

Hello, I'm Jafari Munyugu from Winooski. I'm a member of NAMI Vermont, part of America's largest grassroots mental health organization, the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

But I am not just Jafari, I am a student, I am an athlete, I am an older and younger brother, I am a son, and most importantly, I am a friend. But there was a time when I forgot all those aspects of who I am, but fortunately, I had a friend, a younger brother, an older brother, a parent. But who reminded me that was not any of those, but a teacher.

At the peak of my hardest year of high school, my first year of high school. When coming back from soccer practice, I overheard my parents talk about past due rent and how it could not be paid off because my mother had just been fired from her job, and we were going to get kicked out of the house with no time to find a new one. You can only imagine how this would affect a 15-year-old.

I stopped playing soccer, skipping practice every chance I got, and class time changed into bathroom time. You could notice the change from the highly social, curious teen. I was not talking, I was not asking questions, and some teachers and friends noticed. And most did not act, and some that did ask, "Are you okay?" in the middle of class. I can only imagine all of you would want to share the same information that I wanted to share so badly with somebody, but not everybody.

The one person who helped me was a teacher who decided to call me out of the class and asked me the same question, "Are you okay?" just in a different environment where I felt safer. I strongly believe that Bill H-817 would provide that safe environment for all students, not just me, who got lucky to have a teacher who felt like they could handle that situation. We can all agree that life should not be based on luck, so why should mental health?

This bill would make it so students don't have to look for someone who looks like they care to get help; teachers will get the ability to identify and help. I ask of you to care for a life, a dream, and a hope of a 15-year-old, who could have been smoking to relieve mental pain, and down the road maybe more, because I have seen friends turn down that road because they did not have someone to remind them that they are a student, an older/younger brother or sister, importantly, a friend.