

Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Evelyn Priola, I am a Bilingual Intake Supervisor in the Family and Children Services Division at Boulder County. In my role, I conduct initial assessments of allegations of child abuse and neglect. I am writing in support of HB1038 Addressing the High-Acuity Crisis for Children and Youth in Need of Residential Care, on behalf of Boulder County.

In my work in helping to find placements that meet the needs of children who have suffered from abuse, I am faced with heartbreaking circumstances of not being able to secure the services a child needs, simply because the services do not exist. When we reach out for placements, many times, all facilities report they do not have capacity. Children and youth in Colorado deserve to have the care they need and face even more challenges and suffering when there are not services to support them.

The kids that need this care have "high acuity behavioral health needs", meaning they need an exceptional level of care and attention. Their needs might be related to their physical, emotional, behavioral, and/or developmental well-being. Children with these needs often have experienced traumatic events such as abuse or extreme neglect. They might exhibit violent behavior, struggle with mental health issues or substance use disorders, have developmental disabilities, or require specialized medical attention.

Many children and youth require in-patient mental health treatment or therapeutic foster care. But because so many of these services are simply not available, more than 80 children across the state were living temporarily in emergency settings such as hospital rooms, offices, or hotels in August of 2023. As a child welfare professional, this is simply not ethical. My colleagues and I do our absolute best to support children, get them the care they need, and we need your help.

HB1038 helps address this crisis. We are grateful to Representatives Young and Bradley and Senators Kirkmeyer and Fields for their work in drafting this bill as this bill will support children and youth by:

- Developing a state-wide program for treatment foster care
- Increasing rates to treatment providers to expand access for children and youth
- Requiring school districts to provide education if a child is in an out-of-home placement

As the bill moves forward, we hope that the voices of child welfare staff, along with the voices of people with lived experience are included.

While we know this piece of legislation will not solve everything. We are committed to continuing to work with you and our partners in the room and online today to resolve this crisis.

Boulder County respectfully requests your support of House Bill 1038 and your continued commitment to making sure children and youth get the care they need.

Senate Health & Human Services

05/02/2024 01:30 PM

HB24-1038 High-Acuity Crisis for Children & Youth

Typed Text of Testimony Submitted

Name, Position, Representing	Typed Text of Testimony
Kelly Comcowich For themselves	<p>I am Kelly Comcowich the parent of a child who committed suicide on September 11, 2023, due to the lack of adequate care systems for high-acuity youth in Colorado. I am very much in favor of House bill 24-1038: High-Acuity Crisis Care for Children & Youth. If there had been adequate care for high-acuity youth, my daughter Julianna might still be alive. I applaud this attempt to begin to fix our very broken system.</p> <p>My daughter was a beautiful musician and artist – but she was also a paranoid schizophrenic. Despite the severity of her illness, we were never able to find treatment for her at ANY of the Colorado in-state residential treatment facilities. We searched for help for my daughter from 2019 at the age of 14, until her death in 2023 at the age of 18. We tried to get help through our private insurance, through CYMHTA, through social services, and through the Youth and Family Treatment Court. There was never any real help available because my daughter’s illness was very high-acuity. Eventually, she was “treated” in jail. But upon her release, there was once again no residential treatment available. Because she was not given adequate treatment again upon her release, the results were devastating.</p> <p>The reasons for the denials of treatment were either that there were “no beds available” (which this current bill addresses) or that she was “too severe for our milieu” (which this bill goes a long way towards addressing).</p> <p>“Too severe for our milieu” was code for the fact that my daughter had extreme and complex mental illness which sometimes included violent outbursts and was hard to treat. “Too severe for our milieu” was also code for the fact that when there are not enough services the facilities can pick and choose the patients they prefer -- and when that happens the hard cases (those that are high-acuity) are not the ones they pick.</p> <p>Thank you for your time, and I applaud this attempt to fix our broken system.</p>
Kelly Comcowich For themselves	<p>I am Kelly Comcowich the parent of a child who committed suicide on September 11, 2023, due to the lack of adequate care systems for high-acuity youth in Colorado. I am very much in favor of House bill 24-1038: High-Acuity Crisis Care for Children & Youth. If there had been adequate care for high-acuity youth, my daughter Julianna might still be alive. I applaud this attempt to begin to fix our very broken system.</p>

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<p>Ashley Chase For Office of the Child's Representative</p>	<p>Hello, my name is Ashley Chase and I am a staff attorney and legislative liaison at the Office of the Child’s Representative. OCR is the state agency that oversees attorneys across the state who represent children and youth or their best interests in every dependency and neglect case, at the discretion of the Judge in Juvenile Delinquency cases, and in approximately 10 other case types.</p> <p>OCR participated in the Child Welfare Interim Study Committee and was pleased to see this bill come forward for introduction this session. The lack of placement options for children and youth with the highest needs continues to be a frequent frustration raised by contract attorneys in case staffings, on the OCR listserv, and in surveys. Searching the term “placement” in the OCR listserv archive comes up with 1,946 results. It is not uncommon for youth with very high needs to be kept in detention, a hospital setting, or some other temporary situation (like a room at DHS). Often there are beds available in certain facilities, but they will not accept a particular youth because the youth does not meet the programming requirements. Guardians ad Litem and Counsel for Youth have very little recourse when this happens and it is painful to see a youth in such an untenable situation.</p>

	<p>There is not one solution to this problem as it will require many solutions across the spectrum of needs and placement issues. This bill is one of those important pieces and OCR hopes you will join us in support of HB24-1038.</p>
<p>Dawn Fritz For Colorado Parent Teacher Association</p>	<p>Colorado PTA supports HB 1038. One of the founding purposes of PTA is to support the well-being and safety of all children and youth. In today’s world, that means ensuring equitable access to mental health care. PTA has a long history of supporting bills and policies which provide needed access to mental health care and resources to children and youth.</p> <p>We are glad to see a bill address the issue of youth who are in, or who are at risk of being placed in, out-of-home care. There has been a growing need for a number of years to have a coordinated system of care for these young people and to expand Medicaid coverage for residential care.</p> <p>In recent years we in PTA have testified on numerous bills dealing with children’s mental and behavioral health, and one point we have made repeatedly is that the lack of residential treatment beds has contributed to a crisis for youth who have complex mental and behavioral health problems. It has also put stress on our schools to deal with these students, whose needs are far too extreme to be dealt with in a regular school environment.</p> <p>This bill will help many at-risk youth who are currently not being served or not being served well. By creating more residential care, it will also ease a part of the deficit in funding for mental health programs and staff in schools. We know that the fiscal note is substantial, but we believe that it is money well spent. It will have far-reaching benefits and will save the state a lot of money in the long run.</p>