

Date of Hearing: April 7, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON HEALTH
Mia Bonta, Chair
AB 1985 (Irwin) – As Amended March 16, 2026

SUBJECT: Student health: athletic coaches: mental health training.

SUMMARY: Requires the Surgeon General of California to establish minimum standards for mental health training programs for postsecondary athletic coaches and, on or before July 1, 2027, to identify and compile a list of trainings that meet those minimum standards that postsecondary educational institutions can use to train coaches. Requires the California State University, each community college district, and each private postsecondary educational institution and independent institution of higher education that receives state financial assistance to, and requests the University of California to, require who serves as a coach in an athletic program, as a condition of the person's employment or volunteer service, to complete a student mental health training that has been approved by the Surgeon General. States that the provisions of this bill may be cited as Sarah Shulze's Law.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the Office of the Surgeon General within the California Health and Human Services Agency (CHHSA) and tasks the office with the following:
 - a) Raising public awareness on and coordinating policies governing scientific screening and treatment for toxic stress and adverse childhood events (ACEs);
 - b) Advising the Governor, the Secretary of CHHSA, and policymakers on a comprehensive approach to address health issues and challenges, including toxic stress and ACEs, as effectively and early as possible; and,
 - c) Marshalling the insights and energy of medical professionals, scientists, and other academic experts, public health experts, public servants, and everyday Californians to solve our most pressing health challenges, including toxic stress and adverse childhood events. [Health and Safety Code (HSC) § 438]
- 2) Requires the Surgeon General to be appointed by the Governor and, on or after July 1, 2019, confirmed by the Senate. Requires the Surgeon General to be the director of the Office of the Surgeon General. [HSC § 439]
- 3) Requires the governing board of each community college district, the Trustees of the California State University, the Board of Directors of the College of Law, San Francisco, and the Regents of the University of California to, within existing resources, adopt and implement a rape and sexual assault education program for, and ensure maximum feasible participation of, students and student services professional staff members or student affairs professional staff members at each of their respective campuses or other facilities. [Education Code (EDC) § 67391]
- 4) Finds and declares that colleges should provide special sexual assault seminars for all athletic coaches and administrators and members of athletic teams, among other things. States that

these seminars should take place during a student athlete orientation program or prior to the first team meeting. [EDC § 67391 (k)]

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill has not been analyzed by a fiscal committee.

COMMENTS:

1) PURPOSE OF THIS BILL. According to the author, athletic coaches play a crucial role in the lives of students as mentors and role models, often spending extended periods of time with students outside the traditional academic environment. Experiences on-and-off the field provide various opportunities for appropriate mental health interventions where coaches can provide mental health first-aid and hand-off care to parents and mental health professionals. However, requirements for mental health trainings for every coach at the collegiate-level do not currently exist in California. The author states this bill will require the Surgeon General to identify and compile a list of mental health trainings for colleges and universities to train athletic coaches. Additionally, every coach at a college or university in California will be required to complete a training approved by the Surgeon General. The author argues these trainings will ensure coaches are equipped with the tools to recognize signs of mental illness and behavioral distress in students participating in athletic programs. This bill is named in honor of Sarah Shulze, a Division I student-athlete from California that died by suicide while enrolled at the University of Wisconsin. The author states Sarah was an incredible multi-disciplined runner with a devoted spirit for change-making and compassion for others, and concludes that through her memory, her parents created the Sarah Shulze Foundation to advocate for the causes dearest to her: Mental Health, Student Athletics, and Women's Rights.

2) BACKGROUND.

a) California Surgeon General. According to the Surgeon General's website, the role of was created in 2019 by Governor Newsom with the understanding that some of the most pernicious, but least addressed health challenges are the upstream factors that eventually become chronic and acute conditions that are far more difficult and expensive to treat. The position's responsibilities include advising the Governor, serving as a leading spokesperson on matters of public health, and driving solutions to our most pressing public health challenges. Currently, the Surgeon General has three major priority areas: addressing ACEs and toxic stress; providing public resources to improve maternal mental health; and providing public resources on reproductive health and menopause.

b) Mental health on college campuses. According to the 2024-25 Healthy Minds Survey, a nationwide survey on mental health and related issues in college student populations from the Healthy Minds Network, college students continue to report poor mental health, with more than one in three students saying they experience moderate anxiety or depression. Data from the most recent survey found that only 36% of college students are thriving, reporting high levels of success in relationships, self-esteem, purpose and optimism, down slightly from 38% the previous year. There is slight improvement since the COVID-19 pandemic, with fewer students reporting anxiety, self-harm and suicidal ideation than in 2021-22. Student usage of mental health resources also continues to climb; 37% of all respondents said they had accessed therapy or counseling in the past 12 months, compared to 30% in 2018-19.

According to “Suicide in National Collegiate Athletic Association athletes: a 20-year analysis,” published in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* (but focusing on athletes in the United States from 2002-2022), the rate of suicide in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) collegiate athletes has increased over the last 20 years and over the last decade has become the second most common cause of death, after accidents. The study concludes that additional mental health resources including efforts to raise awareness, screening for early risk identification, training coaches and support staff on how to identify athletes at risk, and providing access to mental health providers trained in sport psychology are examples of ways to help prevent suicide in this population.

- c) **NCAA pilot program.** In August 2025 the NCAA announced a partnership with the National Council for Mental Wellbeing to offer fully funded Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) for Higher Education training to Division III institutions to focus on head coaches and athletic trainers. Division III schools are eligible to receive one fully funded training during the program, which will be in effect until August 1, 2027. According to the NCAA, the 2022 NCAA Coach Well-Being Study underscored the need for expanded mental health support in college athletics. NCAA says that more than 80% of coaches reported spending increased time addressing mental health concerns with their student-athletes compared with pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels, and many identified mental health as the top issue facing their teams. As of late July 2025, 66 Division III institutions had completed the MHFA training. Through this program, up to 30 individuals at each active Division III school are eligible to participate in a 7.5-hour, in-person training with expert MHFA instructors on their campus. Upon completion, participants will be certified in MHFA for Higher Education for three years.

- 3) **SUPPORT.** The California Hospital Association (CHA) states in support of this bill that hospitals see firsthand the growing number of young people in mental health crisis. Being able to spot the signs that a person is struggling and help them find support before their condition worsens is an important step toward improving this crisis. Athletic coaches have a unique perspective and ability to support their athletes’ physical and mental health needs. CHA says that research shows that students who are struggling are often most comfortable reaching out to people with whom they already have relationships; as such, it is important to equip athletic coaches with tools to support their student-athletes’ mental health.

The University of California (UC) supports this bill stating that the mental health of student-athletes is a recognized and ongoing priority across UC campuses, and we have invested in the programs, protocols, and training infrastructure necessary to support student-athlete well-being. UC states its campus athletics programs already require coaches and athletic staff to complete mental health training as part of their professional development obligations. Several campuses utilize nationally recognized training frameworks, including modules developed by the U.S. Council for Athletes' Health, that are consistent with both the intent of this legislation and NCAA Mental Health Best Practices guidelines. UC concludes they are committed to ensuring our campuses continue to meet or exceed the standards this legislation envisions, and look forward to supporting implementation of Sarah Shulze's Law.

- 4) **DOUBLE REFERRAL.** This bill has been double referred; upon passage in this committee, this bill will be referred to the Assembly Higher Education Committee.

5) RELATED LEGISLATION.

- a) AB 1626 (Gabriel) would add a component on behavioral and mental health and trauma-informed care to the list of components to be emphasized by the 1998 California High School Coaching Education and Training Program. Would require as a condition of employment or volunteer service all persons who serve as coaches in interscholastic athletic programs at high schools, including private high schools, that are members of the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) to complete initial training, and subsequent training every 2 years, that covers specified mental health-related topics. Would require the California Department of Education (CDE), on or before September 1, 2027, to develop and post on its website a model youth athletics behavioral and mental health training for persons who serve as coaches in youth sports organizations, both for recreational leagues and competitive or club leagues.
- b) AB 1665 (Pacheco) would add a component on pupil mental health training, as specified, to the list of components to be emphasized by the 1998 California High School Coaching Education and Training Program, and would require a person who serves as a coach in an interscholastic athletic program at a high school, including a private school, that is a member of the CIF to complete annual training in pupil mental health. Would require a school district, county office of education, or charter school that elects to offer an athletic program, other than an interscholastic athletic program, to ensure that the athletic program's coaches complete an initial training, and a subsequent training every two years, that covers sudden cardiac arrest and pupil mental health.

6) PREVIOUS LEGISLATION.

- a) AB 602 (Haney), Chapter 159, Statutes of 2025, requires in July 2026, CSU and UC campuses to offer students rehab services for drug and alcohol use, including overdoses, rather than immediately imposing disciplinary actions.
- b) SB 153 (Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review), Chapter 38, Statutes of 2024, among other things, requires CDE to develop model referral protocols for addressing student behavioral health concerns by January 1, 2025, requires local educational agencies to certify that its employees received youth behavioral training by July 1, 2029.
- c) SB 224 (Portantino), Chapter 675, Statutes of 2021, requires schools that offer one or more courses in health education to pupils in middle school or high school to include in those courses instruction in mental health.

7) POLICY COMMENT. As currently drafted, this bill requires the Surgeon General to establish minimum training requirements and to identify and compile training programs that meet those requirements. The Surgeon General may not be the appropriate entity to carry out this task. The author may wish to identify an alternative entity to compile appropriate programs in collaboration with the segments of higher education and may wish to establish appropriate minimum standards rather than leaving that to an implementing entity.

8) COMMITTEE AMENDMENTS. The committee may wish to amend this bill to require the higher education segments, rather than the Surgeon General, to identify appropriate mental health trainings, including suicide prevention, for their athletic coaches, and require trainings to be completed by July 1, 2028.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Hospital Association
University of California

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Logan Hess / HEALTH / (916) 319-2097