

SB328 Testimony- Jennifer Epstein

March 7, 2023

Chair Dembrow, Vice Chair Webber, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak. My name is Jennifer Epstein, Jon's wife and mom to Cal and Miles.

After losing Cal, Jon and I quickly learned this is not the same opioid epidemic as it was just a few years ago. Synthetic opioids are more dangerous than any other street drug available in our nation's history, and the deception of fentanyl being put into pills and being sold on social media has caused unsuspecting youth to be the fastest growing age group of victims of today's opioid epidemic. We worked with BSD to develop their fake and fatal awareness campaign, which was rolled out to over 20,000 middle and high school students in May 2020 and resulted in BSD fentanyl deaths going from 4 in one year to 0 known student deaths since the campaign was launched. Shortly after I joined SFC, a national non-profit whose mission is to warn youth and parents about the dangers of fake pills and other fentanyl laced substances. I have spent the last 2 years trying to convince schools and other youth-based organizations to take action, and I can tell you there are very few schools in our state, or even in our nation, that have done as comprehensive awareness program as BSD.

In the fall of 2022 Song for Charlie commissioned a nation-wide poll and learned that only about 1/3 HS students surveyed said they were knowledgeable about fentanyl and aware of fentanyl in fake pills. That means a full 2/3 of our nation's youth are not equipped to make a potentially life-changing decision if ever they are offered a pill by a friend, or if they are lured in by a dealer on social media. This is a decision that would not have been life-ending a few years ago. Yet the choice to take one pill, a prescription pill that they are often familiar with, could end their life within minutes. No other generation of teens

has faced this threat before, and our kids deserve to know so they can make informed choices that could save their lives.

We don't pretend the proposed classroom education will solve the fentanyl crisis. This crisis has been decades in the making with many different contributing factors. And it will take us many years to fix this problem. We need to fix problems with the drug supply, youth mental health, and social media. We need to invest in harm reduction, addiction treatment and recovery services. However, educating our kids is the quickest and easiest way to make a dent in this problem. Not only will it decrease the number of deaths, it will decrease the number of people who develop and addiction to illicit drugs.

Losing Cal devastated not only Jon and I, it impacted his brother, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends, teachers, neighbors... even Cal's young swim students. The number of people who have been impacted by Cal's death is too large to count and has changed everyone's lives for years to come. Our family's holidays are all a little quieter. Our son Miles won't have his brother by his side as best man, and his kids will no longer have an uncle. Cal will never be the dad he wanted to be someday. Cal's friends have lost a friend who brought them joy and who helped them through their hardest times, and they, too, are left wondering what they could have done differently. The losses never end. And sadly, we've watched this tragedy happen again, again, and again right in our community since Cal's death.

We will never be able to quantify the number of lives that will be saved if SB238 is made into law. That is the nature of prevention programs. But even if it saves just one life, it will be well worth it.

Thank you,
Jennifer Epstein