

SB – 323 – Proponent Testimony of Kiersten Adkins, M.A, LPC, NCC,
Pathway To Hope, January, 2016

Chairman Abrams and honorable members of the Senate Education Committee I stand to speak in support of SB - 323 the legislation creating the Jason Flatt Act; requiring suicide prevention training for school district personnel.

The loss of a child is traumatic, no matter the reason. In each young life, we see value and potential. The heartbreak of loss can be devastating. As we explore the loss of a child by suicide, the trauma and heartbreak is magnified. Not only do we have to cope with the loss, but also with the questions, like “could this have been prevented?”

The reasons why one’s life ends through suicide are varied. Often the reasons can only be evaluated in hindsight and without adequate input of the victim. As a society, we know that suicide is often associated with a treatable mental illness that is either undetected or medical intervention is not pursued due to the challenges of the societal stigma related to it. This stigma can be magnified in the adolescent years when the challenges of a changing brain and deep desire to fit in collide into hopelessness and despair. Add to that the dramatic increase in the natural risk taking and impulsive behavior, and the end result is an unfortunate and unnecessary death.

Statistically speaking, there is significant evidence to indicate that our State is suffering with an epidemic of youth deaths by suicide. In 2014 we lost 26 individuals between the ages of 5 and 19 to suicide and an estimated 24 % of 9-12th graders reported that they “felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities.” This finding is clinically significant as it is a symptom of depression, a significant contributor to suicide.

What is the solution? On dangerous roads, we put up warning signs, reduce speed limits, add guard rails and rumble strips in an effort to warn drivers. It’s important to note that common sense, warns drivers where they are. We don’t publish “dangerous roads” lists expecting drivers to discover what roads are dangerous prior to driving. In fact, we don’t even expect a driver to look at a map before they embark on their journey. We take the initiative to protect.

Our intent with asking the legislature to pass this bill is the same as any roads bill that affords protection to drivers. While some school districts may put their own standards into place that offers education to recognize signs of mental health distress and possible suicidality, the State of Kansas has the opportunity to clearly state that they value the lives of the children and youth in the State enough to require implementation of a national gold standard through the Jason Foundation. By standardizing this effort, the State is able to assure that our educators are given the best possible, most up to date information from a source that is committed to helping educators keep kids across the nation safe from suicide.

I know from personal experience that when an educator is aware of signs, they are a more effective partner in helping a child and their family seek help. My own child attempted suicide

as a 7th grader in 2007. I had been having conversations with her school counselor about her behavior. While I don't blame the counselor, she did not help me seek treatment, and down played the behavior we were experiencing as "normal adolescence." It wasn't until things escalated with a second suicide attempt that we were even considered for mental health intervention. Even then, I had to advocate strongly as a parent to gain access to the resources available. The school system did not wrap around my child to help her stabilize and in many ways made it more difficult for her. After seeking treatment through the PRTF system in Kansas, my daughter was able to stabilize. She returned to her school district and we found a school counselor that was educated about mental illness, recognized the signs of mental health distress and helped my daughter advocate for herself to her teachers. I dare say that without that school counselor, my daughter would not have survived high school, let alone continued in her treatment and arrive to young adulthood where she is now attending school to become an art therapist.

Sadly, few have advocates within the school system. Depression, anxiety and other forms of mental illness can be debilitating and disconnecting. It takes courage to reach out for help, and we have the opportunity to create an environment in our schools that normalizes caring for our mental health rather than waiting to see if someone we love becomes the next victim. My family is fortunate to have our daughter with us. For families across Kansas, it shouldn't be a matter of being lucky enough to find an interested educator when we have the opportunity to make the difference now.

Please help our educators learn how to better protect children in their care and standardize the efforts to raise awareness among school officials regarding suicidality through a best practices model. Please vote to support SB-323, and make the Jason Flatt Act the standard for Kansas.