

FOR IMMEDIATE ADVISORY

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The Center For Suicide Awareness Announces:

HOPELINE Bill 938: Life-Saving Text Based Emotional Support Line Suddenly Abandoned Despite Bipartisan and State-Wide Support

(KAUKAUNA) – Disbelief is escalating across Wisconsin as some State Senate Leaders fail to proceed with HOPELINE Bill 938 which would have provided funding for HOPELINE, the state-wide suicide prevention and emotional support text service implemented by the Center for Suicide Awareness - Kaukauna, WI. Despite unanimous Assembly support as the bill moved through the proper channels it was suddenly squashed and not sent through to the Senate Hearings that began last week Tuesday in Madison.

The Center for Suicide Awareness has been fielding calls and emails from businesses, schools, teachers, counselors, physical and mental health care professionals across the state asking, “What happened in Madison?”. The Center struggles to answer this question as expressions of anger, disappointment, sadness, and disbelief are being loudly raised.

Founder and Executive Director - Center for Suicide Awareness, Barb Bigalke, was presented the “Wisconsin Heroes Award” in January by First Lady Tonette Walker for her state-wide, ground-level efforts in suicide awareness, prevention, and stigma reduction. “Receiving the award was an honor, but as we continue to save lives the real heroes are the ones who are doing the right thing by reaching out for help, hope, and support. Something went terribly wrong here and our elected officials did not do the right thing for Wisconsin...it’s really that simple,” says Bigalke. “We are trying to find out what exactly happened and it’s been a struggle to get answers. Based on what we have found out to-date this is politics at its worst. Suicide and mental health are not Democratic or Republican issues, they are human issues. Bottom line is the right thing was not done for Wisconsin and our residents,” states Ms. Bigalke.

“We do know that the amended HOPELINE Bill, which was in fact lowered from an original \$220,000, was referred to Joint Finance Committee on 3/13/18 and it stopped there,” Ms. Bigalke states. “Although there was not a Joint Finance Committee meeting held prior to the Senate hearings last week, other bills were pulled and sent to the Senate for hearings...but not HOPELINE 938. We have also been told that the funding amount was not an issue as this bill represented funding totaling just \$137,500 over a two year period and the payback is enormous – saving lives,” says Ms. Bigalke. “HOPELINE serves every county across the state and provides free emotional support and suicide prevention to anyone in Wisconsin when help, hope, and support are needed most. That dollar amount equates to just \$955.00 per county per year, over two years, to save lives,” Ms. Bigalke continued. “This is an incredibly small amount of money to save even one life. The VOI [Value on Investment] for funding HOPELINE is already proven and these are lives we are investing in. For some reason our Senate leadership failed Wisconsin.”

Frustration and disbelief continues to come in from Wisconsin schools as HOPELINE text service, an established and highly valued resource for schools, counselors, and educators across the state, will be left out of Governor Walker’s \$100 million dollar School Safety Plan that will be signed today by the Governor at Victor Haen Elementary School in Kaukauna. Also in Kaukauna, just a short distance away, is the Center for Suicide Awareness where thousands of HOPELINE material school requests are filled weekly. “What message is this sending to not include this established, proven resource as it fits clearly into the plan of keeping our students safe,” states Bigalke.

Based on information received there may be a special Senate Session held. If this takes place, HOPELINE Bill 938 may still have a chance. “If there is a special Senate Session, we urge the Senate Leadership to show where their priorities lie,” states Bigalke, “If not, the process of funding will need to start over again, even as our Wisconsin residents cry out for help every hour of every day.”

Submitting testimony to the Committee on Mental Health Assembly hearing on February 19th, Officer Chris Groeschel-Menasha Police Department- stated, "I have handed out HOPELINE information so many times that I have lost count. No one wants to feel alone when they are in a time of need and the HOPELINE gives someone a sense of hope that someone is out there willing to listen and assist, walk them through their difficulties or contact proper resources to get them the help they desperately need to stay alive." Along with Officers across the state, Groeschel also hands out HOPELINE Challenge Coins to Veterans in crisis

President of E. J. Mullins Company and President of Just Live Inc. (Burlington), Mark Mullin states, "The Board Members of Just Live Inc. were extremely disappointed to hear the news that the Wisconsin State Senate failed the people by not voting on Assembly Bill 938 (HOPELINE Bill). This simple bill would have funded HOPELINE, a texting hotline for those who feel depressed or who may be experiencing suicidal ideation. Just Live Inc. is proud have to been an early supporter of HOPELINE and we are dismayed that AB 938 never received the chance to be voted on in the Senate floor," says Mullin. "With all the issues today regarding mental illness, we hoped the Senate would have taken a more proactive stance but unfortunately, this was not the case. They cast AB 938 aside in hopes someone else would pick up the pieces. Maybe one day the Senate will get the message but until then, Just Live Inc. will continue to support HOPELINE because we wholeheartedly believe this is an important tool that can be utilized day in and day out," Mullin states.

Wisconsin State Assembly Committee on Mental Health unanimously approved Assembly Bill 938, providing funding for HOPELINE. Representative Mike Rohrkaste voiced his continuing support for funding HOPELINE, stating "The Center for Suicide Awareness's HOPELINE is a proven tool that provides emotional support and resources to people before their current situation rises to crisis levels that include the consideration of suicide. I will continue to work in the next legislative session to support this program that helps Wisconsin families."

"We would like to thank the Senators who co-authored the bill, Representative Mike Rhorkaste and the group of Representatives who introduced the bill, and the Assembly Committee on Mental Health for their incredible support of this important life-saving bill," says Bigalke, "and we look forward to their continued support."

HOPELINE Bill 938 was introduced by Representatives ROHRKASTE, STEINEKE, JACQUE, SHANKLAND, ANDERSON, BALLWEG, SINICKI, ZEPNICK, TITTL, SPREITZER, TUSLER, BERCEAU, SPIROS, MURSAU, and VANDERMEER, co-sponsored by Senators L. TAYLOR, DARLING, BEWLEY, PETROWSKI, ERPENBACH, CARPENTER, SHILLING, and TESTIN.

HOPELINE, implemented by Center for Suicide Awareness, provides immediate emotional support and resources for individuals needing help, hope, resources, or are experiencing a crisis. HOPELINE is available 24/7. It serves every county in Wisconsin at no cost to the individual.

In addition to providing immediate assistance, HOPELINE captures valuable and accurate data in real time allowing for detailed and searchable key issues. The data collected can be used in the planning and deployment of state and county resources and is particularly helpful for rural and underserved areas with geographical or resource barriers.

The Center for Suicide Awareness, a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization based in Kaukauna, WI is a state-wide non-profit organization providing education, training, support services, and resources to individuals, families, schools, businesses, veterans, and community agencies. All efforts play a vital role in preventing the tragedy of suicide and are aligned with the Center's mission of suicide prevention throughout our communities.

The bill was supported by Mental Health America of Wisconsin, National Alliance on Mental Illness – Wisconsin (NAMI – WI), Wisconsin Council on Mental Health, Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards, Wisconsin Catholic Conference, Wisconsin Farmers Union, Wisconsin Public Health Association, Disability Rights Wisconsin, Wisconsin Family Ties, and Reentry Associates LLC.

To find out more, please visit www.centerforsuicideawareness.org.

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