Ohio unveils new license plate for suicide prevention amid 988 funding debate

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Ohio motorists can now purchase a license plate to support suicide prevention and spread the word about the 988 hotline.

State officials unveiled a new specialty plate to promote the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, which launched in Ohio three years ago. For every plate sold, the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation will get $25 for programs that help youth, adult males and others who struggle with their mental health or suicidal ideation.

About five Ohioans die by suicide every day, and 25 people visit emergency rooms after attempting to kill themselves, executive director Tony Coder said during a May 20 news conference. The foundation worked with Chip and Debbie McClintock, who lost loved ones to suicide, to lobby for the new license plate.

"When someone dies by suicide, it has a devasting impact on the family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors, loved ones – so many people," Gov. Mike DeWine said. "It's so very important to do everything that we can to bring awareness to mental health needs in the state of Ohio."

Ohio's 19 call centers received over 11,000 calls and 7,000 chats and text messages in April, according to state data. About 14% of calls came from LGBTQ Ohioans, and 17% were veterans. At the federal level, officials have proposed eliminating 988 resources for LGBTQ youth as part of budget cuts to Health and Human Services, USA TODAY reported.

The license plate's debut came as DeWine and the Legislature debate how best to fund the 988 program. DeWine's proposed budget allocated nearly $73 million for the next two years, but the House cut that to $40 million. The budget is now before the Ohio Senate.

Ohio's previous budget covered 988, but lawmakers haven't settled on a permanent source of funding.

"I have great confidence the Legislature will continue to fund this," DeWine said. "This is something that's just very, very important. We know this number saves lives."