

Dec. 15, 2020

Chair Salinas, Vice-Chair Hayden, Vice-Chair Nosse and Committee Members,

My name is Angela Perry. As a sixth generation Oregonian, born and raised in the Willamette Valley, a suicide attempt survivor, a person who has lost loved ones to suicide, and supporter of friends and family members who live with mental health conditions I have seen firsthand, how both our health and mental health systems often fail to help the people who need it most.

Today I will share a part of my story to help you understand why it is so important that therapists, counselors, and social workers are trained to help people who are suicidal. I also think doctors and nurses should get this training, but at the very least we should be requiring professionals in the mental health field to be comfortable talking with their clients about suicide and then know how to help them.

As a young child into adulthood, I have lived with chronic health and mental health issues. Along with a team of doctors at Dornbecher, my community pediatrician, a whole host of medical and mental health providers The Portland Clinic, The Corvallis Clinic, Kaiser and Providence—depending on who my health insurance allowed, I also saw a string of school counselors, psychologists and psychiatrists, and off and at times medical social workers and medical advocates assigned by my insurance providers to help coordinate my care.

My first memory of self-harming was when I was in first grade and the frequency and types of self-harm have evolved as I aged. Dissociation and being the “quiet and shy” child I was able to hide my behaviors, my eating disorders and how bad my anxiety and depression were. The professionals I saw underestimated how much I was thinking about killing myself. In fact, they never even asked me about it.

My freshman year at Oregon State was a turning point though, I was scared and completely out of control of my own life. Despite the doctor at student health referring me to counseling and psych services...where I went weekly my entire freshman year, my mental health continued to decline. I wanted help but I could not talk about why. I did not have the words to explain what suicidal ideations were, let alone how to explain that I near constantly thought about killing myself and the many ways I could go about it and once again, I was never asked directly if I was suicidal or if I was thinking about harming myself.

Not a single time was I asked if I was suicidal...Not once was I asked if I wanted to hurt myself. My entire childhood, teen and young adult years I struggled with crippling anxiety and depression alone. If anyone asked if I was okay—I was always fine...even when I wasn't, and doctors did not push...or know that it was okay to even ask just how bad I was struggling with my mental health.

The fall of my 2<sup>nd</sup> year of college I moved back home to Forest Grove where I received not one, but two knee surgeries in only six weeks of time. I was prescribed medication after medication, I was not eating, and I had a complete mental breakdown. First going to Hillsboro Tuality's Emergency Department under a police hold, where I spent a few hours until they found the only bed available to transfer me to a dedicated mental health unit. I spent two nights in the hospital giving the doctors and nurses “all the right answers” to sound like I was okay, and I was sent home from Portland Adventist Hospital without any support because they had decided I was no longer a danger to others.

Despite the safety I had in the hospital, I did not feel emotionally safe. Soon after my release my parents arranged for me to move back to Corvallis, where I had the support of my friends, and my now husband. They also advocated for me to get into weekly counseling in Corvallis in hopes to further address the fact that they knew I was not okay.

I had been given a diagnosis of depression and anxiety and put-on prescription medication...well...several different ones, some with severe enough reactions that I ended up in the Corvallis Emergency Room until it was safe for me to return

home. The following couple years of seeing a mental health professional focused only on the struggles I was having with school and anything else I could come up with to avoid talking about what was really wrong...my answer to "Are you okay?" was always, "I'm fine." No one ever asked me THE QUESTIONS, and since they weren't asking, I didn't think to volunteer the information...it was after all what I saw as the worst thing about myself.

It was not until eleven years ago when I started to seek help for myself, that I saw that as a problem. I have had to learn how to advocate for myself with my mental and physical health conditions as an adult. The loss of another friend to suicide led me to find the Oregon Chapter of American Foundation for Suicide of which I am now the Chair of the Board of Directors.

In the five years that I have been involved in AFSP I have met countless others, from a five-year-old little boy who was with his Mom at Portland Pride who asked to come over because he had just been released from the hospital for his suicide attempt, to all of the thousands of survivors I have met at our events across the state...I know my journey is not unique, I am far from the first to share in these experiences and I know I will not be the last.

For those of you who have never had to fight to save yourself from yourself...let me tell you, it is TERRIFYING...it is LONELY... It took me 36 years to find any care mental health providers who actually knew how to ask and address my answers to the most important questions: Are you suicidal? Are you thinking of hurting yourself? Do you want to die?

My answers to the first two questions are ALWAYS yes. Do I want to die though? Definitely NOT! It was not until March of this year that I found an amazing counselor through Western Psychological Services and the first thing she asked was—are you suicidal? That question was quickly followed up by, are you currently in a safe location. And those questions have led me to receive the professional health that I have needed all along.

That is why this bill is so important. It should not take a person 36 years to find a therapist and psychologist who know how to affectively work with and treat someone who lives with chronic suicidal ideation.

Children and teens struggle with their mental health and can most definitely be suicidal. I was. Adults can struggle with their mental health and can be suicidal. I am.

If mental health professionals were required to have training in suicide prevention lives most definitely would be saved.

I ask you, to please take this bill seriously, my life and the lives of so many people I love depends on it.