



**SUICIDE AWARENESS & PREVENTION**

Facebook: LiveForThomas \* Instagram: live4thomas \* Website: [www.liveforthomas.org](http://www.liveforthomas.org)

**Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or Text 988**

**Senate Bill No. 165**

**Letter of Support**

**March 20, 2024**

**1:00pm**

Delegate Barnes and Members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Dr. Amy Ocasio; I have a doctorate in prevention science with a focus on suicide prevention, I am a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor, and I am the Co-Founder/President of the LIVEFORTHOMAS Foundation which is a suicide awareness and prevention non-profit organization. And the most important, I am a mother who lost her 16 year-old-son, Thomas, to suicide on July 28, 2019.

Thomas was a popular kid, athlete, honor student, and had been approved to graduate early to pursue his dream of enlisting in the U.S. Army. Thomas loved to hunt, fish, eat crabs, and spend time with family and friends. People would describe Thomas as having a “contagious smile”.

Following his death, many people said, “I never thought it would be him”. That’s the thing with suicide, it doesn’t discriminate, anyone can be at risk. Yes, even those who appear to have it all.

Currently, suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for ages 10-19 and specifically the 3rd leading cause of death for student-athletes ages 15-24.

One of the primary focuses of the LIVEFORTHOMAS Foundation is to promote mental health awareness among local high school athletes and coaching staff. This is accomplished through Mental Health Awareness Talks which are facilitated by guest speakers with lived experience, clinicians to teach coping skills, representatives from local mental health agencies, and opportunities for the student-athletes to ask questions. What we have found is the student-athletes WANT to talk, therefore, coaches need to be prepared.

These talks led me to the topic of my dissertation, “Male Coaches’ Perceptions of Their Role and Capacity in Supporting Male Student-Athletes’ Mental Health.” Findings included:

- Coaches perceive they have a role in supporting their student-athletes mental health and they are willing to take on that role.
- Coaches comfort levels varied in regards to providing support and knowledge pertaining to mental health.
- Coaches want a list of mental health disorders and their signs and symptoms including wanting to know the top five mental health struggles for student-athletes.
- Coaches want an understanding of normal adolescent behaviors vs. indicators of a mental health struggle.
- Coaches want the knowledge and skills on how to respond in specific situations.
  - This includes grounding techniques/emotion regulation to help them remain calm when “freaking out” internally when presented with a student-athlete experiencing a mental health struggle.

The bottom line is student-athletes are wanting to talk and coaches are wanting to be prepared. Therefore, I respectfully request a favorable report on SB 165. I will leave you with this - think about your son, your daughter, your grandchildren, your niece, your nephew. If they were experiencing a struggle with their mental health, who would you want as their coach? One with mental health training? Or one without? The choice is yours.