

Testimony as Prepared for Delivery in support of HB23-1003: School Mental Health Assessment by Leslie Colwell, V.P. of Youth Success Initiatives at the Colorado Children's Campaign

Senate Health & Human Services Committee

April 5, 2023, 1:30 p.m.

SCR 357

- Madam Chair and members of the committee, my name is Leslie Colwell and I am the Vice President of Youth Success Initiatives at the Colorado Children's Campaign.
- We are a non-profit, non-partisan, policy and advocacy organization, committed to securing every chance for every child in Colorado. That includes advocating for better supports for our state's youth and adolescents.
- Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of House Bill 1003 today and thank you to Senator Cutter for your leadership on this bill and your commitment to improving access to mental health supports for our students in Colorado.
- I saw the social and mental health struggles of youth and teens firsthand as a middle school teacher, and this was well before the pandemic. I can only imagine what kids are working through now, but we are all well familiar with the data pointing to troubling trends in child and youth mental health in our state. The percent of Colorado adolescents reporting poor mental health doubled between 2017 and 2021. Emergency room visits for youth mental health crises have been on the rise, and even more concerning, the number of Colorado kids and youth who died by suicide more than doubled between 2010 and 2020.
- As kids navigate the academic, social and emotional experiences that come with growing up, ensuring that all children and youth have access to the behavioral health supports and services they need is more critical than ever.
- But without universal screening, there may be no way to know that some of our students are quietly struggling and need help.
- According to the 2021 Smart Source survey, Colorado's inventory of school health best practices, only 38% of elementary schools and 35% of secondary schools conduct a universal behavioral health screening.
- House Bill 1003 provides a way for schools to assess student mental health needs and, through a qualified provider, ensure those needs are met with available resources such as the I Matter Program, which has provided free therapy to 6,000 students since its creation in 2021.
- We see so many benefits to schools opting into this program besides students getting the support they need to thrive. Making parents aware that these screenings are taking place has the potential to spur important conversations about mental health between students and parents. And further destigmatizing therapy and placing more attention on early intervention may prevent identified challenges from getting worse.
- We urge a yes vote on House Bill 1003. Thank you.