

By: Representatives Creekmore IV, Felsher

To: Public Health and Human  
Services; Appropriations A

## HOUSE BILL NO. 1399

1 AN ACT TO ESTABLISH THE PEER HELPERS PLUS PROGRAM; TO  
2 AUTHORIZE THE DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH TO ADMINISTER THE  
3 PROGRAM; TO STIPULATE THAT THE PURPOSE OF THE PROGRAM IS TO  
4 PROVIDE COUNSELING AND MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTIONS FOR STUDENTS IN  
5 PUBLIC SCHOOLS THROUGH A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF APPROACHES  
6 INCLUDING THE PREVENTION AWARENESS FOR TOTAL HEALTH (PATH)  
7 CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENT AND PEER-TO-PEER  
8 COUNSELING; TO REQUIRE SCHOOLS TO APPLY TO THE DEPARTMENT OF  
9 MENTAL HEALTH FOR PROGRAM FUNDING; TO AUTHORIZE THE USE OF A  
10 PORTION OF THE OPIOID SETTLEMENT FUND TO SUPPORT THIS PROGRAM; TO  
11 PROVIDE FOR A REPORTING COMPONENT BY SCHOOLS AND THE DEPARTMENT OF  
12 MENTAL HEALTH; AND FOR RELATED PURPOSES.

13 BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI:

14 **SECTION 1.** This act shall be known, and may be cited as the  
15 "Peer Helpers PLUS Act."

16 **SECTION 2.** (1) There is established the Peer Helpers PLUS  
17 Program, as a school-based mental health and early intervention  
18 initiative administered by the Department of Mental Health, to  
19 address the wellness and behavioral challenges faced by students  
20 in public schools and to improve school safety and academic  
21 outcomes. The program shall:



22 (a) Provide a comprehensive, multi-tiered system of  
23 support that includes peer-to-peer counseling, prevention  
24 education, and early intervention for students in Grades K-12;

25 (b) Include a Prevention Awareness for Total Health  
26 (PATH) curriculum for all students, addressing that:

27 (i) Is age- and grade-appropriate, aligned with  
28 the National Standards Crosswalk for each grade level;

29 (ii) Addresses the prevention of bullying,  
30 substance abuse, chronic absenteeism, suicide, and other  
31 behavioral challenges;

32 (iii) Uses educator-led, turnkey materials  
33 supported by scripted lesson plans and resources;

34 (iv) Provides communication tools, such as parent  
35 letters, to enhance family engagement in mental health  
36 initiatives; and

37 (v) Incorporates annual updates to ensure  
38 curriculum relevance to current trends and student needs;

39 (c) Train designated school staff and peer helpers to  
40 identify and support at-risk students and refer them to  
41 appropriate resources; and

42 (d) Require regular reporting of program outcomes,  
43 including the number of students engaged, supported, and referred  
44 for additional intervention.

45 (2) The Department of Mental Health shall develop and  
46 oversee the implementation of the Peer Helpers PLUS program,



promulgating and adopting necessary rules and regulations for its implementation and administration, including:

(a) Establishing criteria and an application process for schools to participate in the program;

(b) Approving the funding of applications based on demonstrated need and capacity to implement the program effectively; and

(c) Providing technical assistance, training and monitoring to participating schools.

(3) Participation in the Peer Helpers PLUS program shall be voluntary for public schools and school districts. Schools wishing to participate in the program shall submit an application to the Department of Mental Health, including:

(a) A description of the school's existing mental health initiatives, if any;

(b) A plan for implementing the Peer Helpers PLUS program, including designated coordinators and use of the PATH curriculum; and

(c) A commitment to collect and report program data as required by the department.

(4) Approved schools shall implement the program as a demonstration of its efficacy and ability to address student mental health needs.

**SECTION 3.** (1) A portion of the funds deposited into the Opioid Settlement Fund, in the amount of Four Million Dollars



(\$4,000,000.00), shall be appropriated annually by the Legislature for the administration of the Peer Helpers PLUS program. The Department of Mental Health shall disburse these funds to approved schools to cover the cost components associated with the initial onboarding and training of staff in the curriculum to be used in instruction, professional development training of Peer Helper coordinators and school administrators and annual for ongoing training, curriculum updates, and program resources.

(2) Any remaining funds shall be used to expand the program to additional schools and districts or enhance its components, as determined by the department.

**SECTION 4.** (1) Participating schools shall submit annual reports to the Department of Mental Health detailing:

(a) The number of students participating in the program at each tier;

(b) The number of students referred for additional support; and

(c) The impact of the program on student behavior, attendance, and academic performance.

(2) The department shall compile this data and submit an annual report to the Legislature, evaluating the program's effectiveness and making recommendations for its expansion or modification.

**SECTION 5.** This act shall take effect and be in force from and after July 1, 2025.

