

Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

My name is Michelle Sherman, and I am in strong support of H8148, legislation that would require suicide prevention barriers and safety infrastructure on Rhode Island's major bridges.

On July 27, 2023, my cousin, Matthew, jumped from the Mount Hope Bridge and died.

Two years earlier, he survived a previous suicide attempt. Afterward, he told me something I will never forget: he said it was the scariest thing he had ever experienced because his body acted before his mind could fully process what was happening. Thankfully, a police officer intervened and saved his life that day.

Matthew was funny, intelligent, kind, and deeply loved. He was the kind of person people naturally gravitated toward. He was an incredible cook, a loyal friend, and someone who made people laugh effortlessly. But like so many others struggling with mental illness, he experienced a moment of overwhelming crisis. On the Mount Hope Bridge, without barriers, there was no pause. No interruption. No opportunity for intervention.

Our family has been permanently changed by this loss.

But when someone dies this way, the trauma extends far beyond one individual or one family. Witnesses carry those images forever. First responders are exposed to devastating scenes. Recovery teams enter the water searching for someone's loved one. Medical staff attempt resuscitation. Families receive unimaginable phone calls. Entire communities grieve.

Suicide prevention barriers are not symbolic gestures. They are evidence-based interventions that save lives.

Research examining bridge barriers and safety systems across multiple locations found suicide deaths at those sites decreased by more than 90% after barriers were installed. Experts also know that suicidal crises are often brief and impulsive. When a lethal method becomes inaccessible, many people survive the moment and do not go on to die by suicide later.

Barriers create time.

Time for a person to reconsider.

Time for someone to intervene.

Time for help to arrive.

Time for survival.

According to Rhode Island suicide prevention data, there were 105 deaths by suicide in 2024. Suicide remains a major public health crisis in our state.

We cannot prevent every tragedy. But we can reduce access to highly lethal means in moments of crisis — and that saves lives.

For years, advocates and families have asked Rhode Island to take this issue seriously. H8148 gives our state another opportunity to act. Other states and bridge authorities across the country have already implemented suicide prevention barriers successfully. Rhode Island can and should do the same.

It may be too late for Matthew.

But it is not too late for someone else's son, daughter, brother, sister, friend, or parent.

I urge you to support H8148.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Michelle Sherman

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