

MEMORANDUM

TO: Representative Lori Houghton, Chair, House Committee on Health Care

FROM: Emily Hawes, Commissioner, Department of Mental Health

DATE: March 14th, 2023

RE: Written Testimony answering Committee questions and requests for comment on Vermont School-based Suicide Prevention Programming

Committee Requests:

The House Committee on Health Care is inviting a representative from the Department of Mental Health to testify on Wednesday, March 15th, at 10:15am-12pm, on current suicide prevention programming in Vermont schools. The Agency of Education and Department of Health will also testify. Questions from the Chair for this testimony are below. Some of these questions are specifically for AoE, but I'm including them all here in case the Department is able to comment on those.

Our goal: understanding what suicide prevention education is done in schools.

1. What, if any, directives come from AOE or statute for suicide prevention education in the schools?
2. What do the programs look like?
3. Student based programs vs. Staff based programs?
4. Do all schools do the same thing or is it locally created?
5. How is it funded?
6. What languages is the education material?
7. Are the programs different by age/grade level?
8. Garrett Lee Smith Grant and CDC grant - what programs, resources are going to the schools? How will it continue when grants expire?
9. Outcome/Measurements for any programs

In addition, the committee would like a comment from the department on two language proposals:

From Draft 1.1 of the Committee Amendment to H.230:

(4) The Department of Health and Agency of Education shall develop detailed information regarding firearms safety and annually provide it free of cost to students and parents. The information shall include the risks associated with firearms, suicide prevention resources, state laws requiring secure firearms storage, and the importance of secure storage in protecting minors from accessing firearms. School districts shall annually distribute a pamphlet in English and Spanish containing the information required by this subdivision to all students and their families and shall post the information on the district's webpage.

And § 8154. SUICIDE PREVENTION INFORMATION; STUDENT IDENTIFICATION CARDS from H.283 As Introduced



Department Testimony Response:

Umatter for Schools

The Umatter for Schools Suicide Prevention is a national best practice program for suicide prevention. Umatter online training for Schools Fall 2022 was the first delivery of the new platform iteration, condensing our 6-week course to a 4-week program including both self-paced asynchronous work and virtual live seminars. Attendees engaged with the desire to guide their schools (admin/teachers/families/students) toward a more suicide prevention prepared culture. Content included: Foundation of Suicide Prevention - Umatter SP Awareness; Introduction of model suicide prevention/intervention/ and postvention curriculum - Hazelden/ American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP); Mental Health and Health Education; 3 School Level Outcomes: Full immersion in Awareness and ability to replicate this at your site, Curriculum, Policies and Protocols; Postvention and re-entry considerations; Discussion/roles/practice; Next Steps and Self Care.

Umatter for Schools Cohorts ranges from teams of 2 to teams of 6 in their efforts focused to understand, identify, draft, implement, monitor, and communicate protocol enhancements and change. Conversations and energies were impacted by recent suicide deaths in several communities and in general from the working knowledge that youth (and family) mental health/wellness is suffering for many, if not most. The audience for this training consists of school guidance counselors, nurses, health educators, mental health providers, and Administrators. This course provides the tools, the information, and the expert support for teams to go back to their schools with energy, ideas, and plans/proposals for administrative consideration and implementation. Whole school engagement from Superintendents, principals, nurses, teachers, guidance/clinicians, families, and of course the children makes the system work. It's about building a culture that is supported by solid pillars.

At the end of this training, teams and participants will have:

- Deepened their understanding of identifying risk factors and warning signs;
- Developed knowledge, skill set and competencies in facilitation of conversations about suicide prevention and their responses;
- Completed the Gatekeeper and Training of Trainers, both part of the learning modules and practice sessions;
- Planned to provide a parent and/or staff suicide prevention awareness session;
- Created and shared a prevention protocol;
- Created and shared a postvention protocol;
- Shared their plan for implementation at the school level;
- Reported on how staff and community training sessions went. (“What was challenging? Helpful? What do you need more of?”)
- Developed a plan for implementation of Lifelines or other suicide prevention curriculum.

Course dates in fall of 2022 ran from October 12, 2022- November 5, 2022, consisting of 4 modules of asynchronous learning and 4 virtual live weekly sessions. The total number of participants was 36 individuals covering North, Central, and Southern VT. The School districts represented: WSESD, WNESU, OSSU, HUUSD.

The cost to provide the training is \$350/per person. This training is supported by funding from the Vermont Department of Mental Health, and Agency of Education AWARE Grant. The fee includes the online training plus online access to the training materials, handbook, as well as Staff and Parent Awareness Training materials, wallet cards, and post-training consultation. There is an additional option of \$1,550/per person to complete a more in-depth training accompanied with 3 graduate credits through Castleton University (Project Implementation Plan and final paper required).

Umatter For Schools Spring 2023 is set to run March 15, 22, 29 and April 5th 2023.

Youth Mental Health First Aid® (YMHFA) and Teen MHFA Training



The National Council for Behavioral Health (NCBH), in collaboration with SAMSHA, oversees the training of instructors of YMHFA and other Mental Health First Aid USA curricula and the copyrighted materials used by the instructors and training recipients. Y/MHFA instructors who provide the training locally in all states must maintain certification as a Y/MHFA instructor through the NCBH.

Vermont Care Network/Vermont Care Partners (VCP) is the single organizing entity for Teen and Youth MHFA instructors in Vermont, established through competitive SAMSHA grants. VCP organizes the contingent of t/Y/MHFA instructors across Vermont, which entails the following: provides statewide coordination and support of instructors, ensures certifications are renewed, serves as the hub for training requests to identify available instructors, supports the registration process, provides peer supervision to support the instructors' effective implementation and fidelity of the training, provides compensation for the instructors when available, tracks data from the training events, surveys mental health first aiders as appropriate. <https://vermontcarepartners.org/youth-and-adult-mental-health-first-aid/>

Youth Mental Health First Aid is an 8-hour training focused on youth ages 12-18 and it is designed for adults who regularly interact with adolescents. The training focus is providing education on the risk factors and warning signs of mental health challenges and how to support a youth with signs of a mental illness. Teen Mental Health First Aid is a training for teens ages 15-18 teaching them how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental health and substance use challenges in friends and peers.

With input from DMH, the Agency of Education created a funding agreement with Vermont Care Partners beginning in June 2021 to offer a specific number of trainings at no cost to schools on Youth Mental Health First Aid (YMHFA) and Teen MHFA. A total of 489 Vermonters have been trained through Sept 2022: 371 adults were trained in YMHFA, and 118 youth were trained in teen MHFA. Agency of Education may have more current data.

Project AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education) is in its 5th and final year of federal funding through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The Project is focused on three school districts. One aspect of the project involves partnership with Center for Health and Learning (CHL) to provide suicide prevention training and protocol support for the three identified school districts. With the support of these funds, CHL provided the Umatter® for Schools; Umatter® for Community; Umatter Suicide Prevention Training of Trainers (TOT); Introduction to Zero suicide in Vermont: Suicide Safe Pathways to Care; Suicide Risk Assessment & Treatment for Youth in Schools: CAMS/CALM; Suicidal Awareness in the School System (Gatekeeper Training). Oct 2020-Sept 2021 = 90 trained; Oct 2021-Sept 2022 = 154 trained in the AWARE regions.

Schools are expected to have a crisis suicide intervention protocol in place. CHL provided a template protocol for schools to use if they needed to update their protocols. In the Project AWARE Year End Evaluation Report (Sept 2021-Oct 2022), all 3 AWARE districts had policies/protocols for youth who express suicide ideation; one district indicated that individual schools are responsible for creating and documenting their own suicide protocols.

A 2022 survey of staff providing mental health related supports in the AWARE schools indicated that there is not consistent awareness of and/or implementation of school and district policies related to mental health support and supporting students with suicide ideation. Additionally, respondents identified their greatest need for support is around in the following top three areas (in order of highest need first): meeting the social, emotional, and developmental needs of youth; supporting students exposed to trauma or stressful events; and creating a positive school climate.

Across the three AWARE districts, nine schools have implemented universal screening of students for social, emotional and behavioral needs and strengths. All three districts implemented a universal screener in 2021/22 school year and are planning full implementation across all schools in the AWARE districts in 2022/23. The experiences of these districts in implementing and making use of universal screening provides helpful information on the steps needed for successful implementation, including lessons learned on how the screening data is used, who inputs follow up data, who has access to it, and how it impacts both universal prevention planning and individual supports. Districts continue to need support for navigating various layers of challenges in tracking and



understanding what the screening results are used for, how to track data between schools and mental health (or other community support) systems, whether students who are referred to services access the services, and what are the results of those services for students' mental health.

Garrett Lee Smith (GLS) Grant

The GLS grant provides funding for five years with regional focuses on Chittenden, Rutland, Bennington, Windham, and Statewide. Within this grant the focus populations are youth and young adults ages 10-24, LGBTQ+ Youth, BIPOC Youth, and child welfare and justice-involved youth. The activities supported by this grant are youth and teen Mental Health First Aid, Umatter for schools, improving suicide clinical treatment and care transitions, expanding family supports, reducing access to lethal means, increasing public awareness, and increasing postvention supports for families and organizations. For school staff grades 7-12, Umatter for Schools presented by the Center for Health and Learning is an online 4-week training including, identifying risk factors and warning signs, facilitation of conversations about suicide prevention and their responses, gatekeeper and training of trainers on suicide awareness, creating and sharing prevention and postvention protocols and planning, and developing a plan for implementation of Lifelines. The GLS grant is also supporting the Zero Suicide framework through activities such as: a monthly Community of Practice focusing on quality improvement models to improve practices in screening, assessment, treatment, care coordination, and follow up, Zero Suicide Academy for Youth Treatment Providers, and Youth Zero Suicide Regional Planning Groups to improve continuity of care and care transitions for youth experiencing suicidality.

Student identification card language

VT Department of Mental Health is in support of providing information to students through multiple methods about how to get support when they or someone they know is in crisis. DMH is unclear what is driving the selected age parameters of grades 7-12. If this range was selected based on practice in other states, we may want to consider whether this simply applies to all Middle and High School students, given that VT middle schools vary in range of ages/grades. DMH is less familiar with the scope of providing student identification cards in Vermont schools, and so cannot speak to the breadth of impact using this method.

Draft 1.1 of the Committee Amendment to H.230 Language

While the Department of Mental Health sees no issues with the language as it is currently written, the Vermont Department of Health has purview over safe-storage messaging. The Department recommends seeking input from the Department of Health and the Agency of Education for comment on this language.

Suicide Prevention Training for Faculty and Staff language

a.2) charges DMH with “posting on its website a list of approved evidence-based suicide and awareness trainings and related materials that address the following topics:

A) how to identify appropriate mental health services both within a school and in the larger community; and
B) when and how to refer students and their families to those mental health services”

The Department has concerns around how to best provide up-to-date information on mental health services within specific schools. There does exist trainings and awareness resources on how to identify need and refer based on risk factors more generically. These are the resources that exist on the VT Department of Mental Health website:

- Landing page on suicide prevention <https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/suicide-prevention>
 - Helping Someone Else: <https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/suicide-prevention/helping-someone-else>
 - Awareness materials and training resources: <https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention-partnerships/awareness-materials>
 - Registry of Vermont Independent Mental Health Providers Trained in Suicide Specific Treatment Protocols <https://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/suicide-prevention/vermont-mental-health-providers-trained-cams-collaborative-assessment-and>

