

Statement of Devin & Veronica Eckhardt  
Parents of Connor Eckhardt  
Founders of The Connor Project Foundation  
Before the  
House Judiciary Committee  
United States Senate  
May 17, 2016

**Stats:**

90	more than 90 countries have reported instances of New Psychoactive Substances (NPSs) in their country
11	percent of high school seniors in US that have tried or use NPSs
229	percent increase in phone calls to poison control centers across the US related to the use of synthetic drugs in the first half of 2015
9,000+	calls to poison centers in 2015 related to NPSs
300+	NPS compounds encountered by law enforcement in the US since 2009
277	people treated in Austin TX in for NPSs in June 2015
48,000	ED visits related to NPSs in 2011
15,796	ED visits of patients age 12-20 for NPSs in 2011
1	every single life matters... for every one person we help... it will make a difference to them, my son represents one of those statistical numbers
672	days since I last held my son; since his death

Good morning, Judiciary Subcommittee Members. My name is Devin Eckhardt and I am joined by my wife Veronica, and for very personal reasons we chose to join you here today as you dedicate some time to better understanding the threat and issues surrounding New Psychoactive Substances (sometimes referred to as synthetic designer drugs), the epidemic rate at which they are spreading, the severity of their destructive effects both within the USA and globally, the deadly impact they are having upon countries, our communities and our families.

We sincerely appreciate the opportunity to join you for this critically important conversation and it is our sincere hope and prayer that each of you will leverage your **individual** and



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**collective power** to do more than simply discuss this issue, but rather, that you will choose to take action and make the changes necessary to eradicate these deadly poisons and their proliferation.

We want you to stop and reflect for a moment... how many of you have children of your own? Young children or grown, or perhaps grandchildren? Think about your family, your children, those who are deeply important to you.

We too have children. What we have learned after traveling around the country, around the world and spending time in many different countries, cultures and with many different nationalities is this... parents deeply love their children. They want the best for them and they are willing to do whatever it takes to care for their children and for their children's future. I'd be willing to bet that is true of each of you, and I know that is true for us.

You may be wondering about the numbers stated when I first started to speak... those are not just numbers. They represent the lives of people, children young and old who have been negatively impacted by NPSs.

## REVIEW THE STATS ABOVE AGAIN

Sadly, my wife Veronica, our family and I tragically know all too well the devastating impact of these synthetic drugs.

In July of 2014, our 19 year old son Connor was a bright, vibrant young man with a full life ahead of him. He really was what most would have called the "All-American" young man. He was working, gaining promotions, preparing to go back to college, he loved music, surfing, the outdoors and was loved and adored by his many friends... and of course, he loved his family and was deeply loved by his sisters, his mother and by me, his father.

Here is a photo of our family – that's me, my wife Veronica, Connor, and our daughters Sabrina and little Ashnika who we adopted from Ethiopia. This was taken on the 5th of July 2014. This was the last time we'd be together like this as a family.

8 days later, Connor was with a new friend and made the seemingly innocent decision to try something called spice (an NPS)... and the result was this (photo). After many days in the hospital, our son was ultimately declared brain dead. Connor died July 16, 2014 after one smoke of spice.

At the time when this happened we, and obviously Connor, had never heard of the dangers of synthetic drugs or the proliferation of these deadly NPSs.



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We made the decision while still in the hospital with Connor to share our story publicly, to be painfully transparent, raw and naked with our tragedy before a watching world with the hopes that perhaps it might change one person's life and spare them and their family the horrific circumstances that we were facing and that we now live with each day.

Since the death of our son 672 days ago, we have met far too many parents who have also lost their children to synthetic drugs like Spice, and through our outreach, speaking and education efforts over these past 672 days, we have literally communicated with hundreds of thousands of people throughout the United States and around the world who have lost loved ones or had their lives destroyed by synthetic drugs.

Unfortunately, **what happened to Connor is not unique**. Far too many people have suffered irreparable harm, including death, as a result of trying or using NPSs. However, **what is unique about Connor's story** is how it has received an overwhelming global outcry in response to what we've shared publicly through social media, news, TV and radio broadcasts around the world. His story has cut through racial, socio-economic, geographic, and religious barriers typically encountered. What we know is that NPSs are affecting everyone, everywhere.

Thousands of young people are devastated each year with horrific side effects, including death, from synthetic drugs and the numbers continue to grow. Something must be done. Literally tens of millions of people around the world have read and shared our Facebook page since our tragedy struck. They tell us about how spice has taken hold of their lives, or lives of people they love; the pain and sorrow when someone ends up in a vegetative state or worse because of synthetic drug use; the choice to become sober and not to use any type of drugs; the hope they feel when they see the impact our story has had on their children.

What we have found out about synthetic drugs and their impact on our youth has shocked and dismayed us. It really is the deadliest and ugliest secret. We are losing a generation. We must do all we can to make sure synthetic drugs are eradicated. Our desire is that our kids, young adults and those that love them become educated about the significant dangers associated with synthetic drugs and have the tools necessary to resist this deceptively marketed seductive killer.

We have learned that Connor's story is a catalyst for change. The more we spread it, the more people reach out to us and tell us of their decision to change, to stop using, to never use and to help their friends. We may not be able to stop those using NPSs from exploiting and victimizing our children, but we can help our youth choose life and a future. We invite you to join us and help our youth live into the promise of a future free from synthetic drugs.



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We have had the opportunity to reach literally millions of people on this subject. We have been interviewed by most of the major news and media outlets including: The Today Show, FOX News, ABC, NBC, CBS, twice on BBC News, Daily Mail and of course Facebook.

Our individual unique Facebook posts have reached millions at a time with one post even reaching over 37 million people globally. We've heard from numerous countries around the world... the USA of course, Canada, countries throughout South America and across Africa, Europe, frequently from the UK, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Russia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand... and many more.

We have had the opportunity to speak in schools, churches, youth groups, youth camps, community parent meetings... we've worked with and spoken to senators, legislators, many government officials, law enforcement officials... we even met with one of Lords from the House of Lords on this subject while we were in the UK this past summer.

We've worked with numerous organizations in an effort to educate and increase awareness on the dangers of synthetic drugs and have worked to change laws so that these poisons are removed from our streets, our stores, and our communities.

Something must be done, the problem is getting worse. This past November 2015 - IN ONE DAY ALONE - 13 people ranging from ages 13-45 were taken to San Diego emergency rooms due to the use of synthetic drugs. In May 2014, 15 people ended up at the emergency room due to NPSs. And then right in the city where I live, Sacramento CA, the week of March 21<sup>st</sup> we learned of 28 people who "over dosed" and 9 who died from synthetic fentanyl... and those numbers have continued to increase.

This is happening in towns, cities and countries all across the globe.

Poison control centers across the USA saw a 229% increase in phone calls related to the use of synthetic drugs in just the first half of 2015. The issue and problem of synthetic drugs is growing and something must be done, now.

The DEA here in the USA reports that hundreds of new synthetic drug compounds have appeared on the streets in the last few years, sometimes they experience as much as a new drug per week. We have spoken to emergency room doctors and nurses who have told us that they have seen an alarming increase in patients presenting with synthetic drug related symptoms – and because these drugs do not show up in a typical drug and alcohol test, medical professionals often just don't know what substances and chemical effects they are dealing with.



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There have been various legislative efforts to address the problem of NPSs by passing laws against the chemicals contained in them. And while these efforts are good, the problem is that the illicit drug manufacturers are constantly working and changing the formulas, developing new chemical derivatives & variants in order to evade the laws... and frankly they are working faster than we are; always seeming to stay a few steps ahead of the law.

Additionally, most of the legislative efforts are simply inadequate deterrents. I recognize that the larger issue of drugs, addiction, substance abuse which surround the specific issue of NPSs is complex and is not easily resolved through a new law. However, I believe that broader, stricter laws with more severe consequences are needed in order to deter the growing proliferation of NPSs across our country.

We need to collaboratively address the issue of NPSs and it needs to be done now. We need specific laws addressing the issues with consequences that will deter the sale, distribution and possession of any and all NPSs that are killing and permanently damaging our youth and adults.

When this Congressional gathering has ended and you return home... you will return to your families, to your children. When we return home... we return to our family that has been **forever changed** because of the death of our beloved son as a result of NPSs.

As long as the people around the world pushing these drugs into our communities know that there is little or no consequence for their actions, and they DO know this, we will continue to see the spread of NPSs and the terrible harm they are bringing to our families, our youth and our communities.

You have the power to do something to change this. You are in positions of influence and leadership. We are pleading with you to please take action. Don't just talk about and debate the issues. Bring about change that will get these substances out of our communities and will deal appropriately with those behind the manufacturing and distribution of NPSs globally.

We want to thank you for your time and consideration on this important issue. We are available if any of you have questions or would like to talk further.

Sincerely,  
Devin and Veronica Eckhardt  
Founders, The Connor Project Foundation