

Chairman Abrams and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for considering Senate Bill 323, and thank you for allowing me to testify before you today.

My name is Joe Karlin. I am lifelong Kansan, a Lenexa City Councilman, small business owner, avid volunteer and proud father of four beautiful children. One of those four children, my oldest son, Tom, is the reason I sit before you today.

I will preface this with a statement that this topic touches near and dear to my heart. It addresses an issue that, five years ago I would have given little thought to. I now understand how desperately this topic needs attention. That topic is suicide, and more specifically, suicide prevention. If I get choked up or struggle with my testimony, please grant me grace.

As I said, five years ago I would have given little thought to this issue. Five years ago I knew little about depression or suicide, and most of what I did “know” was ill-conceived and, frankly, incorrect. Five years ago I was the father of the “family next door.” A family that attended church, was active in the community, participated in sports teams my wife and I coached, participated in Scouts, and was active in my kids’ school. Little did we know that on November 5, 2011, our lives would change forever. On that day, my oldest son, Tom - a smart, good-looking, well-liked, and responsible young man, who seemingly had everything in the world going for him - took his own life.

On that day – with our lives and our hearts ripped to shreds – we knew we had to do everything we could to stop other families from experiencing the same hell we found ourselves in. We formed the Tom Karlin Foundation. The mission of the Tom Karlin Foundation is “to improve the quality of teens’ lives and reduce teen suicides through education and awareness of depression, mental wellness, and suicide prevention.”

Since my son’s death, not an hour has gone in which I didn’t think about my son. And every time I hear of another teen taking his or her own life, my heart aches for the pain that child was in, and the devastation and desperation that his or her family will find themselves in for the rest of

their lives. News of another young life cut short by suicide continues to drive me and all of us at the Tom Karlin Foundation toward finding solutions to this terrible problem.

This committee addresses many important issues on a regular basis. Today this committee hears testimony on Senate Bill 323, Creating the Jason Flatt act; requiring suicide prevention training for school district personnel. While your work is often critical, I believe this bill is different than many other matters brought before you. This bill is special. While other issues are critical, this issue is – literally – a matter of life and death. Yes, it is a life and death matter. Specifically the lives of our youth and, in the face of inaction, the deaths of some of our youth.

According to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's recent report, suicide is the second leading cause of death for persons ages 15 to 24 in the state of Kansas. More youth in this age group die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease, COMBINED.

The effects of suicide go beyond the devastation faced by families and the heartache realized by friends of those lost to suicide. The costs of suicide are financial as well, with each suicide costing Kansas' citizens nearly \$1.3 million in medical and work loss. I can personally attest to the impact, as I struggled for many years to regain the focus, energy and efficiency I enjoyed before my personal tragedy. As well, I suffered a heart attack 18 months after losing my son, no doubt brought on by the pain of his tragic death.

So, what is the solution to this crippling problem? Unfortunately there is no "silver bullet" SOLUTION. But there are SOLUTIONS. Many different, disparate solutions which, taken together, can tackle this hideous problem. Solutions taken by whom? Actually, it takes action on each and every segment of the population: parents, grandparents, teens themselves, and teens' advocates such as teachers, coaches and administrators. This calls to mind the adage attributed to societies much older than ours: "It takes a village to raise a child."

One critical segment of that solution is our school's teachers, administrators, counselors and coaches. Our teachers and

administrators spend many more hours with our own kids than we ourselves do as parents. Teachers see our kids for eight hours each day, far more than the time we spend with our kids on a regular basis. Thus, teachers and administration find themselves in a critical position to help us raise healthy kids, and to identify and provide assistance to those students who may be struggling with mental wellness issues.

To date, sixteen states have passed the Jason Flatt Act. The Act has been well received in those states, and I am unaware of any problems with or challenges to this Act in those jurisdictions. I do know, from personal experience, that talking about suicide and mental wellness leads to fewer suicides and stronger mental wellness. This bill is not the “silver bullet”, but it is a step – a positive action to be taken. The bill does not give the teachers tools to fix the problem. It does, however, equip them with the tools to identify students who may be struggling so that the appropriate resources can be brought to bear to address the problem...and save a life. I am confident that providing two hours of training annually to our teaching professionals will further enable them to recognize youth who are struggling and enable them to direct aid to those in need.

In closing, I ask – no, I BEG – you to further this bill. This bill simply requires two hours of suicide training for each teacher in Kansas each year. The training requires no state funding. The state of Kansas and its citizens will surely benefit from a reduction in suicides. That benefit is not only emotional, but also physical and financial. There is nothing to be lost in supporting this bill, and much to be gained.

Again, please further this bill. It is – literally – a matter of life and death.

Thank you.