

Suicide prevention task force urges release of hotline money

Posted on Wednesday, Sep 25, 2019

The Speakers Task Force on Suicide Prevention is now calling on the Joint Finance Committee to release \$220,000 already budgeted for a suicide hotline.

This comes after earlier considering new legislation that would've allocated the money, but with added reporting requirements.

The original approach raised concerns it would delay the HOPELine receiving the money, which has yet to be released by JFC.

But while it dropped the suggestion of a new bill, the task force report still recommends JFC tweak the funding. It would send it through the Department of Health Services, which the task force wants to make the central point in the state's suicide prevention efforts, rather than through the Department of Public Instruction as the budget required.

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

The task force recommendation also would require the recipient to annually report to DHS how the money was spent and collect data on how the program is working.

GOP Rep. Joan Ballweg, who led the task force, bemoaned media outlets obtaining the draft recommendations yesterday, saying the issue had "fallen prey to politicized headlines." But she declined to say exactly when the task force decided to drop the call for a bill and instead just ask JFC to release the money.

Dem Rep. Steve Doyle, the vice-chair, said he found out yesterday the bill was being dropped from the recommendations. WisPolitics.com and others obtained the draft yesterday.

Doyle praised the bipartisan process that resulted in the recommendations, though he pledged to continue pushing for more money to address suicide prevention.

If all nine bills in the package were approved, they would allocate just more than \$2 million over a two-year period, not counting the already-budgeted money for the hotline. Doyle said he wants to bump the effort to \$5 million, which would match what was allocated to the Speaker's Task Force on Foster Care, which he co-chaired.

"There's always a process," Doyle said. "My job throughout this process is going to say, 'Hey, Joint Finance, hey, leaders, we've got an \$81 billion budget. Five million to save people's lives is not too much.'"

Ballweg and Doyle jointly sent a letter to the co-chairs of the Finance Committee asking them to consider the task force's proposal.

JFC Co-chair John Nygren said the committee will work to meet "as soon as possible to release funds that have been set aside" for the hotline.

"From day one, the Finance Committee has been clear that it will wait for the recommendations from the bipartisan Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention before releasing any funds," said Nygren, R-Marinette.

The other final recommendations released today follow what was in the draft report — other than the switch in approach to the hotline money. Those other recommendations include calls for the Department of Health Services to implement a suicide prevention program.

The draft originally listed \$10,000 biennially for an initiative to provide low-income farmers tuition assistance grants to enroll in courses on farm and business management. But the final draft pegs that proposal at \$100,000.

Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, intends to take up the bills before year's end. He also expressed disappointment in how the earlier draft of the task force recommendations was released.

"I'm disappointed that several Democrats tried to undermine the process and leaked a draft report to the media," Vos said. "With such a serious issue, you'd think lawmakers would focus on trying to save lives and not political tactics."

See the final proposal:

<https://legis.wisconsin.gov/2019/committees/assembly/suicideprevention/media/1174/interim-report-of-the-assembly-speakers-task-force-on-suicide-prevention.pdf>

Four of the Dem members who served on the task force called the body's work "incomplete" because it failed to include a "red flag" law.

Reps. Jimmy Anderson, of Fitchburg; Jonathon Brostoff, of Milwaukee; Deb Kolste, of Janesville; and Melissa Sargent, of Madison; recounted hearing testimony at the task force's public meetings about family and friends who committed suicide with a gun.

"Each and every one of these heartbreaking stories came with a plea—enact meaningful legislation to limit access to lethal means and to prevent these tragic losses from occurring in our state," the four said. "The recommendations released by the Speaker's Task Force on Suicide Prevention today have failed to listen to the will of the people throughout these hearings and throughout our state."

The four urged GOP legislative leaders to take up the bill.

Rep. Beth Meyers, of Bayfield, was the other Dem to serve on the committee besides those four lawmakers and Doyle.

See the release:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/190925-assembly-democrats.pdf>