



**American
Foundation
for Suicide
Prevention**

Rhode Island

RE: Support H5353-SUICIDE PREVENTION--THE NATHAN BRUNO AND JASON FLATT ACT

Missy Ames

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

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Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony in support of H5353 which would require training of Rhode Island's teachers, students, and other school personnel regarding suicide awareness and prevention. My name is Melissa Ames and I am Board Chair for the AFSP Rhode Island Chapter. I work closely with our volunteer-led Chapter for AFSP in our work to save lives and bring hope to those affected by suicide -- through research, education, advocacy, and support.

Far more adolescents have suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide and survive than those who die by suicide. According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, in the year before the survey, almost 1 in 3 (32.3%) Rhode Island high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks in a row; 13.3% seriously considered attempting suicide; 12.1% reported making a plan about how they would attempt suicide; and 14.7% attempted suicide one or more times. This suggests that we can and must do more to increase awareness of resources for students who may be struggling. **Teen suicide is preventable. Suicide rates for at-risk youth can be substantially reduced by:**

- **Knowing the signs.** Four out of five suicide deaths are preceded by warning signs such as suicidal threats, previous suicide attempts, preoccupation or obsession with death, depression, and final arrangements.
- **Making it more difficult to die in an act of deliberate self-harm.** Interventions include building barriers on bridges, removing guns from homes with at-risk youth, lethal means counseling, and reducing medication load available.
- **Improving access to mental health resources.** Examples include medical interventions and support groups, effective clinical care for mental disorders, and family and community support.

Youth suicide can be prevented through early detection of students who may be in crisis or struggling with their mental health and connecting those students to resources and treatment services. School personnel interact with children and teens daily and are therefore in a prime position to recognize the signs of suicide risk and make the appropriate referrals for help. By providing this training, H5353 will ensure that educators have the necessary skills and confidence to intervene with youth at risk for suicide.

The stigma around mental health creates an environment that discourages showing signs of vulnerability, which can contribute to a reluctance to seek help or self-disclose mental health concerns or suicidal thoughts. Mental health is central to student success and well-being and we owe it to our students to ensure they are supported in mental health just as they are in other aspects of health. Educating students on suicide awareness and prevention will create more transparency with students and parents, helping to reduce stigma and contribute to a school culture where it is a sign of strength to seek help.

The health, safety, and well-being of our youth is of critical importance, and mental health and wellness must be a top priority in our schools. We must ensure information about suicide prevention and mental health is accessible to all students, families, and educators across Rhode Island to allow for a coordinated response to behavioral health needs and suicide risk among youth. I urge you to support H5353 to affirm the legislature's commitment to the current and future well-being of Rhode Island's students and join AFSP in taking a stand to reduce suicide and help save young lives across the state. Thank you for your consideration and please feel free to contact me with any questions or if you would like additional information.