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LD 1263

Chairman Brennan, Chairman Rafferty and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of AFSP in support of LD 1263, which would add a local, state, or national hotline (988 Suicide & Crisis Hotline) to all student identification cards for grades 6-12. While not included in this bill, we also encourage the Committee to consider extending this requirement to include public and private institutions of higher education as well.

In 2020, the state of Maine lost 26 young people ages 10-24 to suicide, making it the 2nd leading cause of death for that age group. According to the 2021 Maine Integrated Youth Health Survey, more than 1 in 3 (35.9%) Maine high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row; 18.5% seriously considered attempting suicide; and 9% attempted suicide one or more times.

A 2022 report from the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment found that 32.9% of college students reported experiencing anxiety, 25.5% experienced depression, 21.6% reported experiencing both depression and anxiety, and 2.5% seriously considered suicide. Additionally, a separate study sponsored by the American College Counseling Association reported that less than 20% of students who died by suicide accessed their school's counseling center as a resource. This suggests a need for colleges and universities to increase awareness of the mental health programs and resources that are available for students who may be struggling.

We know that upwards of 90% of individuals who ultimately die by suicide were living with a diagnosable mental health condition at the time of their death; often these conditions are undiagnosed or untreated. To prevent suicide, we need to recognize that mental health is as important as physical health and encourage those struggling to seek help before they reach the point of a suicidal crisis.

The stigma around mental health creates an environment that discourages showing signs of vulnerability, which can contribute to a reluctance to seek help or self-disclose mental health concerns or suicidal thoughts. Mental health is central to student success and well-being and we owe it to our students to ensure they are supported in mental health just as they are in other aspects of health.

By offering immediate help to everyone that may need it, crisis lines provide invaluable support at critical times; lifesaving information, like how to access crisis lines, should be easily accessible. LD 1263 is a simple initiative that would accomplish this goal and provide transparency around suicide prevention and mental health.

With your support, we can act to affirm the state's commitment to the mental health of Maine's young people and to preventing youth and young adult suicide across the state. The AFSP Maine Chapter appreciates your consideration and we look forward to working with you and your colleagues on suicide prevention efforts moving forward. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or if you would like additional information. Thank you.