

Beth Wright

I would to take a moment to thank you for allowing me to speak to the court on such an emotional topic that has greatly affected myself and others around me. It was such a relief to hear that Kansas had the SB- 3303 bill, and such a disappointment to think that someone wanted to repeal it.

Suicide has completely changed my life. From the time that I was in eighth grade I have struggled with depression and severe anxiety. I would go through periods of arriving to school with 3 hours of sleep every day for weeks. It was in eighth grade that many of my close friends, and myself started self-harming. As eighth graders we did not trust any of the adults around us, because we did not feel like they cared about our emotional state, due to the fact that the schools we attended focused on extracurricular activities and grades. Due to this my friends and I were left to rely on each other, which did not help because we had no idea how to help so often times our emotional states all got worse instead of better. As peers, our depression and anxiety only made that of the others much worse. No one in my middle school or high school ever talked about suicide. They did not talk about how to prevent it, what the warning signs looked like, nor the attempts or successes that had occurred while in school. Everything about suicide was swept under the rug, except for the week long discussion in Freshmen PE, which was required.

By the time I was in high school I was addicted to self-harming and my depression and anxiety had gotten much worse. The high school was still not talking about it, and made no effort to help their struggling students. The school had an underground emotional disaster that no one was talking about, because “you don’t talk about things that make others uncomfortable”, and anything that makes our school “imperfect” never happened. Our administration was only interested in having the “best” and most “perfect” school, so many things went unmentioned.

My sophomore year of high school I had a teacher, which was the only teacher who taught history and WW1 & 2 so every student had him, who did not take suicide seriously. I sat in his class every other day and at least 5 times within the first semester he had made jokes about suicide. At this point I was mortified and hoped that it would simply go away. By my junior year I had the teacher again. Sitting in a class with 18 other students, four of which were currently self-harming and two more had done it in the past, and our teacher pretended to slit his wrist at the front of the class. This happened four different times within a month. And the fifth time he not only slit his wrist, but also pretended to bleed out on the floor. It was at that moment that I had to email another teacher, begging her to call me to her room because I was so mortified that I could not force myself to walk out. She called me out and since she was out of the building, another teacher talked to me. I explained what happened and she mistakenly decided to take the matter into her own hands. She proceeded to give my name and extreme detail of my self-harming past to not only my history teacher, but also my English teacher who happened to also be in the room at the time because “they both needed to know”. My history teacher walked up to me after school with a group of my peers around me and talked to me about the sensitive topic, in front of all of them. He also claimed that if he had only known how it was affecting me that he never would have done it. This was his excuse to being caught doing something that no educated professional would have done, regardless of who was in their class. This emotionally scarred me and the rest of my history class and that cannot be undone. The sad part is my friend who was in his class the next year said he was still doing it.

This is one major reason why teachers need a minimum of one hour of suicide prevention training. So they know the basics of suicide and mental health.

In the future if this bill is repealed many more students will be emotionally scarred when their instructors act out like this. Not to mention their peers will also make these jokes and comments, and without the proper training teachers may not be ready to handle what comes next. In cases where students do attempt at school, it may be swept under the rug so other students are informed and so the school does not have to be seen in a “negative light”. This will only damage schools and their students, which the mental and physical health of those students should come first due to the fact where sports and grades can only be accomplished with a health mind and body.

A few simple facts which I’m sure you will hear many times today:

- Suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of 10-24 year olds.
- We lose over 400 Kansans a year to suicide.
- In 2016, there was approximately one suicide per year ([www.kansassuicideprevention.org/data/](http://www.kansassuicideprevention.org/data/)).
- In Emporia Kansas, there are at a max twelve individuals trained in formal mental health/suicide prevention training.

As far as my life besides my personal struggles, my oldest brother took his own life on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016. This completely changed my life and the lives of my family members. Including his fiancé which is now a single mother to their now three year old daughter. My parents have had dramatic emotional life changes, and my entire family handles each other, peers, and life in a completely different manner than before. Because of the death of my brother, I have pushed myself out of my comfort zone. I am now the president of Esu’s suicide prevention group, Hornets for Hope, and a board member for the newly created suicide prevention organization in Emporia, Beacon for Hope. I wrote my Honors College research paper on the lack of suicide prevention in Emporia. During my research I sent a survey to teachers at the High school, and in the survey it asked teachers if they had ever received suicide training OF ANY KIND... and out of the 27 who actually took the poll 85.2% said no. This pains me since they were required to have at least one hour of training online. Online which is another issue, if the teachers are not aware of receiving training or cannot remember taking it then the training does no good. And that is as harmful to Kansas as repealing the bill.

Suicide in Kansas is on the rise and it is only going to go down if Kansas decides to do something about it. Hornets for Hope is going to be spending money from our upcoming suicide prevention walk to send college faculty and students to receive training in Wichita, and Beacon for Hope is paying to send police officers to receive training in Emporia. For other communities which do not have groups who want to help pay for training, people are simply not being trained. Suicide is a huge issue for communities not only in Kansas, but everywhere in the US. It should be our goal to train as many people on suicide prevention and mental health as possible! With this bill not being repealed it would be able to do at least some good to help our schools become mentally safe, if the staff is actually being trained. And to do even more good have the training be in person, and even think of opening it to others in the community if they are interested.

The SB-3303 bill is extremely important to Kansas. It is the only thing holding schools accountable for the mental health of their students. It is the only thing holding communities accountable for taking mental health seriously. And it will help break stigma surrounding

suicide which would go a long way to make Kansas communities safer. Hopefully if Kansas can start taking suicide prevention seriously, then other communities will start to follow. And if that happens then the lives of many may be saved.

I know the heartbreak, mental struggles, and the scars that can be caused by suicide prevention. It is not necessary for others to feel unwanted, unheard, and like a burden to society. And it is not necessary for others in Kansas or anywhere else to lose their brothers, friends, or themselves due to the lack of support. I lost my brother and that is reason enough to require teachers to give, if nothing else, one hour of their time.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and for your time.