

Testimon

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Thank you Mr Chairman, Members of the Committee, and Representative Fields:

I'm Hanni Raley, Director of Systems Advocacy with The Arc of Aurora, representing families and individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I ask you for your support of this HB 1131 with amendment adding disability.

Cyberbullying is a national epidemic. It's nameless, faceless, isolating, and proliferative: it's where online harassment creeps into schools and the communities. I speak today about its impact on youths with disabilities who are often the least likely to identify danger, but the most likely to be targeted by it.

Statistically people with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience high rates of victimization. Although statistics are more than numbers on a page, they represent people with names, people like Emily.

I've changed her name to preserve her anonymity. Also, I offer the Committee a copy of Emily's story, which includes some of the graphic language used by those who traumatized her. For the sake of the audience, I'll be bleeping out language unfit for others.

Emily was a lovely petite 15 year old girl with learning disabilities living with her single father. She and her father contacted The Arc of Aurora for help. Emily had a small voice and was hard to hear but began telling a story of how she had been bullied and was now being expelled.

Emily wanted to be liked by her peers, though she didn't have any real friends to hang out with, she had literally hundreds of Facebook friends. Emily spent hours on the social media site to fit in. She was willing to be social friends with a group of high school girls who targeted her by calling her chicken, slut, retard- even pushing her in the hallways and challenging her to fight. She feared not having "friends" more than she feared their "friendship".

One day these "friends" told Emily they would spread rumors about her if she didn't meet them after school in the vacant lot by the High School. At 2:30, she walked reluctantly to the lot and found 10 or more teenaged girls waiting there with a video camera, telling her to fight. They called her a chicken, made chicken noises, and baited her. She repeatedly said no and moved away from the crowd the best she could. She was pushed into a girl and that's when the fists flew. Emily tried to defend herself, while the other larger and stronger girl laughed as she repeatedly punched Emily's face, holding her to the ground and pulling her hair.

Briefly the gang of girls let Emily up and laughed at her while the camera panned into just her face, now bruised and swollen with tear streaming down her cheeks. She tried to be brave, wiped her tears, and pulled her hair back as she was shoved to the ground again, this time the stronger girl kicking Emily in the head and punching her on the way down.

While the fight was ultimately broken up by a neighbor, the video was posted to YouTube and linked to each offending girl's Facebook account immediately after the incident. It went viral, with hundreds of hits within the first few hours.

When Emily went to school the next day, everyone was whispering and snickering. They were saying she was a pussy, got her ass beat, and used any name they could think of to degrade her further. She couldn't concentrate in class. They threw paper and gum at her head and mocked her when she flinched. In the hallways people ran into her, shoved her into corners, and tripped her when she tried to go up the stairs. Everyone was laughing. Everybody knew.

Emily started to skip class and to leave school. Even previously loved classes like choir and theater, she no longer attended. Her dad was worried and made her stop using Facebook. He called the school and pleaded with them to intervene, but they refused as it was just kids being kids. Emily and her father were at a loss of what to do.

Finally things came to a head when Emily was late to class, and tripped and fell near a group of boys. The boys laughed and mocked her referencing that they had seen the video. They then opened an empty locker and though she resisted, they picked up her small frame and forced her into the dark locker. They held her there for what seemed like hours and she thought she was going to die. She screamed, kicked and fought her way out of the tight space and as the locker door opened, tears streaming down her face, she had her fists ready and began to swing and scream and chase the boys. Rounding the corner was a Dean and Resource officer who had heard the uproar.... Finally, she thought! They were there to help her!

Sadly, the adults didn't know the story and saw her chasing the boys, fists flailing. She was ticketed and suspended for 10 days. Her father, frustrated and angry, addressed this with the school, saying that she had been targeted for weeks, had been jumped, and that no one from the school would intervene. He showed the YouTube video as evidence. Instead of being helped she was ticketed again by the School's Resource Officer for fighting and was referred for expulsion.

The Arc of Aurora was able to assist Emily and her father in navigating the system. Emily needed a lot of support regarding her school program, and she especially did not need to be further victimized or harassed by her peers, school, or courts.

Ultimately, Emily's charges were dismissed and expulsion was no longer on the table. Emily's life should have returned to normal, except normal wasn't normal anymore because the place Emily should have felt safe, became a place of fear and shame. People, who should have cared and protected her, weren't able to prevent further harassment. The same consequences that applied to the aggressors also applied to the victim. And while the bullies had plenty of peer support, Emily was alone... again.

Emily continues to struggle to find positive influences, she doesn't know who to trust, and she continues to put herself in situations just to be liked.

While Emily is only one of the individuals The Arc of Aurora serves, her story represents many people with disabilities who are quietly suffering due to online harassment and bullying.

The Arc of Aurora supports House bill 14-1131 and the amendment to add disabilities. We further ask for your kind consideration for future legislation that addresses this epidemic as impacts adults with disabilities.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to entertain any questions.