

House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health Hearing

Chairman Anna Eshoo (CA-18)

Talia Day - Witness Testimony

January 29, 2020 – 5 mins allotted

Chairwoman Eshoo, Ranking Member Burgess, and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Talia Day and all three of my children have severe food allergies, two of them are allergic to sesame. I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to explain why the FASTER Act will have an enormous and positive impact on the 32 million Americans living with food allergies and their families. These allergies are not only life-threatening they are life altering.

My son, Zachary, was diagnosed with several severe food allergies in infancy. When he was just three years old, Zachary ingested Dairy at school and had an anaphylactic reaction. Let me tell you in simple terms what this means: almost instantly, his blood pressure began to drop, his airways began to close, he struggled to breathe, his eyes and face began to swell. Luckily, epinephrine was promptly administered and Zachary recovered.

I wish I could say this only happened once and that since then we've been able to avoid his allergens. But I can't.

Since then, Zachary has had multiple anaphylactic reactions, each one landing us in the Emergency Room not knowing whether he would live or die and paralyzing me with overwhelming fear and anxiety.

Just this last summer, Zachary now 10-years-old, was off to summer camp. We did everything we are supposed to do as parents of a child with life-threatening food allergies. We met with the camp directors. We provided camp staff with detailed, written instructions around his dietary limitations and needs. We supplied substitute foods and epinephrine auto injectors. None of that mattered though because due to a simple oversight, pure human error, Zachary was given the wrong food one afternoon, sending him into his worst anaphylactic episode to date. The situation was so dire we thought the unthinkable: his food allergies were going to cost him his life. We would lose our son to something that should be preventable.

While most parents who send their child to camp or school worry about homesickness or scrapes on the playground, our reality is different. Our greatest fear is that he will be accidentally exposed to sesame or one of his other allergens and not come home at all.

This is our reality - every single day.

As I mentioned, 32 million Americans have food allergies – with a rise of nearly 400% in the number of hospitalizations for food allergies from just 2007 to 2016. 1 in 13 children have a life-threatening food allergy – that is roughly two children in every classroom. The trend is frightening. Imagine how many people in the next generation could be at risk. We need to do more.

Today, sesame remains the most common allergen that is NOT required to be written on food labels and is often hidden on labels as “Spices” or “Natural Flavors.” How are parents, schools, and other care takers supposed to keep children like Zachary safe if companies aren’t even required to label for their allergens? Nearly 1.5 million Americans are allergic to sesame like Zachary. When you consider this, combined with the rapid increase in overall food allergies – it’s clear we MUST TAKE ACTION NOW.

We are thankful for organizations like FARE who work every day to advocate on behalf of the food allergy community and Congresswoman Matsui for introducing this important legislation.

H.R. 2117 stands to drastically improve our day-to-day lives and change our reality. If passed, it will require the federal government to gather comprehensive information about who has food allergies, the kinds of food allergies they have, and what types of food allergies occur most often. Further, it will update allergen labeling laws to include sesame and it would require labeling standards for additional allergens as new scientific evidence emerges.

We need this. For me. For my family. And for families all over the country, in each of your states and districts.

NOW IS THE TIME TO PASS the FASTER Act.

Thank you.