

H.593 Testimony
Rep. Teo Zagar
March 8, 2016

I'd like to thank both committees for taking the time to hold this hearing.

For the record, I'm Teo Zagar, representing the town of Quechee, and one of the sponsors of H.593 along with the members from Hartford, Northfield, and Hartland.

One morning five years ago, I received a phone call from a co-worker at the high school where I worked. One of our favorite students had just ended his life in the Quechee Gorge. Yes, we did have favorites, and Derek Cooper was at the top of a lot teacher's lists, as was his twin brother. Needless to say, we were all shocked and heart-broken. Derek was greatly admired by his peers, his teachers, and his community. At the memorial service, the fire department that he was a member of raised a memorial shield and flags in his honor with their truck's ladder.

When I became a legislator, Derek's mom approached me with an appeal that the State should act to prevent further suicides at the Gorge, and she laid out a compelling case for why and how, which you'll hear about in more detail from the other witnesses. The sight of emergency service personnel descending into the gorge, and the newspaper headlines, were becoming an annual occurrence, never allowing the hurt experienced by families in the area to fully heal.

I hope that today's testimonies will dispel some myths and provide enough food for thought to compel you to move legislation to address this ongoing problem. It is well established that a prevented suicide attempt does not always lead to a repeat attempt. Countless lives have been saved by prevention and outreach, or just getting someone to stop and think for a few more moments about the people they will leave behind. The safety of first responders is also a crucial element of this proposal. Their lives are jeopardized, and they are traumatized, every time they are called to respond.

It's been disappointing to hear that some businesses in the surrounding area are already opposed to the idea of prevention measures at the Gorge, before even knowing what it would look like, or how and if the tourist experience would even be effected. The bridge has also been referred to as a historic treasure, suggesting that we should be mindful about altering its appearance in any way. However - and meaning no disrespect to its builders - it is still just a bridge that crosses over a river far below. It's a bridge that has become a magnet for people seeking a quick end to their suffering. If we do nothing, and the bridge's future history is marred by a record of repeated incidents, then its legacy will be tarnished far more than its appearance might be if we do something.

So I'm hopeful that this bill will move forward, and that the experts and public servants responsible for public health and safety can approve and implement some measure of prevention at Bridge 61. Thank you.