



## **TESTIMONY OF**

**Arriana Gross,**

**National Youth Advisory Board Member, Sandy Hook Promise Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) Promise Club**

**HEARING ON JUNE 30, 2020**

**"High Anxiety and Stress: Legislation to Improve Mental Health During Crisis"**

**Subcommittee on Health  
Committee on Energy and Commerce  
United States House of Representatives**

Good morning, and thank you to the Subcommittee Chairwoman, Ranking Member, and all the Members of the Subcommittee on Health for having me here today.

My name is Arriana Gross, and I am a 15-year-old rising junior at Newton High School in Covington, Georgia. I am in my second year serving as one of only ten youth advisory board members on Sandy Hook Promise's Students Against Violence Everywhere, also known as SAVE, Promise Clubs. SAVE Promise Clubs were formed in 1989 after the death of a 17-year-old named Alex Orange who died from gun violence. Today there are over 3,500 Clubs across the nation in all 50 states.

The SAVE Promise Club in my community is called Jared's Heart of Success, and they mentor youth and empower us to protect our friends, schools, and communities from all forms of violence, including suicide. We do this by promoting student mental health and wellness, including training students to recognize warning signs of violence and how to seek help.

For example, in response to the fighting at our school, we created an anti-bullying project where we had students write positive messages about themselves and each other and put them on the walls around the school. It provided an opportunity to re-frame students' thinking about themselves and their peers. Because of COVID, our SAVE Club is now holding weekly calls with the primary focus of supporting the mental health of our students. We have opened this up to the community at large because everyone needs help.

As a student, I know that mental health and well-being are more important now than ever before. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for students, and for Black boys, the rates are on the rise. However, unlike other tragedies that are accidents, this one is preventable. 70% of students who die by suicide will show a warning sign or tell a friend. COVID is only making this worse. For some students, home isn't the safest place, and with no place to go and no one to go to from our schools, it has become very stressful, lonely, and even dangerous for some students.

I have seen firsthand the need for support for student mental health. In our school, a year doesn't go by without a student dying by suicide. I've even known of elementary kids who died by suicide. I am concerned that youth suicide has become so common that my school community and our nation is stuck



in a pattern of mourning and accepting these deaths as something that is normal, instead of seeing them as preventable and tragic.

As students, we see everything—in class, in the neighborhood, and on social media. We're on social media sites that you probably haven't even heard of. We see way more than our parents, teachers, and other adults. But we aren't given the tools to help our friends struggling with mental health or thinking about suicide. We just need those tools to know how to help in order to save lives. Trust me, we've seen and been through way more than you realize, and we can and want to help.

Our SAVE Promise Club teaches us how to spot a friend who might be struggling, reach out and help, and talk to a trusted adult. I recently had a friend who was struggling and didn't feel comfortable talking to her parents or a teacher. However, she was only comfortable talking to me. Through my experience with SAVE, I knew how to have the conversation with her and make sure she was supported.

The pandemic has shown that mental health challenges go beyond the school walls. As part of the Black community in the South, there is a lot of stigma to saying you may have mental health issues. Once you do say it, finding and affording that care can be challenging. When I needed to see a therapist, I had to travel two hours from my home to talk to someone! This shouldn't be the case, and all youth should be able to get help at school. Unfortunately, where I go to school, the counselors are only there to support academics and are not qualified mental health professionals. Because of that, many students don't have someone they can openly talk to about how they're feeling or what they're struggling with emotionally. We need counselors for both our minds and our academics.

We need your help in creating a system of support for us in our schools. Allow us to be the eyes and the ears of our peers. Give us the tools and trainings we need to know when our friends or ourselves may be struggling so that we can speak up and prevent suicides. And once we do speak up, give us mental health professionals in our schools to go to when we are struggling.

I ask the Committee to vote in favor of the bipartisan STANDUP Act of 2020, H.R. 7293, and the Mental Health Services for Students Act, H.R. 1109. These bills will help support student mental wellness by encouraging more schools to adopt policies to train students on suicide prevention and provide more mental health professionals in schools.

The effects of COVID on our mental health are happening in our homes now, whether we talk about it or not. You have the power to help, and I ask that you act now to prevent another one of my friends from dying by suicide. Thank you.