

Bill HB 132 Testimony

My name is Parker Cross and I am a freshman at Towson University. I am representing Rise Up Maryland and Our Minds Matter and am testifying through Delegate Bagnell for the Mental Health Initiative Bill, HB132. March 1st; a day that sadly will always be imprinted into my mind as the date when everything changed. Let's go back a bit. It began after my best friend received multiple detentions and referrals for coming to school high, or better yet getting high during school. These drugs acted as a mask for his depression and suicidal thoughts. When the time finally did come and the courage and motivation to get clean arrived, the mask began to fall off and suicide was unveiled. To say that he screamed for help was an understatement and he wasn't the only one screaming. Suicide and the want or need to die, are conversations teens have on a daily basis. It starts as a joke, until it becomes real, so real that you have to attend your best friends funeral.

Right after winter break, months before my friend took his life, I went to my administrator to discuss my own anxiety. I spoke about how I struggled to keep my friend alive every night. It was by far the hardest thing I had ever experienced. But Please know, I would do it all over again if I could. But, a 16 year old junior should not have to feel responsible for someone else's life. This administrator quickly called the student down and got outside resources involved. And yes, those can be helpful. However, this child, my friend, continued to scream for help. His scream for help was urgent. It was so urgent, I made him promise me every night that I would see him at school the next morning. His scream for help was so loud, and to so many of his friends and teachers. I was not surprised when one day I was called into the hallway by a teacher who had seen marks on his body and was worried. In fact, multiple teachers reported concerning comments and physical marks on my friend, but no one took enough action to stop his pain. When you hear a student say "I might as well just kill myself" and do nothing, that is part of the problem. He was old enough to get help without contacting his family, but what would he have done if he was just a year younger? What if the problem stemmed from home and he couldn't receive any help? Would this end result of suicide happen sooner? Would more children be taking their own lives cause the help isn't always readily available

The night of the suicide I was promised that the Crisis Response Team would be at the school in support of anyone struggling on that Sunday, during a mandatory tech rehearsal for the school play, and that Monday during the school day and that the school would have additional counselors available for anyone in need. Some were available but it wasn't enough. I was shocked when my family received a call on that Sunday, two days after the suicide, stating that CRS was told to stand down. Even if they were available, I would have to have consent from my own parents to talk to them and receive the help needed. Then for kids who did not feel comfortable talking to their parents about the issue, they just don't get to receive help? In the weeks following the suicide, I was told multiple times by personnel that no one was available to speak with me and that it would be better if I just went home. I have two working parents so going home isn't always an option. At one point, I was escorted into an empty conference room where I sat alone sobbing until I could calm myself down. The recommendation for Anne Arundel County Public Schools is 250 students to 1 guidance counselor. At my school and other schools in our county that ratio is much higher.

I hadn't begun to feel as hopeless as my friend until a few weeks after his death. Reaching out for help is hard. but reaching out for help and not having someone there immediately is even harder. Reaching out for help when the problem is at home, and not being able to receive help unless my parents gave consent is something no child should experience. There are kids suffering at age 12 who can't get the help they need. Depression doesn't discriminate, any age can feel like this, so help shouldn't discriminate either. Students are suffering. According to the Anne Arundel County Department of Health's most recent study, from 2014 to 2016 the suicide rates per 100,000 by county in Maryland. 5.4 in PG , 7.2 in Montgomery, 7.6 Howard, 8.6 Baltimore City, 9.6 in Frederick, 9.7 in Baltimore County, 10.7 in Anne Arundel County, 12.3 in Harford, 14.3 in Carroll, and 14.7 in Washington. I know that this one bill can not fix everything, this is a problem rooted so deep, but hopefully we can join together so no one has to fight this battle alone. I am not here to place blame, trust me. If I were, I would be pointing that finger right at myself and thinking about what I could have done differently. I'm asking for help from you so

we can all work together and make positive change. Kids should be able to receive help by a trusted adult at any age they need.

I ask that these testimonies be considered and that action be taken immediately. Time is of the essence.

Thank you.