success of the Monroe County Mental Health Coalition, which is a partnership of local government, education, health, and law enforcement entities. In the 14<sup>th</sup> Senate District which I represent, the Adams County Human Services Department and Sheriff's Department team up to do this work. But, their efforts are funded by donations and brat frys. We should do more to support these activities in every county across the state.

We know that suicide is a complex and growing problem in our state, but we also know that we can make strategic and targeted investments to support communities and those who are considering suicide. Thank you for your consideration, and I am happy to answer any questions.

<sup>1</sup> Data from the Suicide in Wisconsin Report (2020): <https://www.preventsuicidewi.org/statistics-and-reports>

<sup>2</sup> Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Wisconsin Data and the Wisconsin Suicide Prevention Plan (September 2020): <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p02657.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Data from the Suicide in Wisconsin Report (2020): <https://www.preventsuicidewi.org/statistics-and-reports>



# NANCY VANDERMEER

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 70<sup>TH</sup> ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

TO: Honorable Members of the Assembly Committee on Mental Health

FROM: State Representative Nancy VanderMeer

DATE: April 28, 2021

SUBJECT: Testimony in support of Assembly Bill 210 - relating to grants for suicide prevention programming

Thank you Chairman Tittl for holding a hearing on Assembly Bill 210 today. This bill would award grants to local mental health organizations for the purpose of suicide prevention. Using the grant money, mental health coalitions and organizations will be able to train teachers, first responders and families in a variety of ways, including on how to assist individuals in crisis and refer them to find additional appropriate assistance. Additionally, the grant money could help organizations implement suicide prevention programs, have sufficient staffing and resources for mental health programming and education, and more.

This legislation was first introduced in 2019 as part of a broader package of bills recommended by the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention. Last session, the bill was 2019 AB 530/SB 504, and it passed the Assembly 92-3, as amended. The bipartisan task force was created in March of 2019, and it was charged with evaluating the current resources for suicide prevention and identifying opportunities to target and assist at-risk individuals. The task force held six public hearings across the state.

As alluded to initially, this particular proposal seeks to grow the number of local mental health organizations and coalitions throughout Wisconsin. Local mental health organizations provide help and resources to those in our communities experiencing mental health issues and suicidal thoughts. They are staffed by mental health professionals and volunteers who direct people to services that are available to them, provide education to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health, and teach community stakeholders such as police, teachers, and family members how to assist when a person is in crisis. Often, mental health organizations hold workshops, community meetings, or lessons in schools to raise awareness about mental health and what help is available. In addition, mental health coalitions offer peer support to people suffering from a mental health issue by offering an outlet for someone to talk with a trained and compassionate listener.

The idea for this bill came from testimony received by the task force modeled after the Monroe County Mental Health Coalition's work. This community coalition provides education focused



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on reducing stigma and promoting awareness about suicide's warning signs throughout the community. The coalition is a partnership with local government, education, health, and law enforcement entities so they can better help residents in crisis. Local mental health organizations have great potential to be a frontline resource for individuals struggling with suicidal thoughts throughout our communities. With the help of these grants, more localities will be able to start a mental health organization or strengthen an existing one to help eliminate stigma and save lives.

Under this legislation, the Department of Health Services is required to award grants to local mental health organizations or coalitions for suicide prevention programming. An organization receiving a grant is required to match the grant at a value equal to at least 20% of the grant, and grant amounts will be limited to no more than \$25,000 per organization in a particular fiscal year. The amended version of the bill from last session is incorporated in this proposal and the bill before you today provides that a federally recognized American Indian tribe or band located in the state is eligible to receive a grant created by the bill.

Thank you again for the opportunity for a public hearing on this bill and to testify before you today. I respectfully ask that you join Senator Ballweg, myself, and our other colleagues who have signed on in support of this legislation, including some of our committee members, in supporting this legislation.