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Congress Urged to Support Mental Health Checkups for Teens

Pediatricians, Mother of the Late Garrett Lee Smith Brief Congress On Teen Suicide Prevention in Primary Care

WASHINGTON – Sharon Smith, the wife of former U.S. Senator Gordon Smith of Oregon, and mother of Garrett Lee Smith, who died by suicide at the age of 21, was joined by physicians treating adolescents in Colorado, Nevada and Ohio at a briefing in Congress today. They urged the national adoption of mental health checkups for all teens to reduce the current rates of teen suicide and school dropout, substance abuse and crime related to undiagnosed mental health problems in youth.

Smith shared the experience of taking her son as a teen to regular doctor's visits where only physical and no regular mental health exams were conducted. The urgency of mental health assessments for all teens was stressed as Smith said "I am convinced that if Garrett received a mental health checkup as a teen, he'd be alive today." The nation's current teen suicide prevention law, the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act, is named for her son.

Dr. John Genrich, a pediatrician in Colorado Springs, offered an overview of the simplicity and efficacy of mental health checkups in primary care. Dr. James McGhee, a pediatrician from Henderson, Nevada, explained his work to expand the use of the annual mental development assessment required by the federal government for all teens who are covered by Medicaid. Dr. Jacqueline Grupp-Phelan of Cincinnati Children's Hospital explained how untreated teen mental health problems can tragically end in suicide and also result in costly admissions to the nation's emergency departments. According to the Centers for Disease Control, each year more than 148,900 teens require medical attention for a suicide attempt.

The briefing was sponsored by CheckUpNow, a coalition comprised of the TeenScreen National Center for Mental Health Checkups, The Jed Foundation, Active Minds, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), Families USA, Mental Health America, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and The Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (SPAN USA).

Laurie Flynn, executive director of the TeenScreen National Center for Mental Health Checkups, chaired the briefing on behalf of the coalition. Flynn called on Congress to take steps necessary to save lives and reform the health care system by making a voluntary five to 10 minute mental health checkup available to every teen in the United States.

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