

Nick Saban takes rare step, weighs in on bill that will save lives



Alabama football coach Nick Saban talks with the media in Tuscaloosa, Ala. Vasha Hunt/vhunt@al.com (VASHA HUNT)



By **Guest Voices**

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It is rare that Coach Nick Saban weighs in on issues outside of football, but **weigh in he did** on the Jason Flatt Act being considered by the 2016 Alabama Legislature. "This is not a political thing for me, alright? This is all about how can we help our youth have a better opportunity with our help and assistance, that we can see warning signs of something that is very, very preventable."

Jason Flatt was a very average 16-year old. According to his father, Jason was a "B" student who loved sports, especially football, and was active in his youth group. He had many friends, **his father Clark said**, noting that "Jason was the one who was always up for going places and trying new things. From all appearances...my son loved life....But on July 16, 1997, everything changed. My son became a statistic of the 'Silent Epidemic' of youth suicide."

From then to now, Clark Flatt has worked tirelessly through the **Jason Flatt Foundation** to encourage awareness about teenage suicide. The problem is very real here in Alabama, as statistics from the Alabama Department of Public Health shows:

- Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death among Americans of all ages, and the third leading cause of death among young Americans ages 15 to 24.
- America experiences about 100 suicides each day, or one suicide every 14.3 minutes.
- The suicide rate in Alabama is rising: It was 13.3 percent per 100,000 people in 2011, rising to 14.9 per 100,000 people in 2013. In both years, **Alabama's rate was higher than the national average.**

Alabama's suicide rate doubled between 1960 and 2013, and Alabama has had higher rates than the U.S. average each year since 1990. Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in Alabama with 719 of our fellow citizens lost—a figure far higher than homicides (420). Of the 719 deaths, 84 were between 10 and 24 years old. **Nine in 10 of the 719 were males.**

Behind each statistic is a personal tragedy of a life cut short, grieving families and friends. These were some of the facts that influenced University of Alabama Head Football Coach Nick Saban to reach out to Governor Robert Bentley and Tuscaloosa Senator Gerald Allen to introduce and support legislation to establish the Jason Flatt Act. Sixteen states to date, including Mississippi and Arkansas, **have enacted legislation requiring annual suicide awareness prevention education training for their certificated public K-12 school personnel.**

This past Tuesday came the good news that the Jason Flatt Act was unanimously approved by the Alabama Senate Health Committee. As Coach Saban said in an Associated Press story, "We've been very, very fortunate through the years to have very few players suffer issue and problems when we were coaching them," he said. "But we have had some. And it's one of the most devastating things that you have to go through, even as a coach. I never experienced it as a parent. I'm here to help the young people," **Coach Saban continued.**

Suicides are preventable. And once passed, the Jason Flatt Act will build upon existing efforts by caring Alabamians who are already stepping up. For example, Birmingham's Crisis Center has served Central Alabama since 1970. Crisis intervention volunteers who help staff the hotline receive 30 hours of extensive training, and participate in three four-hour sit-in sessions where trainees monitor actual calls received in real time by experienced volunteers. I am proud to personally know caring, committed University of Alabama students who drive from Tuscaloosa to Birmingham for their weekly volunteer shifts.

America as a nation has a long way to go on mental health issues. We won't be where we need to be until the day comes when the stigma associated with obtaining mental health services is the same as treating a broken leg or arm. Clearly, the **State of Alabama will need to adequately fund suicide prevention training for our state's 56,000 certified public school personnel.** That said, Coach Saban is right: Training for suicide prevention is a step in the right direction. As Clark Flatt, Jason's father, said, "It's so important. It will save young lives."

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