



Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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October 2, 2019

TO: Members
Joint Committee on Finance

FROM: Bob Lang, Director

SUBJECT: Public Instruction: Section 13.10 Request for HOPELINE Funding -- Agenda Item I

REQUEST

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) requests the transfer of \$110,000 GPR in 2019-20 for HOPELINE, a text message-based suicide prevention service. The funding was placed in reserve in the Committee's s. 20.865 (4)(a) program supplements appropriation under 2019 Act 9.

BACKGROUND

In its 2018 report to the Legislature, the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health indicated that in 2015-16, 24% of young adults in Wisconsin had been diagnosed with a mental illness, based on data collected by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration. The report also indicated that Wisconsin's youth suicide rate of 9.8 per 100,000 was higher than the national average of 6.7 in 2016, and that Wisconsin's rate had increased over the previous year.

Under 2017 Act 59, two new categorical aid programs were created to provide funding for mental health in schools. Funding for each of the two programs was increased under 2019 Act 9. In 2019-20, \$6 million GPR is provided to reimburse eligible school districts, independent charter schools, and private schools participating in a private school choice program for a portion of the cost of increased expenditures on social worker services. School-based mental health services grants totaling \$6.5 million GPR in 2019-20 are provided to school districts and independent charter schools for mental health services to pupils in collaboration with community health agencies. In addition to these programs, state funding totaling \$420,000 GPR is provided for mental health training programs for school district and independent charter school staff, including training on the following: (a) screening, brief interventions, and referral to treatment (SBIRT); (b) trauma sensitive schools; and (c) youth mental health first aid.

Additionally, bills were introduced in the 2017-19 and 2019-21 legislative sessions to provide funding to the Center for Suicide Awareness, a non-profit organization based in Kaukauna, Wisconsin, that provides education, support, and intervention related to suicide prevention. The Center operates HOPELINE, a text-based service that provides support and resources to individuals struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts. The Center was founded in 2010, and HOPELINE began operating in 2014.

Under 2017 Assembly Bill 93/Senate Bill 787, which were introduced on February 9, 2018, \$110,000 GPR would have been provided to the Center for Suicide Awareness in a new appropriation under DPI. On February 20, the Assembly Committee on Mental Health recommended passage of the bill by a vote of 11-0. The Assembly approved the bill on a vote of 93-0 on February 22, 2019. The Senate referred the bill to the Joint Committee on Finance, and no further action was taken. The same bills were introduced in the current legislative session as 2019 SB 270/AB 307. These bills were introduced on June 7, 2019, and referred to the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services and the Assembly Committee on Mental Health. No further action has been taken on 2019 SB 270 or AB 307.

Under 2019 AB 56/SB 59 (the Governor's 2019-21 budget proposal), an increase of \$2,580,000 GPR annually would have been provided in the appropriation for school mental health training, and DPI would have been required to expand its mental health training program and award grants from the appropriation to three non-profit organizations, including the Center for Suicide Awareness. Although the amounts of the annual grant for each organization were not specified in the bill and therefore would have been determined by DPI, DPI indicated in its agency request document that \$110,000 GPR annually would have been provided to the Center for Suicide Awareness.

On May 23, 2019, the Committee adopted Motion 94, a DPI omnibus motion which deleted the Governor's proposal, but placed \$110,000 GPR in the Committee's supplemental appropriation in 2019-20 and 2020-21. Although no statutory language was included in 2019 Act 9, the omnibus budget motion adopted by the Committee indicated that this funding was for HOPELINE.

DPI requested release of the HOPELINE funds on July 15, 2019. At that time, the Co-Chairs indicated that their intent was to consider action on the HOPELINE funds after reviewing the final report that would be issued by the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention, which was formed in March, 2019, with the goal of issuing policy recommendations to address the trend of increasing rates of suicide in Wisconsin.

The Task Force issued its interim report on September 25, 2019. The report recommended that the Committee release \$110,000 GPR to the Department of Health Services (DHS) and require that DHS award a grant to a nonprofit organization to support staff, training, and expenses related to operating a text-based or application-based suicide prevention program. The report also recommended that the grant award be conditional upon the recipient meeting an annual reporting requirement, which would include reporting expenditures using the grant funds and aggregate data relating to use of the service. DHS would then be directed to provide an annual report to the Legislature regarding suicide prevention activities in the state, including the information received

from the grant recipient.

ANALYSIS

DPI indicates that the requested funding would be used to support staff, training, and expenses related to HOPELINE. Funds would be used for the following purposes: (a) upgrading software; (b) creating a data portal that would provide regional data regarding how HOPELINE is being used; (c) supporting a part-time data analyst who would use data to identify factors contributing to suicide and best practices for preventing suicide; and (d) recruiting additional volunteers to operate the service. Information from DPI indicates that additional funding is necessary to keep HOPELINE operational, and that the funding set aside in Act 9 would be sufficient to do so while also allowing the service to expand its operations and, in particular, its use of data.

Under the Governor's budget proposal, funding for HOPELINE would have been placed in DPI's s. 20.255(1)(ep) appropriation, which currently funds mental health training programs. The current law statutory language for the appropriation directs DPI to use the funds for the three mental health strategies detailed in the statutes, as described above.

The Governor's proposal modified the statutory language related to s. 20.255(1)(ep) to allow the appropriation to be used to award grants to specified organizations. However, this statutory change was deleted by the Committee during budget deliberations. As a result, some have expressed concern that DPI would not have the authority to award a grant to the Center for Suicide Awareness from this appropriation. Therefore, the Committee could consider transferring the funds to DPI's general program operations appropriation (s. 20.255(1)(a)), which is to be used for "the improvement of curriculum, instruction, and educational resources." It could be argued that the statutory language in this appropriation is broad enough to include distribution of a grant for suicide prevention.

The Committee could also consider transferring the funds to DHS, as recommended by the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention. The Task Force report did not identify an appropriation under DHS to which the funds would be transferred, but the Committee could consider transferring the funds to s. 20.435(5)(a), which current law indicates is for "general program operations relating to mental health and alcoholism or other drug abuse services, including field services and administrative services."

ALTERNATIVES

A. Funding

1. Approve the request to transfer \$110,000 GPR annually of ongoing funding from the s. 20.865(4)(a) appropriation under program supplements for the HOPELINE suicide prevention hotline into one of the following appropriations:

- a. DPI's s. 20.255(1)(ep) appropriation, as originally recommended by the Governor;
- b. DPI's general program operations appropriation (s. 20.255(1)(a)).

c. DHS's general program operations appropriation for mental health and substance abuse services (s. 20.435(5)(a)).

2. Deny the request.

B. Annual Report

1. Adopt the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention recommendation to direct the Center for Suicide Awareness to submit an annual report, including information on expenditures using the grant funds and data relating to use of the service, and direct DHS to provide an annual report to the Legislature regarding suicide prevention activities in the state, including the information received from the grant recipient.

2. Take no action.

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