

## Senate Health and Welfare Testimony

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Thank you Senator Lyons and to the Health and Welfare Committee for hearing my testimony on H.481. My name is Terri Lavelly and I am a resident of the Northeast Kingdom. In the spirit of transparency, I want to share that I have worked for a Designated Agency for the past 19 years. That is not the hat I wear today. Today I come to you as a volunteer for the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, Vermont Chapter. I am the current board chair as well as a trainer, Out of the Darkness walk chair and advocate.

I lost my 18 year old nephew to suicide 7 years ago. I also attempted to take my own life when I was 15 years old. This work is near and dear to my heart as someone with lived experiences.

The importance of this bill is to pull all of the grassroots efforts that are happening in Vermont in a comprehensive strategic plan to ensure all Vermonters are supported with their mental health. The work is happening in pockets across the State but we are all unsure of who is doing what and where to go for resources and supports.

I'd like to start with some data. Vermont's suicide rates are 44% higher than the national average, and has the highest suicide rate east of the Mississippi River. Men are three times more likely to die by suicide than women. Veterans, farmers and construction workers have some of the highest rates of suicide, which Vermont has high populations of.

Over 60% of individuals that die by suicide visit a health care provider 30 days prior to their death, but less than 30% are mental health providers. When we think of mental health struggles, we need to acknowledge that the drivers to those thoughts are not always mental health related, but food insecurities, housing issues, financial issues. We need to make sure that as a State we are well-resourced state to support these drivers so suicide does not become the answer.

To insure we are identifying those in need we need to be sure we are developing systems according to the data we are informed with. Training our professionals that interact with marginalized and vulnerable populations is a great start, and we need to ensure our community members have the tools and resources to support each other! The work we do is not just for professionals but for you and your family, to make sure you have the support you need as a Vermonter.

For our school communities we need to do more. We need to wrap a community of supports around our students. We should be thinking about not only training the teachers, but working with students to understand their mental health and family and care takers to support them the same as we are training teachers. By working with the whole school community we are developing shared understanding and letting the students know the adults around them can serve as trusted adults as the entire community is aware that training and supports are going to come from all areas of their lives. At AFSP we offer "Gizmo's Pawesome Guide to Mental Health" to pre-k to fifth grades, which is not about suicide, it is about what their mental health is and how to reach out when they need supports. Upstream preventative supports to get ahead of the curve and teach kids at a younger age that talking about their mental health is ok!

Postvention supports are more long term that go beyond the initial crisis response. Postvention is really prevention. Those who has lost someone they love to suicide are three times more likely to have thoughts of suicide. Well developed supports for family and loved ones is a key component to prevention. AFSP has saved my life with the support they have given me since the loss of my nephew. Although I still grieve as deeply today as I did seven years ago, the supports I receive gives me a purpose and a family of those who know what I am going through.

In my professional work I have the pleasure of co-chairing our Zero Suicide (ZS) team for many years. With the support of the Center of Health and Learning I have personally witnessed the collective impact of the work we are doing. It is not just about support our staff but bringing training and supports to our community partners and community members. In the ZS framework we also insure we are meeting the needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations. Diversity, equity and inclusion is also embedded into the frame work to ensure that we have culturally competent trainings and resources available to all Vermonters.

We can not minimize the important of system developments around suicide awareness and prevention. This bill will save lives. I ask that you support this H.481 as framework for the hard work that is already being done. We can not do it alone, as Vermonters we need to take care of each other! Thank you for your time today.