

Statement for the Record

Of

Eric Stein

Before the

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
The Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

Regarding

Voices of the Vaccine Injured
July 15, 2025

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Honorable Ron Johnson
Senator
Chair, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
328 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Honorable Richard Blumenthal
Senator
Co-Chair, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations
503 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Johnson, Senator Blumenthal and members of the subcommittee,

My name is Eric Stein. I am a flu survivor and the brother of Jessica Stein, who my family lost to the flu when she was four years old. Jessica's death impacted and changed my family, and our mission since that day has been to not let another family experience the same loss.

I have included a photo of Jessica with my testimony. As you can see, she was a bubbly, happy little girl. She loved Barbies and dress-up. She was my big sister, and I adored her.

Jessica and I went to pre-school together. In early January, there was a virus going around school, and Jessica and I along with some other kids and teachers missed a few days, but we both recovered.

We were back to school, playing, going to birthday parties. My mom now reflects back that Jessica did start to need a nap in the afternoons, which was unusual but not really anything they thought much about. But late in January, Jessica seemed to relapse—she had mild fever

and was vomiting. After a couple of calls to our pediatrician, my mom took Jessica to the hospital, because they were worried, she might be dehydrated.

As my mom and dad tell it, things started to happen quickly. Jessica started having trouble breathing, my mom called my dad and he rushed over from home.

A pediatric cardiologist was called in, who said Jessica's heart was slightly enlarged, but beating strongly. But literally just a few minutes later, her heart stopped. The room suddenly filled with doctors, nurses, everyone was doing everything they could to restart Jessica's heart.

But they couldn't. Before my parents even really could comprehend what was happening, Jessica was gone. My parents still—more than 20 years later-- struggle when telling the story. It haunts them to talk about having gone to the hospital with Jessica, and to have to leave without her.

To say that Jessica's death changed them, changed all of us doesn't begin to tell the depth of the story. I now have a younger brother and sister. Johnny and Katie never knew Jessica, but she remains a part of our family. Shortly after Jessica died, my uncle painted a portrait of her that hangs in our home. Her presence is always there. My parents and I, and even my younger brother and sister, talk regularly about what she would be doing if she were still with us today. Each year on Jessica's birthday, and the day she died we go as a family to her gravesite. We bring flowers and talk to her about what's happening in our lives.

My parents' strength is something I will always admire. Though I was too young to realize it at the time, they turned their grief into action. In a time before Facebook and social media, they found other families, who had also lost a child to the flu. They came together and worked, we still work, each day to keep this unnecessary tragedy from happening to another family. When Jessica, and Emily, and Amanda, and Alanna died, the flu vaccine was not recommended for their age group. Our families changed that. They went to the CDC, they testified in front of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, they told their stories. It wasn't easy, but ACIP listened. They understood. They changed the recommendation to where it stands today. that everyone aged 6 months and older should get an annual flu shot.

That is our legacy. That is Jessica's legacy. That's the work that the organization my parents helped found, and that I work for today---Families Fighting Flu is all about. No more unnecessary lives lost, or impacted due to a vaccine preventable disease.

Through my work with Families Fighting Flu, I've had the opportunity to meet families from across the country who have been impacted by the flu. There are far too many—we have stories from almost every state. There's one story I want to share because of how impactful his story is on me. Kaden Stevenson is from Michigan. It was Christmas 2022- and 7-year-old Kaden wanted a bike more than anything. On Christmas morning, Santa delivered. But Kaden

wasn't feeling well and wasn't playing with any of his new toys. After a few days of rest, his mom didn't see any improvement, but Kaden did share he had pain in his leg. He then developed a rash and his mother, Michele struggled to get him dressed to go to the hospital because he was in so much pain.

Things quickly went downhill, and Kaden ended up being airlifted from one hospital to another, to get him the needed care. He was diagnosed with Influenza A and strep throat and the infection had gotten into his bloodstream, causing him to go into toxic shock. His heart, liver and other organs were beginning to shut down. Ultimately both his legs needed to be amputated to save his life. He was in the hospital for several weeks and in a rehab facility following that.

Thankfully, doctors were able to save his life—and Kaden is full of life. His smile lights up every room he enters. His infectious laugh and nonstop energy is contagious. Kaden is now the youngest advocate for Families Fighting Flu, and he and his mother get their flu vaccine every year.

I understand that not everyone shares my views. I have enormous respect for the families who have a different perspective on vaccination. Vaccines aren't perfect, but we do know they save lives. I worry that the misinformation I hear, coming from people my age is pushing us back to a time when vaccines weren't available, when people died from diseases that are now rare. Do some people have adverse reactions? Yes. Is that the norm? No. The benefit of vaccination is far greater than the risk of deadly disease.

This is how I explain it to my friends when they have questions. Let's say there are 10 of us sharing a chocolate cake. Each of us gets a slice from the same cake, about the same size. But each of us will have a different reaction when eating the cake. One of us might get full after two bites, while someone might have a big appetite and a high metabolism. One might have an allergy to the cake's ingredients. One might not like chocolate. Most of us will enjoy our piece of cake and be happy to have eaten it. Vaccines are the same way. Most people get a vaccine and it does its job and keeps us from becoming sick and protects people against the most severe outcomes of deadly diseases. Do some people have a reaction? Some yes, but that does not negate all the good that vaccines do. Does someone still get a disease? Sometimes yes, but the vaccine will help keep symptoms manageable and make it less likely that someone might spread it to others. Spreading the disease gives it the chance to mutate and grow stronger and more severe. The bottom line is the value of the vaccine in keeping people healthy far outweighs the risk of diseases like flu, measles, chickenpox, and polio.

That's the message I want to leave you with today. When I think of the lives impacted by flu— I think of my sister's of course, but also the roughly 27,000 Americans—including more than 255 kids who died unnecessarily just this past year from the flu, many of whom were unvaccinated. This doesn't even include the countless others who now suffer permanent complications and altered lives from influenza. This doesn't have to happen.

Vaccines save lives and keep people healthy. A vaccine likely would have saved my older sister Jessica's life. Thank you.