



**Testimony of Howard Sovronsky, LCSW-Chief Behavioral Health Officer
at Connecticut Children's Medical Center
to the Public Health Committee
Regarding SB 1085, *An Act Concerning Suicide Prevention*
March 28, 2021**

Senator Abrams, Representative Steinberg, and other esteemed members of the Public Health Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts regarding Senate Bill 1085, *An Act Concerning Suicide Prevention*.

My name is Howard Sovronsky and I serve as the Chief Behavioral Health Officer at Connecticut Children's Medical Center. While I applaud the spirit of SB 1085 in its intent to prevent suicide, I cannot support the bill as it is currently written and wish to offer some suggestions for how to strengthen this bill in support of children.

Connecticut Children's is the largest provider of emergency behavioral health services for children in the state of Connecticut with over 3,000 visits in 2020. Depression and suicidal ideation (contemplating suicide or wanting to take one's own life), or threats of self-injury are the most common presenting problem. Recognizing the growing incidence of suicide, Connecticut Children's Emergency Department began screening all children starting at the age of 10 for risk of suicide, even for those who may be visiting us for a broken bone or a couple of stitches. In the first year, over 16,000 children were screened in the emergency room including those coming in for a medical condition. 16% of those children screened tested positive for risks of suicide. This does not include those children who are admitted each year with serious medical complications resulting from failed suicide attempts. We have found a disturbing trend over recent months. The rates of positive screens in October 2020 increased to 19%, November was 24% and December was 21%. We need to act now to better support the mental health of children in Connecticut.

As the state's only independent hospital focused exclusively on the needs of children, we often care for many children with emotional challenges, some who are in crisis in our emergency department and others whose behaviors are intertwined with other medical conditions. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated children's behavioral health needs due to the social isolation, disruption in routine, and stressors brought on by the health crisis. We have seen first-hand in our hospital the toll this pandemic has taken on children's mental health and I wish to impress upon you that we are currently at a crisis level. Therefore, we would caution against dissolving the current Connecticut Suicide Advisory Board (CTSAB) at such a critical time and instituting this newly proposed model.

We are also disappointed that the proposed bill language eliminates specific references to children. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 10 through 34 years old and the rates continue to rise. Children are not just tiny adults. Their needs and developing brains are different from that of adults and as such, children need specific prevention strategies designed to meet them where they are. We recommend that any state-driven suicide prevention efforts include pediatric expertise and an explicit focus on children.

In Section 1 of the bill regarding the membership of the proposed Suicide Advisory Board, there is no requirement that any member represent a provider agency. We believe that having a “boots on the ground” perspective is critical to addressing this crisis. Additionally, we would also recommend that a member of the Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council also be included on the board.

Furthermore, when it comes to preventing death by suicide we must rely on evidence-based practices. In the proposed legislation, there is no mention of evidence-based approaches to suicide prevention education and training nor is there a proposed infrastructure to monitor or enforce for accountability among practitioners.

Thank you for your consideration of our position. If you have any questions about this testimony, please contact Emily Boushee, Connecticut Children’s Government Relations, at eboushee@connecticutchildrens.org.