

*Blake, Carl, Caroline, Chad, Conner, Harrison, Henry, Hunter, Jason, Jack, Jake, Jordan, Justin, Kaycie, Kristi, Lane, Laura, Luke, Maddie, Michael, Nick, Pierson, Regan, Sam, Sarah, Taylor, Tom, Teddy...and many more ☺*

Feb. 10, 2020

To: The Insurance Committee, Kansas State Capitol, 300 SW 10<sup>th</sup> Street, Topeka, KS 66612

- Kansas Representatives Jene Vickrey, Chair, Rep. Tom Cox, Vice Chair
- Rep. Cindy Neighbor, Ranking Minority Leader and other House Members of the Insurance Committee

Re: House Bill 2459 – The Kristi L. Bennett Mental Health Parity Act - Limiting utilization review conducted by health plans under certain circumstances involving the treatment of mental illness or substance abuse disorder.

Dear Committee Chair, Vice Chair, Ranking Minority Leader and other Members of the Committee,

Thank you for allowing my written testimony as a proponent of HB 2459, the Kristi L. Bennett Mental Health Parity Act.

My name is Joni Breidenthal and I belong to the worst mother's club ever...the club nobody EVER wants to be in. Sadly, I am a lifelong member and I am not alone. Currently, I am one of 26 women in and around the Kansas City area who belong to this horrific club. All of us have lost a child to suicide, mental illness and/or addiction. Many moms claim, as do I, that help was NOT available when we needed it most. There was a complete lack of available, affordable and accessible mental health care services for many of those we loved and lost.

I testify today on behalf of Kristi L. Bennett and her family's intense struggle to locate and receive the mental health services she needed. Sadly, this issue is not unique to Kristi. It was our nightmare as well. I'm here today in honor of my son, Teddy, and for every child/young adult listed at the top of this page who lost their lives to mental illness, addiction and/or suicide.

My son, Teddy Breidenthal, 24, died two years ago this past November of an overdose. He struggled as the result of a childhood trauma that left him broken, desperate, addicted, suicidal and at the mercy of himself and his mental degradation.

Accessing mental health services for Teddy was a living hell. Ginormous barriers stood in the way. For years, we actively sought help for our son, only to experience roadblock after roadblock to getting relief that might have given Teddy hope and a will to keep living.

After nine years of searching for help, and two years after Teddy died, I still cannot tell you, or any desperate parent, where to go, what to do, or who to call for help. I often hear people say, "WAIT! DON'T DIE! There are resources out there! Help is available. Call 988!"

**But is HELP really out there? There might be but I don't know for sure.**

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If I can't convince you that help is out there, that's a problem. It tells me that families are unable to navigate the complexities of accessing mental health services. It's cumbersome, impossible and heartbreaking. Add in insurance limitations, cost, urgency and trying to knock down huge barriers to accessible, affordable and available mental health care options. It's monumental.

Parents and families are at a complete loss for what to do, where to go and how to help. Our youth, teens and young adults are in a mental health crisis and we must act before it's too late for yet another precious life.

Short and sweet...

- Please pass HB 2459 (SB 249) out of committee to be voted on by the full house.
- This bill couldn't save Kristi, our Teddy, or any beautiful soul listed above, however I do believe it could potentially save lives. **It's a start.**

Why I am a proponent of HB 2459:

HB 2459...

- brings mental health issues on par with other healthcare needs, requiring healthcare plans to cover **both** medical and mental health **equally**. This is huge. If Teddy had cancer, he would have access to anything and everything to save his life. Because he struggled with addiction, mental health issues and suicide ideation, he didn't have access to anything life saving;
- addresses the issue of UNQUALIFIED insurance companies and staff making life and death decisions for our children, young adults and family members with mental illness;
- puts qualified, licensed physicians and psychologists in the driver's seat to make critical life and death decisions for patients;
- requires insurers to provide necessary waivers to get in-patient treatment within 24 hours when in-network facilities are unavailable, and
- would allow medical/mental health coverage to continue for young adults up to age 26 on their parent's insurance plan.

Thank you for reading my testimony and for pushing this important bill forward.

Sincerely,

Joni Breidenthal  
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**Teddy Breidenthal 1993-2017**