

RE: Support City of Austin Agenda Item 68 regarding the Council's commitment to end suicide

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Councilwoman Mackenzie Kelly and Council Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to share testimony in support of agenda item 68. My name is Laura Ramos, and I am a volunteer and Central Texas Board Member with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). I appreciate the Council's commitment to ending suicide by directing the City Manager to perform additional outreach on the prevention of suicide, initiating amendments to sections of the City Code related to design and operation requirements of an archery range or shooting facility, and adding the City's support to end suicide to the City's legislative agendas.

AFSP is the leading national not-for-profit organization exclusively dedicated to saving lives and bringing hope to those affected by suicide. As the nation's largest private funder of suicide prevention research, we know that suicide is a leading yet preventable public health problem.

In 2020, 3,924 Texans died by suicide, making it the 2nd leading cause of death for youth and young adults ages 10-34, the 5th leading cause for adults ages 35-44, the 8th leading cause for adults ages 45-54, and the 11th leading cause of death overall.¹ In 2021, there were 176 deaths by suicide reported to the Office of Vital Records (OVR) for Austin, Texas, making it approximately 18.2 deaths per 100,000 population. This is the highest rate for the past ten years.²

While I find these statistics daunting, my interest in suicide prevention is also very personal. In late November 2017, I lost my best friend and three young girls, ages 2, 10, and 12 at the time, lost their daddy. Four months prior he had what we can now describe as a crisis in which he targeted me. After that night, everyone exclusively saw him as a threat to my daughter and me, which was very understandable, but I always thought, "What about him?"

When I explained to the many different people involved in our case: attorneys, officers, caseworkers, etc. that he had been struggling with his own mental health and had previously attempted against his own life, it felt like no one listened. Those involved in our case, most of whom are possibly still actively working with Austin residents, seemed to ignore alternate resources for him when I asked. Only four months after the arrest, and two after he was released under house arrest, he died by suicide.

The night of his arrest, he was in crisis. He desperately needed someone to listen. He needed the empathy, compassion, and kindness he showed to so many in this same city, extended to him during one of the darkest moments of his life.

His selfless nature, and the three girls he left behind, are why I advocate for a change, so that we don't continue to lose productive citizens of Austin to suicide. I appreciate the Council's commitment to end suicide so that other little girls like my daughter don't have to wonder why their daddy can't celebrate their birthday with them, why they will never participate in a daddy-daughter dance with their daddy, or why, when all the other kids talk about their dads, she has nothing to share, or in her desire to be included, can only say "my daddy lives in heaven because he died."

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2023). WISQARS Fatal Injury Reports. Retrieved 3/30/23 from <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/index.htm>

² <https://data.austintexas.gov/stories/s/HE-B-4-a-Rate-of-deaths-by-suicide-Number-of-death/mqa2-tm7r/>

Upwards of 90% of individuals who ultimately die by suicide were living with a diagnosable mental health condition at the time of their death; often these conditions are undiagnosed or untreated. Suicide can be prevented through early detection of individuals who may be in crisis or struggling with their mental health and by connecting them to resources and treatment services.

Your commitment to suicide prevention through support, outreach, and amendments to the city code of Austin are very valuable. The AFSP Central Texas Chapter appreciates your commitment to end suicide. We all have a role to play in preventing suicide, and with your support, passage of this resolution will affirm the city's commitment to improving the lives of Austin residents and to preventing the tragic loss of life to suicide in the future.

Thank you.