



KSL TV 5

Lawmakers push for tougher oversight after several deaths in Utah teen treatment centers

Feb 25, 2025, 5:09 PM | Updated: 5:23 pm

SALT LAKE CITY — Four years after Utah first started regularly inspecting teen treatment facilities, a Utah lawmaker says too many kids have died, and more needs to be done.

[Sen. Mike McKell, R-Spanish Fork](#), now wants to add additional independent oversight of the industry.

Since his [first major law](#) regulating these facilities passed in 2021, McKell said at least seven kids have died while in treatment — a sign that Utah needs to do more to protect kids in congregate care facilities.

“Almost every death that I’m aware of was avoidable,” McKell said.

The KSL Investigators have been trying since last August to learn how many teens have died in these facilities since 2021. After months of waiting, the Utah Department of Health and Human Services told us it was six.

Following McKell’s testimony, we asked for clarification. In an email Tuesday, they wrote the “seventh death took place in the psychiatric hospital of a provider that also operates a congregate care facility on the same campus.”

SB297

McKell said Utah is “learning the hard way” that more is needed when it comes to regulation at teen treatment facilities. That’s why he said he is sponsoring SB297 this session, which would create an ombudsman to investigate complaints.

The legislation would also require facilities to provide patients with a phone that they can use to call the ombudsman at any time if they have a concern regarding the facility or themselves.

Advocates say this is necessary because many of these facilities limit contact with the outside world.

The bill would also create an advisory committee that would work with the [Department of Licensing](#) to create new standards for teen treatment facilities, including an examination of admissions criteria to make sure a facility is only admitting patients with needs they can properly address.

If the bill passes, facilities would also be required to notify parents within five hours of when a crisis begins. They would also be required to create suicide prevention plans for each patient, suited to their needs.

Biruk Silvers

Parents Katy and Josh Silvers testified in favor of McKell's bill in a Senate committee hearing on Friday.

They call their 17-year-old son, Biruk Silvers, a blessing and a gift. Biruk was treated for issues with drugs, alcohol, and unresolved childhood trauma at Discovery Ranch for almost seven months last year.

On Nov. 5, Josh Silvers said he received a call from Discovery Ranch that a student found Biruk's body in his room.

"It's the most hopeless feeling I've ever had," he said.

After his death, the Silvers said they learned the facility knew their son was suicidal and had told his therapist about a plan similar to the way he died. The Utah Department of Health and Human Services [wrote up Discovery Ranch for multiple items](#), including not following their suicide prevention policy.

The Silvers believe several pieces of SB297 could have saved their son's life. Katy Silvers told lawmakers that "my son's death was preventable and the fact that I'm here means we are not doing enough, and we must do better."

Some people spoke out against the bill during the hearing, with concern that more regulation could eliminate facilities.

"When I think about limiting them to the point of parents not having these options, that means we watch our children die or maybe they go to jail if we're lucky," testified one parent via Zoom from Florida.

The bill received unanimous support from the Senate Judiciary Law Enforcement Committee, 8-0. It is on its way to the full Senate for a vote.