

Testimony Of Audrey Herralld
Operation Elevate from Horizon High School in Thornton, Colorado

Regarding House Bill 18-1177 Youth Suicide Prevention
March 9th, 2018

Good morning. My name is Audrey Herralld, and I am a Junior at Horizon High School in Thornton. My group and I are the creators of a program called Operation Elevate, which is a school-based movement focused on battling the stigma surrounding mental health issues. We have come here today to express our profound support for the passage of HB 18-1177.

Not only does the bill signal to high school students that the state government is aware of our struggles, but it also provides a multitude of resources that have the potential to bring noteworthy change to our lives.

We recognize that you are reaching out to help us, and this testimony is our way of reaching out to help you. We want to assist all of you in understanding that the statistics you base your decisions on are not just numbers- they are memories, feelings, and people. It is much harder to let a price tag or a to-do list triumph over a *statistic* than it is to let such numbers take precedence over a *person*. Before you make your decisions, it is our hope that we are able to breathe some life into the remote nature of facts and figures.

Last year, I listened to my friend explain that her brother was days away from taking his own life. Had he not come home from college for winter break, the worst might have occurred. This boy was nineteen.

I have been stuck on a bus to Missouri, hundreds of miles away from my friend, as she sent texts planning her own death. Students back at Horizon tried to explain the situation to counselors, but it was her boyfriend who found her in the end. She was home alone, holding a razor blade, unconscious on the bathroom floor. They were sixteen.

I've been on the other side of the phone as my friend contemplated the way that she would kill herself. At first, I didn't take her seriously. Nobody did. When the problem got worse, we all realized that we should have. She was fifteen.

I have come to school late, accidentally oversleeping after a night spent talking to a friend who wanted to die. His coach told him that he was overreacting. His parents told him to go to sleep. He told me he was going to kill himself. We were fourteen.

I have listened as my little sister recounted the way that her best friend took scissors to the excess skin around her stomach. The girl knew she needed help, but her parents were skeptical. She was thirteen.

The boy who I was on the phone with is still trying to explain to his parents that he does not feel safe inside his own head. His parents dismiss his requests for help with the argument that counseling is

useless and unaffordable. My little sister's friend has saved up quite a fortune from babysitting and driveway shoveling; she has the funds to pay for at least a few sessions of therapy. However, if I dropped her off at an outpatient psychotherapy service tomorrow, her age would make it illegal for her to receive help. The girl on the bathroom floor, a friend of mine since kindergarten, was about an hour away from becoming another percentage point on the graphs of statewide suicide rates. I was about eight hours away from checking on her in-person. Neither one of us knew about Colorado's suicide hotline.

In creating a free youth suicide prevention program, lowering the minimum age for seeking outpatient psychotherapy, and advertising Colorado's suicide hotline, the passage of HB18-1177 would have a very direct positive impact upon my own life and the lives of those around me.

It is also, I believe, necessary to take into consideration the fact that I am not special. My group is not special. In fact, we live in a health statistics region with a suicide rate of 19.0 per 100,000 people, which is actually lower than the statewide average of 19.5 per 100,000. If these kinds of stories are commonplace in Adams County, I cannot imagine the experiences that students in Park or Teller County - where the suicide rate nears 40 - must endure. Regardless of region, the urgency with which rising suicide rates need to be addressed cannot be overstated.

On behalf of my group from Horizon High School, I urge that the Youth Suicide Prevention bill be passed. The time to act on the issue of youth suicide in our state is not tomorrow. It is not next month, nor is it next session. The time to act is today, before we find any more of our friends on bathroom floors. No bill has the power to immediately solve such a daunting issue, but HB18-1177 takes promising steps in the right direction by presenting Coloradans with resources that we've never needed more.