

## Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute

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### Roshni Koli —Testimony on House Bill 1537, April 17, 2023

The “**Handle With Care**” program enables law enforcement to easily notify schools if an officer encounters a child at a traumatic scene, so schools have better awareness of events that may affect student behavior and can provide trauma- and grief-informed support, if necessary.

### Trauma and Grief

**Childhood trauma** occurs when kids experience stressful events (such as witnessing domestic violence or experiencing the death of a loved one) that can lead to significant long-term mental health challenges. In fact, some of society’s most significant problems, including domestic violence, community violence and mass shootings, can be traced to unresolved childhood traumas and losses. Approximately **two-thirds of U.S. children will experience at least one traumatic event before age 16**. After experiencing such an event, **children return to class, often carrying a burden of traumatic stress and/or grief that interferes with their learning and behavior**—without the school being aware that anything has happened.

A crucial component of Handle With Care is **responding to bereavement, or the death of a loved one**, which is:

- The most frequently reported type of trauma among clinic-referred youth and the most common form of trauma in the general population;<sup>1</sup>
- The most distressing form of trauma among adults and youth in the U.S.;<sup>2</sup> and
- The strongest predictor of poor school outcomes beyond any other form of trauma.<sup>3</sup>

Bereavement is a significant factor with **justice-involved youth**. Most detained youth report the death of a close loved one, **with over 70% experiencing at least two or more significant**

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<sup>1</sup> Pynoos, R. S., Steinberg, A. M., Layne, C. M., Liang, L.-J., Vivrette, R. L., Briggs, E. C., Kisiel, C., Habib, M., Belin, T. R., & Fairbank, J. A. (2014). Modeling constellations of trauma exposure in the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Core Data Set. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 6(Suppl 1), S9–S17. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037767> And Kaplow, J.B., Saunders, J., Angold, A., & Costello, E.J. (2010).

Psychiatric symptoms in bereaved versus non-bereaved youth and young adults: A longitudinal, epidemiological study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 49, 1145-1154.

<sup>2</sup> Breslau, N., Peterson, E., Poisson, L., Schultz, L., & Lucia, V. (2004). Estimating posttraumatic stress disorder in the community: Lifetime perspective and the impact of typical traumatic events. *Psychological Medicine*, 34(5), 889-898.

<sup>3</sup> Oosterhoff, B., Kaplow, J. B., & Layne, C. (2018). Links between bereavement due to sudden death and academic functioning: Results from a nationally representative sample of adolescents. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 33(3), 372–380.

losses.<sup>4</sup> Detained youth report experiencing their first loss, on average, by age five.<sup>5</sup> Deaths experienced by this population are most frequently characterized as violent losses.<sup>6</sup>

### Handle With Care Prepares Schools to Help Students

Handle With Care provides an elegantly simple but impactful solution:

1. When law enforcement officers (LEOs) encounter a child at a traumatic scene, they send a "Handle With Care" notification to the child's school. LEOs are trained to send a confidential notification with the child's name, age, and a message to "Handle With Care." **No details about the traumatic incident are shared with the school.**
2. The school then notifies the child's teacher, who is trained to recognize signs of trauma, if any occur. The teacher may **only make a referral for mental health services within the existing school support system (including requirements for parental consent).**
3. If additional services are needed, **mental health professionals will provide trauma- and grief-informed care, with parental consent,** to further support the student.

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<sup>4</sup> Lansing, A. E., Plante, W. Y., Beck, A. N., & Ellenberg, M. (2018). Loss and grief among persistently delinquent youth: The contribution of adversity indicators and psychopathy-spectrum traits to broadband internalizing and externalizing psychopathology. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 11(3), 375–389. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-018-0209-9>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.