

Written Testimony in Favor of Bill S2969 and H7858

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From: Christine Beltrami  
Reference: In Favor of Bill S2969 and H7858

Dear Honorable members of the Senate and House and Finance Committee:

My name is Christine Beltrami and I am the sister of the late West Warwick Police Detective, Matthew Beltrami. Last spring I testified in support of installing barriers on our state's bridges and today I am testifying to ensure the progress of this actually happening in a timely manner. There is a lot of bridge discussion here in Rhode Island, unfortunately the discussion revolves around the George Washington bridge and the steadfast approach to fix the issue. I would be lying to you if I didn't express how discouraging and triggering it is to constantly hear about the Washington bridge and practically nothing about the progression of barriers on our bridges. Just hearing the word "bridge" brings forth an onslaught of images and emotions that haunt me daily. Those that lost their loved ones to bridge suicide can relate to this constant retraumatizing.

On April 1st 2021, my brother took his life when he jumped off the Claiborne Pell bridge. We just passed his three year anniversary and I wish I could say the pain his suicide caused my family eased. I wish I could tell you all today that I have run out of tears, that my body does not hurt from the grief I carry with me daily. I wish I could stand in front of you today and tell you I have no idea what it is like to call your parents and tell them their son jumped off the Newport Bridge. The same bridge my father and brother spent many summers fishing and boating. I wish I could stand in front of you all today and tell you my parents have recovered from their son's suicide. Sadly, I cannot. This life is now my new normal.

Matthew Beltrami was a seventeen year veteran of the West Warwick Police Department. Matt was the epitome of the Department's motto that emphasizes courage, sacrifice and devotion. My brother was a successful crisis negotiator, an opioid response liaison and an empathetic mental health trainer for first responders in New England. My brother honorably served his country in the U.S. Air Force. His ultimate successes are his three beautiful children he traumatically left behind. My three children lost their Uncle Matt.

There are so many questions left unanswered. I personally have felt the pain of these unanswered questions because for the past three years I have lived everyday with a rupture in my soul that I pray none of you will ever experience in your lifetime. These past three years have been nothing short of learning how to live and breathe again. The trauma of my brother's suicide has caused a catastrophic emotional and spiritual rift in my family. As I testify in front of you today, I ask that you remember my face, remember my words, remember my brother's name, Matthew Beltrami, when the opportunity presents itself for you, as elected members of this senate, to continue working in a steadfast approach to ensure the safety of Rhode Islanders when

they are at their most desperate time of need.

My brother knew how easy it was to use the Newport Bridge as his way out. Four months prior to his death he confided in me his plan. For four months I fought to keep my brother alive. For four months he received the help he desperately needed at Butler Hospital and then at a residential facility for first responders in New Hampshire. Matt was determined to heal from the PTSD he endured from his seventeen years on the force. Matt was determined to fight for his life; to be the father he knew he always wanted to be.

Unfortunately, the fight was too much for him and the Newport Bridge was too tempting. In a rash decision, how can it not be? Simply drive to the highest span, throw the car in park and climb over the barrier- a barrier about the same height as baby gates that once adorned my house.

As a decorated hostage negotiator, Matt attended many call outs. On April 1st there was a mass call out in the state to find my brother. This would be Matt's last call out, but instead of helping a complete stranger, this call-out was for himself. I still get sick to my stomach thinking about the eye witnesses that saw my brother leap to his death- the construction worker that screamed at him to get down. The drivers and passengers in the other cars. The first responders that combed the water and shoreline looking for one of their own.

For fourteen days my family and Matt's friends walked the Newport shoreline desperately hoping that the ocean would give Matt's body back to us so we could have a proper burial for our family, for his children. Fourteen days we walked, climbed, stumbled and fell, looking for my brother's body. I remember looking under docks hoping I would find him, my father talking to local fishermen, asking them to keep their eyes open for his son's body, all while the Coast Guard scanned the depths of water under the bridge. My father, a retired "Coastie" hired a private helicopter to get a better view of the shoreline we couldn't venture to on foot. Despite our efforts, we never did find Matt.

I will never look at RI waters the same way again. When I bring my three children to the beach, creating those Rhode Island childhood memories- just like the ones my brother and I created as kids every summer at East Matunuck beach, I now stop and take a moment to just close my eyes and breathe in the salty air for I know my brother's essence is with us.

A netting. A protective safety barrier. If we had these installed on our bridges you wouldn't bear witness to a broken sister in front of you today. It is our duty. It is our responsibility to protect the citizens of Rhode Island the same way my brother risked his life to protect all of us. Enough is enough. Please, you all have the power to end the trauma and devastation families will live with for the rest of their lives because of bridge suicide. As lifelong residents, both Matt and I know Rhode Island can do better than this.

Thank you for your time and attention today.

Sincerely,  
Christine Beltrami