

House Health, Insurance, and Environment Committee  
HB18-1223, Declare Autism Epidemic in Colorado  
April 26, 2018

Hello. My name is Leslie Reed. The first word our youngest uttered was "bird". A bright toddler, she was fascinated by birds in flight and when she spied one, she would point to it and cry "bird!" in an excited voice. This was not to last. Before long she withdrew completely. No more words, no more pointing, ever again.

Her behaviors became extremely challenging as time went on. Terrifyingly, she would race across the room and hurl herself into the wall at full speed. She would bite and scratch herself drawing blood. She would beat her head against the wall, while we, panicked, would try to prevent her from injuring herself.

To help change the world for her when we could not change her, we embraced involvement in the disability community. For six years I co-led an educational program to train young adults and parents of young children with developmental disabilities to navigate the medical, educational, and political systems. This program was co-funded by the Colorado Department of Education and the Colorado Developmental Disabilities Council. For two years I was board president of the Arc of Denver. Now, I find that both that council and the Arc oppose this bill. I do not understand this unless they think that avoiding the word "epidemic" is more important than the prevention of human suffering. It is sad that these organizations oppose a bill which aims only to assist the very population the organizations claim to serve.

Meanwhile, our daughter's extreme behaviors were such that soon we could not take her to social events, or when we did, we were subject to judgements from family and friends who either failed to exhibit the patience she required or levied the assessment that we had somehow caused her autism. Just as we could not include her in our former social activities, we could not, for the same reasons, host anyone comfortably in our home. We became withdrawn as a family. The world we had known moved on without us.

Daily life was a struggle. It is impossible to convey the stress we lived under continually. We could have no pictures on the wall. Televisions and stereos had to be tied down. Holes were punched in the walls and holes were smashed through the floors. In public, she was a runner. She would break free anywhere and run for the street with me in hot pursuit. Often, I would tell myself, "I can't live like this another day. No one could." But we did. We got up and we did it day after day, year after year.

Our beautiful daughter is grown now. She is still autistic and non-verbal, but she has come a long way, with great personal struggle. She has revealed herself to be a perceptive and talented poet. We are so proud of her. She is proud of herself, too, but like us she would like to know what causes autism and how it might be prevented. As for us, we have survived as a family in this struggle. Many, many families do not.

We voice our support of this bill in the hopes that it will spur research into the causes of autism. We support this bill in the hope that other children will be spared our daughter's ordeal. We support this bill in the hope that other families may not go through the stress, heartbreak, economic privation, and social isolation that we have endured. We urge you to support this bill, for scientific inquiry into the condition of autism, and for common humanity. Thank you.

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