

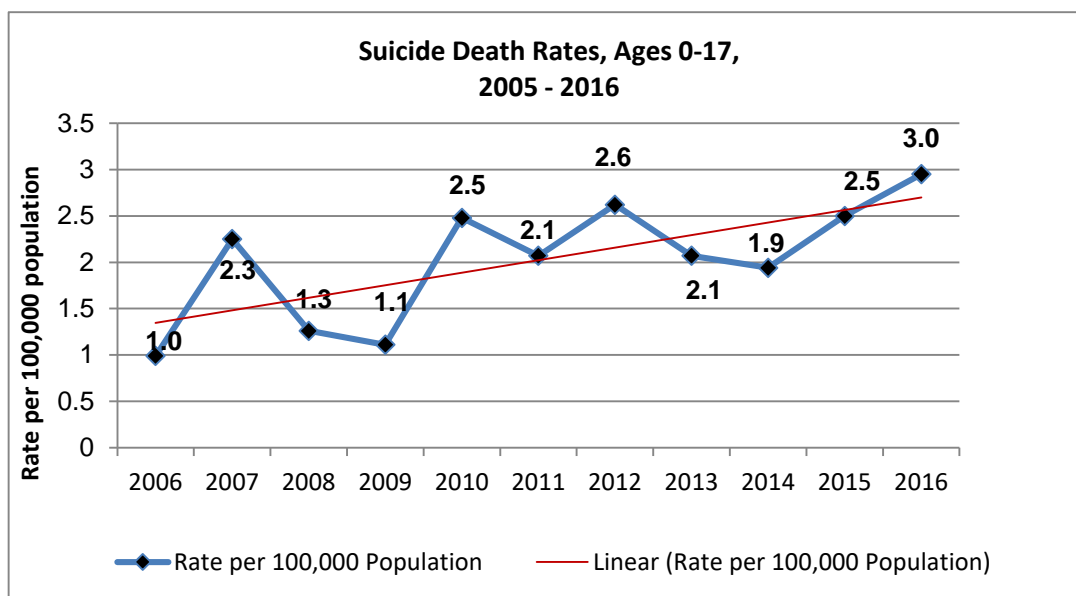
**Testimony of Prof. Jennifer Schmidt in Support of SB 211,
 Appointment of a Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator
 Presented to the Senate Education Committee**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 211, appointing a dedicated Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator.

My name is Jennifer Schmidt, and I am a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Kansas Law School. I had the honor of serving as Co-Chair of the Kansas Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force.

Youth Suicide in Kansas is a Crisis

Kansas kids are killing themselves at an increasing and alarming rate. This upward trend continues despite a decline in the overall rate of child deaths. In 2016, the latest year that state data is available, there were 20 youth who died by suicide, seven of whom were age 14 or younger.¹ Suicide was the third leading cause of death for Kansas children, with more kids dying by suicide than by homicide.²



Source: Kansas Child Death Review Board Annual Report, 2018.

There is no expert consensus on causes of youth suicide. We do know that there is no single cause, no easy fix, and that each suicide is different, as each life is different. We also know that 60 percent of the Kansas children who died by suicide in 2016 had not received mental health

services, and that 35 percent had a history of substance abuse. Many of these deaths were completely unexpected, seemingly coming out of the blue.³

A Response to this Crisis: the Kansas Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force

In response to this crisis, the Tower Mental Health Foundation and the Kansas Attorney General last year created a Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force. Dr. Andy Tompkins and I served as co-chairs.

The Youth Suicide Prevention Task force was deliberately created to be a fresh look at the crisis of youth suicide, and to be finite. Member composition was intentionally diverse among professions, with experts in education, mental health, victim services, law enforcement, juvenile justice, legislation and public policy. We traveled the state, holding seven field hearings in six locations.

At the end of our work, we knew continuing efforts were required. Therefore, a central task force recommendation is the creation of a Kansas Youth Suicide Coordinator. The Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force Report is attached to this testimony.

Appointment of a Kansas Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator

The task force strongly believes that there is a need for ongoing work on this issue beyond what the state is already doing. There are great efforts underway, but more can and must be done. The rising rate of youth suicides is evidence that this tragedy continues.

A central, dedicated, and knowledgeable resource on youth suicide prevention is the next step in fighting this crisis. Specifically, we need a person who is responsible for:

1) Ongoing Coordination of Youth Suicide Prevention Efforts

The task force found that a significant challenge to all of the efforts to prevent and respond to youth suicide is that there is no central point of coordination and communication solely dedicated to originating and managing ongoing youth suicide prevention efforts.

2) Implementation and Follow-up of Task Force Recommendations

The Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force found areas where communication, coordination, data collection, and training are needed to fight youth suicide. Without ongoing efforts to make these changes, the report will be paper on a shelf.

3) Further Youth Suicide Prevention Efforts

The Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force was a good first step. Our job was to survey current efforts and make recommendations. Our short timeframe limited us to focusing on prevention of youth suicide in the moment of crisis and response to suicide attempts. Kids should not, however, even reach the point of considering suicide as an option, or making a plan to do so. Childhood should not be fraught with unhappiness that leads our children to reach this point of desperation. A dedicated Youth Suicide Prevention Coordinator would go beyond what we have

to create new, novel, and better ways to reduce, and hopefully eradicate, youth suicide.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. Please contact me if I can be of further assistance on this issue or others.

I would be happy to stand for questions.

¹ Kansas Child Death Review Board Annual Report, 2018. Available at: https://ag.ks.gov/docs/default-source/reports/scdrb/9-26-18-final-scdrb-annual-report.pdf?sfvrsn=579cd11a_4

² Id.

³ Id.