

Good Afternoon

My name is Annie Bukay, and I am representing Jefferson Center's Policy Action Network. I am a social worker. I currently work as a coordinator of the school-based mental health program, and prior to that, I was a therapist; I have worked with kids and families for 15 years.

Our youths are struggling in ways that we are only beginning to understand and treat. We are managing not only the individual and family impacts of a global pandemic, but also the systemic toll of ongoing exposure to illness, death, divisiveness, fear, and losses resulting from COVID-19. While we are more plugged in than ever before, our kids and teenagers are reporting isolation, anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts at a higher rate than I have experienced in my career. COVID-19 has brought Zoom into almost every household, and yet accessing appropriate mental health services remains a barrier for families who have already been hardest hit by COVID-19. Many youths are failing their classes, disengaged from their peer group, or have simply disappeared from the school system; these children are not accessing mental health services because they're too busy focusing on survival. Those most impacted include families who qualify for CHP+ but cannot afford the copay for therapy, children who are ineligible for Medicaid due to immigration status, and families with high-deductible insurance plans that make therapy cost-prohibitive.

By passing a bill that permits youths to have 3 free therapy sessions, you are helping our highest-risk children have the opportunity to be assessed for risk. These youths have the right to be connected to a trained professional who can assess for safety and provide them with education about ways to move forward in a healthier way. Additionally, it is my opinion that 3 sessions is a great start, but will not address the depth of the current mental health needs our youths have. A truly equitable response includes the ability for each person to receive the level of care they need to heal from trauma, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. I ask you to support HB21-1258, as it is movement in a positive direction, and I also ask that you consider envisioning a possibility for providing more in-depth options for children who have been most severely impacted by COVID-19. Equitable mental health access is a necessity for all youths, regardless of their ability to pay for it.

Thank you.



Written testimony in support of HB21-1258 (Rapid Mental Health Response for Colorado Youth) to the Senate Health & Human Services Committee by Sarah Barnes, Manager of Special Policy Initiatives at the Colorado Children's Campaign

- Madam Chair and members of the committee, my name is Sarah Barnes and I am the Manager of Special Policy Initiatives at the Colorado Children's Campaign.
- Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1258, and thank you Senators Buckner and Woodward for your leadership on this bill.
- **The Colorado Children's Campaign supports HB 1258** because it will help broaden access to mental health services for Colorado youth.
- Fifty-two percent of Colorado district or school leaders reported being concerned about student emotional support last fall —making it the most common concern cited by education leaders across the state.
- Before the pandemic spread across the country and Colorado, many of our students were already facing mental and behavioral health crises. In 2019, more than one third of high school students reported that they felt sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks (a hallmark symptom of clinical depression) according to results from the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey.
- The disruptions and social isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to only exacerbate mental and behavioral health issues for youth in Colorado.
- Understanding and meeting the mental and behavioral health needs of all Colorado youth is critical, especially as they deal with the lasting impacts of the pandemic. We will need a myriad of strategies to support these needs for Colorado youth as they start back to school in the fall.
- HB 1258 will help with one part of the solution by providing youth with access to mental health screenings and connections to mental health providers.
- We are excited to hear input from youth in Colorado on the design and implementation of this strategy.
- We urge your support of HB 1258 as one part of the solution to supporting the needs of Colorado youth as they recover from the effects of the pandemic on their mental and behavior health. Thank you.

Senate Health & Human Services

HB21-1258 Rapid Mental Health Response For Colorado Youth

Typed Text of Testimony Submitted

Name, Position, Representing	Typed Text of Testimony
Sophie West For Self	<p data-bbox="565 506 971 539">Good afternoon, Representatives:</p> <p data-bbox="565 625 1455 1115">My name is Sophie. I am very passionate about suicide prevention and work in the field. One of my primary responsibilities is to review all preventable youth deaths, including suicides. As you know, suicide is a leading cause of death for our youth in Colorado and, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, suicidal ideation and attempts were increasing nationally. The pandemic, and the necessary restrictions resulting from it, have introduced an additional set of factors that are contributing to the status of our youths' mental health. For some youth, the social restrictions of the pandemic served as a protective factor; at the same time other youth experienced increased anxiety and isolation and struggled immensely as a result of the pandemic. Now, as our communities begin to reopen, all youth are experiencing complex internal and external social emotions and conditions readjusting to the new normal.</p> <p data-bbox="565 1205 1466 1772">Time and time again, I review stories of youth who would have benefited enormously from mental health services but were either unaware, too uncomfortable or unable to access them, particularly services beyond just a single visit. Removing the barrier to access and providing these services alone would greatly increase our chances of helping our youth through this incredibly complicated time. The more connections between youth and trusted adults and/or mental health professionals we can create -- coupled with ongoing care and the opportunity for referral beyond the services that this bill would provide -- the greater reduction in youth suicidal ideation, attempts and death by suicide we will see among our youth. It is imperative we normalize youth accessing these services and provide each and every one of them with the opportunity to do so affordably and with ease. And, we must do it now; we simply do not have time to wait on such an important and valuable opportunity to support our youngest Coloradans.</p> <p data-bbox="565 1862 862 1892">Thank you for your time.</p>

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