

**Written Testimony of The Defensive Line's Co-Founder S. Chris Thomas. On behalf of Co-Founder's Martha & Solomon Thomas and Executive Director Rei Horst.**

Subcommittee Chair Diana DeGette Ranking Member Griffith, and members of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, thank you for the opportunity to testify today Thursday, February 17<sup>th</sup> at this hybrid hearing entitled, "Americans in Need: Responding to the National Mental Health Crisis."

My name is Chris Thomas. I am the son of high school dropouts and the first in my family to attend and graduate from college. I'm here today as a survivor of the last 60 years. I am a survivor of sexual and racial abuse as well as numerous childhood Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) like violence, poverty and abuse. Unfortunately, along with my wife of 37 years Martha and my son Solomon, I am also a suicide loss survivor of my daughter.

In the face of this most profound loss, the most treacherous grief, my wife Martha - a middle school teacher with decades of experience, my son Solomon who is in his sixth year of playing in the NFL, and my niece Rei who possess extensive social work experience and a master's degree in public policy are speaking out today and every day about how we live. Losing our Ella to suicide at the age of 24 has not only changed our lives in immeasurable ways, but it has pushed our lives into new meaning, new mission, new purpose. We have built an organization that is focused on **five components** of our new purpose in life:

1. Reduce stigma and raise awareness of mental health and suicide.
2. Create modes of authentic connection between people and resources in a variety of settings.
3. Teach others how to meaningfully care for their own mental health.
4. Advocate for improvement of policies and systems that keep people sick.
5. Tell Ella's story so others can tell their own.

We are turning pain into purpose - or as a minister once shared: whenever life hands you a mess, use one's perseverance and passion to create a message. Our purpose today is The Defensive Line with the vision of a world where no young person of color dies by suicide - the second leading cause of death for young people under the age of 24.

For young people of color, suicide rates continue to rise and be a leading cause of death. Suicide is the leading cause of death for Asian Americans 15-24.<sup>1</sup> There were *double digit* increases in suicide rates for Black Americans between ages of 15-34 and for Hispanics between ages of 25-

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<sup>1</sup> *Kaiser Health News*, 2021

34.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous youth continue to die by suicide at *three times* the rate of any other racial or ethnic group.<sup>3</sup>

For us, these numbers are a framework for why we focus on improving resource connection for youth of color. Ella is but one in an endless list of young people who died this way. We didn't call this "Ella's Story" because suicide is bigger than Ella. This is an epidemic of youth suicide. It takes a team to tackle this crisis.

TDL seeks to make a difference by pursuing our primary goals:

1. Reducing deaths by suicide
2. Reducing the stigma by sharing vulnerably & increasing authentic connections
3. Increasing connections to mental health services in schools and in communities with majority students of color
4. Broadening support for schools & teams in their role in preventing suicide
5. Increasing the use of best-practices for schools to approach prevention holistically

We pursue this work through two primary programs: **Storytelling and Advocacy** and **Suicide Prevention Workshops**.

### **Storytelling and Advocacy**

Reducing the stigma of mental health, mental illness, and suicide can only come by discussing these challenges and what they look like in real people. We believe by sharing our story publicly, we give these things faces, personalities, relatability. We began this work by sharing openly and vulnerably, as I am today, what the experience of suicide loss has been like and the impact it has had on us as individuals and as a family unit.

We have shared our story in private circles all the way to venues like CNN, NFL360, ESPN, and dozens of other mental health symposiums and panels. We most recently were featured as keynote speakers for the Mental Health America of Greater Dallas annual conference, sharing how we've turned our pain into purpose.

### **Suicide Prevention Workshops**

Our suicide prevention workshop aims to create solutions and enhance resource connections and referrals for youth. We train educators and coaches who have direct connection to young people every single day. We believe teachers and coaches play an essential role in young people's lives and have a unique opportunity to see signs of suicide risk or mental health challenge before it gets to a point of crisis. Schools have resources for students, and we want to help everyone

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<sup>2</sup> Center for Disease Control

<sup>3</sup> Center for Disease Control

understand how they can play a role in supporting young people in need of mental health support.

We see teachers as a bridge between the student in crisis and the resources available to help save their lives and move towards mental wellness. We aim to fine tune teachers' hearing for warning signs of suicide and to help them create supportive environments for students to speak more openly about their mental health. We believe by arming teachers with the appropriate language and the confidence to use it we can make a massive dent in preventing suicides long before they reach a crisis state.

Our workshops also focus on ways teachers may be creating unsupportive environments for some students through their own implicit bias by overlooking students of color's mental health needs because they may look different. Students of color, particularly Black and Hispanic students, are disproportionately suspended and disproportionately receive their first mental health service through the justice system.<sup>4</sup> This is a massive barrier to mental health resources within the school - how students of different backgrounds present mental health crises and receive care for it. We want to address this directly in our workshops.

We created a framework to lead this discussion-based workshop and help educators think about this. At the end of the workshop, every participant has a Plan of Action for what to do in a suicide or mental health crisis. We call this framework D-LINES for a Mentally Healthy Environment:

**Don't ignore your gut** - More often than not, a major indicator of a mental health crisis is a change in behavior. If you're around someone often, you tend to recognize if something feels "off," or if something shifts. Trust your instincts if something feels off or wrong. Little signs can be big indicators of something going on inside. There's no downside to paying more attention and asking questions. There is a potential downside to not paying attention.

**Listen for signs of suicide** - Signs of suicide risk can look as different as different as the people who experience them, and there is no single cause for suicidal thoughts. However, there are typical indicators we can look to that are serious indicators that point to. We love this graphic from our friends at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. These are important indicators to reach out to someone and talk to them directly about your concern and be a thoughtful, active listener.

**Interact** - Recognizing warning signs is an important step to supporting people in a mental health crisis. But these signs share a lot in common with other mental health conditions and can go unnoticed or assumed to be less serious. When we hear or see

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Education Suspension Data 2012

warning sign behaviors in others, it is essential that we find a way to approach that person with genuine care, concern, and an open ear and mind. Enact good, engaging listening skills.

**Name your concern** - When interacting with the person you're concerned about, it can help to be specific about what exactly you're noticing that's prompting your conversation. You can try to say something like, "*I noticed you seem really withdrawn lately, which makes me a little worried. Is everything ok?*" Identifying what you're noticing is helpful in guiding the conversation and giving that person something to talk about. No one "owes" you an explanation, so be mindful to be courteous and sensitive. However, in a trusting relationship and a safe environment, this can be helpful to generate an open dialogue, instead of more simply asking, "How are you?"

**Evidence your concern** - Particularly for teachers, but as a parent, as a friend, consider taking note of what you're noticing in someone you're concerned about. How have you noticed things change in recent days, weeks, months? Not to build an argument, but to actively notice someone's well-being shift as a practice of mindful awareness.

**Supportive environment** - At the end of the day, the most essential need for someone to open up to you is **trust**. Trust takes time and consistency to build. Make it well known that you are a safe person to talk to. Talk more openly about mental health in relevant conversations where you see fit. Demonstrate consistently that you care about a person outside of the benefit they bring to you. Show them you are open to talking and listening by being curious about their lives. Ask questions that aren't related to mental health. Have integrity with your word. Speak up when you see someone hurting or someone being harmed.

While we're still a very young organization, our early workshops have shown incredibly promising results that we believe demonstrate the extraordinary potential of having these conversations with educators. Notably, educators demonstrated a near 40% increase in their comfort levels intervening in a mental health crisis and showed a 30% increase in a plan of action for suicidal intervention.

### **About Chris Thomas - My Why**

Prior to my role as Co-Founder and CEO of The Defensive Line, I spent over three decades in the consumer product goods industry working at an executive level for companies like Procter & Gamble, Alberto Culver, and Pepsico. Now, along with my wife Martha, my son Solomon and my niece Rei, I lead The Defensive Line (TDL). Our mission is to end the epidemic of youth suicide, especially for young people of color, by transforming the way we communicate and connect about mental health. TDL was established in May of 2021. Its genesis centers around the death - the impulsive suicide - of my daughter Ella Elizabeth Thomas.

Ella was born on April 19, 1993. She was our first-born child and Solomon's big sister. From day one she was Solomon's protector. She was Solomon's critic, adviser, concierge, and best friend. She had a big heart for her little brother and for all others. Early on in his life Solomon was frustrated and couldn't sleep. Ella would come over to him to sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

Ella was born with a huge personality. She had determination, wit and feistiness, and she had them from the womb. But Ella had something unique. She was never just another person in the room. Ella had that rare quality that we call presence. It is often called charisma as well, but it is always associated with leadership. And Ella was a leader. She corralled people. She put them on a track. In all those 24 years it was always clear when Ella was in the room. It's not that she didn't relax or let others participate. Rather, whenever she was in a room, the room changed.

Ella was an excellent athlete. She was an awesome swimmer and gifted basketball player. Ella also suffered from anxiety and ADHD. When she went off to college at the University of Arkansas and she was sexually abused. Specifically - she was gang raped. In hindsight this proved to be the beginning of the end for Ella.

She gave until she could give no more. On the day Ella took her own life, a police officer handed my wife her phone to show the last text that she sent before she died. Two of her friends were struggling with depression. She was helping them save their own lives.

Ella and Solomon were often the only kids of color in their classroom and on their teams. Ella often received comments like "you look good for being a black girl." There were several times when she was pulled over and was grilled and persecuted by the police, while her white friends were allowed to go free. While at the University of Arkansas there were several times when she would be called the N-word at grocery stores, gas stations, or when she was a hostess at a restaurant. It also pains me that Ella's gang rape happened at a white fraternity.

After losing Ella to suicide my family and I had to take a crash course on what we should have known prior to losing her to understand how suicide can be preventable. There are signs a person experiencing suicidal crisis may show, such as giving away prized possessions. About a week before Ella took her life, she came to me and said: "Dad, you can take care of my dog Mickey." Mickey was Ella's whole life. She loved her rescue dog more than me. Had I known this warning sign I would have acted differently.

I experienced frustration, anger, guilt, and shame after losing Ella. I also experienced the loss of my job and my health. Depression set in and I tried to solve my problems in the bottom of a bottle. After therapy and counseling I came to the realization that sobriety was an important part of my self-care. Sobriety is still an important part of my recovery. So, too, is my heart-work at The Defensive Line. Though I still ask - how can this be?

It is my commitment to Ella and others like Ella who are suffering. As we speak Thursday, February 17, 2022, there will be 17 young people under the age of 24 that will die by suicide. That equates to 119 young people under the age of 24 this week - only slightly fewer people than a Boeing 737 holds. I must believe that if a plane went down every week in America, Congress would work together to create immediate solutions to address the issue.

### **Solutions:**

We started this work because we felt compelled to speak when so many were silent. The Defensive Line is an answer to the problem of inability to access mental health resources. Our suicide prevention workshops create an avenue to ensure every single adult knows how to talk to a young person in a mental health crisis. To solve the crisis of youth suicide, everyone needs to understand what to look for and how to talk about it. We believe there are many ways to do that. We believe we're on a path to doing that.

We've been so fortunate to receive unbelievable support from partnering organizations in this fight, like Providence Health, Born this Way Foundation, Mental Health America, and most especially American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP). As a national board member for AFSP, I provide strategic input on direction, fundraising, and research and work closely on making sure that there is programming for our youth of color. I play a key role to ensure there is collaboration with the local chapters and their affiliates and professional teams like the 49ers, Cowboys, and Raiders. I also work to identify corporations where we can collaborate and work together to increase resources and funding to in our attempt to reduce suicide by 20% by 2025.

We see this all as essential work in reducing barriers to mental health resources for all students, including students of color. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said it best, *"At some point we need to stop pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in."*

We believe everyone has a role to play in ending suicide epidemic. Not everyone can be a clinician, nor should they be, but everyone can have a better understanding of the warning signs to look for and know to speak up earlier to have hard conversations. This is all about access to resources. If people don't know when someone needs help, how can they help them get help?

We are new in this field, but we know we need unconditional bipartisan support. We know the conversation we're having is so desperately needed. People are so afraid to talk about this, and if we can't even talk about it, how will we ever solve the problem? How will we ever prevent it?

We, like you, believe that addressing challenges to prevention, care, and service access are essential in the work to turning the suicide trends upside down. We believe our work at The Defensive Line is a direct and approachable answer to these problems on many levels. However,

there are challenges to addressing those barriers, like vast differences in state education mandates and a lack of priority on awareness and public education.

We ask the committee to consider the following solutions in their conversations of mental health, suicide prevention, and the health and well-being of young people - our future - of this great country.

- 1. Mandate, standardize, and fund K-12 suicide prevention curriculum with a mandated annual certification for educators.**

There is no standardized suicide prevention curriculum across districts, counties, or states. This leads to extreme inconsistencies in educators' knowledge and ability to understand the suicide warning signs and how they can help, which leaves a massive gap in prevention. While there may be mandates that require this education to exist, there are vast differences in what those mandates require, expect, and teach. In some states like Texas, a simple 5-minute video can satisfy state requirements. This will not do in a true pursuit of suicide prevention work.

In the two states we're beginning our work in, there are serious barriers to accessing care. Texas ranks 44th and Nevada 51st, home to some of the largest school districts in the country.<sup>5</sup> They have also seen increases in suicide rates among youth. Without thoughtful consistency in how every single educator is trained in suicide prevention, there aren't opportunities for every student to receive access to the care they need.

Educators have consistent exposure to young people and their ability and availability to notice mental health problems as they arise are key to moving the needle on suicide prevention nationally. Their close connection and access to resources in the school makes them great people to invest in educating.

- 2. Develop awareness and legislative platforms that generates public discussion, funding, normalizing, and destigmatizing of mental health crisis and suicide.**

As we continue to say repeatedly, we can't fix this problem if we can't even talk about it. Reducing stigma, creating more opportunity for access to resources demands that we work on a national scale towards normalizing conversations about mental health and suicide. We know this can't fall on legislative bodies alone. We know this has to be an all-encompassing effort amongst legislators, faith-based groups, celebrities, community organizations, survivors of loss, educators, and everyday people.

Personal stories and sharing personal experiences, as we have, help reduce stigma by putting faces and experiences to the sterile clinical terms of mental illness and trauma.

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<sup>5</sup> The State of Mental Health in America, 2022, Mental Health America

While this takes all of us, the leadership and investment of this committee and Congress can demonstrate its high priority and create an opportunity to expand this awareness and destigmatizing effort across groups.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving was paramount in several critical legislative initiatives that created safer driving for all and reduced drunk driving deaths significantly. We know this was driven by external influences, but think Congress has an opportunity to look to that model to share resources, stories, generate conversations, and normalize these topics.

At present, TDL is working in partnership with AFSP to pursue awareness initiatives like the new 988 crisis number that will be available. We know there has been investment in this initiative and feel this can be a model for pursuing more mental health and suicide prevention conversations nationally and sustainably.

Awareness is about activating communities to take care of themselves. Communities so often know the best way to take care of those they love. Sometimes, though, the way forward in doing that means learning new things. Mental illness, especially in communities of color, has been looked on as weakness, something to be prayed away. With compassion and smart messaging, awareness campaigns can support movement away from this thinking to new thinking that is empowering and generates new community-based initiatives.

Awareness is a key component of de-stigmatization. Destigmatizing matters because when stigma is not present, people can talk about what's hard. When it is present, people are afraid to say what hurts & ask for help. We want people to be able to say it all.

It is far from easy to talk about our loss every day. It is bittersweet each time I speak about Ella and our story. The hardest part is the "would have, could have, regret, anger, frustration" of losing her to such a preventable death; of not being there for her. Of imagining the suffering she experienced because she felt like a burden and her pain level was too great for her to bear. I get through it all because she is standing on my shoulders cheering me on to make a difference, to save lives, to create a positive and lasting change.

It is impossible to fathom how someone with so much presence, personality, leadership, beauty and wit, someone so kind and loving, so fearless, who never met a dog she didn't want to rescue, who loved holding children in her arms and had so much yet ahead of her, could leave us so suddenly and so soon. So many parents will struggle to understand with us forever.

We know how much speaking out, awareness, and reducing stigma is not only needed, but also essential to stopping the upward trends of suicide deaths and creating more access to mental health resources. We believe the only path out of this epidemic of youth suicide is for all of us to

be part of the solution. We called ourselves The Defensive Line to pay homage to the imagery of strength, of togetherness, of unifying to protect each other.

We started The Defensive Line because we were finding a way to come home to ourselves, a journey we will walk for all our lives. We know we're on the right path, most eloquently put by Nayyirah Waheed, *"You will find your way. It is in the same place as your love."*

Our love is with Ella forever. We will work to ensure what happened to Ella doesn't happen to others, but we can't do it alone. We hope you'll join us in this defensive line to protect, defend, and ensure the health and wellness of the brilliant future of our young people.

Thank you for this extraordinary honor. Ella would be so proud.