

February 12, 2023

Dear Judiciary Committee,

I am writing this in support of SB23-075 Deletion of Child's Name From Criminal Justice Records.

We protect our youth in so many ways that it seems strange to me that this has slipped through until now. I'm glad the conversation is being had though and I would like to present some thoughts.

When 17-year-old Riley Whitelaw was murdered at work in June of 2022 it was a devastating emotional blow to our entire community. The largest emotional toll of course, was on her family, but a very close second was Riley's friends, most of whom were also children. She was my daughter's best friend so this hit very close to home for us. Within hours of knowing, her mother was concerned about "how were the kids going to hear about this" and she didn't want them to learn about it from the media or on social media. It was summer time and the kids were out of school with no quick way to reach them all. We knew we were racing against the clock for it to hit the media and her mother had been told that her name would likely be released as well, despite the fact that she was a minor. This meant that we were also racing against the fact that Riley's name (and several horrific details of the crime scene) would be published and there would be no doubts in the minds of the kids about who was murdered last night. We reached out to try to get in touch with as many kid's parents from our small group she was involved with as we could so those kids could at least hear about it from their parents, who knew best how to support them. Her mom was also reaching out to other parents she knew. We did our best but were obviously limited in who we could contact. Too many of the kids who knew Riley found out about it from the media anyway. They were suddenly faced with horrific, undeniable information (because her name was right there!) that they did not know how to process and this often was happening before even their parents knew or other adults who could help support them. In a situation that was already going to be traumatic, these kids had an extra layer of trauma to deal with right from the start because there was her name "in black and white."

In addition to directly exposing the identity of Riley, her name being published exposed the entire community and took away the chance for any private grieving for the family and for her friends and greater school community. Obviously, all of these kids were going to find out sooner than later that their friend died. However, publishing her name opened up the rest of her community to be identified. Very early articles had already dug up where she went to school and what activities she was involved in and that exposed many of these kids to attempts to get stories and information about her for their sensational stories. There was no time for any private mourning, certainly not for the family, but also not for the greater high school and neighborhood communities. Kids trying to pay their respects were approached by the media and had to fend them off themselves. If her name hadn't been released it would have afforded this grieving community a few moments of time, space and privacy that was ripped away by the release of her name.

Out of respect to Riley herself, future minor victims, and their young friends, I urge you to pass this bill.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Swain



The Care Team responded to AAHS the Monday following Riley's murder, June 13th. The team responded with eight Care team members. The team saw approximately ten students individually, and then they did a psycho-ed group with band members and staff. Due to it being summer break, the Care team did not see the number of students we would typically see in this situation.

The following Tuesday night, The Care team provided a caregiver trainer with the parents and had approximately twenty parents in attendance and two administrators. The Memorial preceded this.

On August 11th, the week before school started, two care team counselors did a staff training to cope with the trauma of this event and to help them learn how to appropriately respond to their student's reactions when they returned from summer the following week.

After this time, it felt like the school community was starting to heal and to work through the tragedy. However, recurring media coverage, including details associated with the arrest warrant and details of the investigation, continued to re-traumatize the Air Academy students, staff, and broader community.

Additionally, a few days before the autopsy was released, the Air Academy High School community started talking about the report and the potential details within the report. Many questions were asked about why the media would share this report and the information within it. Once again it felt like the community was being re-traumatized. The impact around the release of this report was felt days before the release and when the autopsy report did not come out, the buzz was that it would not actually be released, and people started feeling like they could move on again.

On August 24th, the media released the horrifying and graphic details of this tragedy in the autopsy report. Students went from starting to work through and accept Riley's murder to once again having this wound opened; they expressed being upset and angry. One of the biggest concerns regarding the release of the autopsy report was that students did not want to hear about the graphic details, nor did they want to be exposed to the details within the report, causing further trauma. Vicarious trauma is when someone is exposed to someone else's trauma. When students scrolled through social media and saw videos of Riley's autopsy on Snapchat and TikTok, they were exposed to the details, and they had no control over seeing and being impacted by the graphic details. This autopsy and police affidavit quickly spread further than just the Colorado Springs and Air Academy community as it was on National news. Teenagers all over America were making TikToks and Snapchats about it. Teenagers were exposed to the violent details of their friend's death, repeatedly. The shift in the school went very quickly from academics to working through the trauma caused by the reports, on students, staff and community.

MISSION

We educate and inspire students to thrive.

VALUES

We believe people are the heart of our success.

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We believe relationships matter.

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We believe in quality education.

VISION

We provide creative and personal learning opportunities, accessible to all students, preparing them to thrive in an ever-changing world.

On August 25, the Care team responded to AAHS and although they only saw a few students, they had several staff who sought out support about how to talk to students about the tragedy and the recurring trauma.

After the autopsy was released, one of the SAFE counselors and members of the Family Resource Center staff saw Riley's friends in individual and group sessions. The students reported sleep disturbance, seeing graphic images in their head, eating concerns, and dissociation. Adolescents are still developing, in so many ways, leaving them prone to an increased risk of suicide, substance abuse, acute stress, and similar symptoms of PTSD when exposed to secondary trauma. Students went from starting to find closure around the murder to once again being very angry, hurt, and confused.

Counselors heard from Riley's friends that they believed that some adults failed to protect her, when she needed them most. Riley repeatedly told adults she was being harassed and stalked, and nothing was done. Students shared that after the autopsy was released, these same adults were now sharing graphic details, and once again, they felt like some adults were not protecting Riley. This caused students to lose trust in adults and, once again, not feel safe. Some students that the counselors saw reported panic attacks when they thought of her autopsy report and the details included.

The impact this autopsy report and the police affidavit has had on the students of Air Academy High Schools is tangible and their feeling of losing their right to be protected from the gruesome details of this murder is also a real concern. Students starting to find comfort and support were forced into an unwillingness to know the facts. There is no question that minors need to be able to be protected from autopsy and other criminal justice reports. In addition, victims and their families deserve privacy during the most vulnerable and difficult times of their lives.