

Stopping suicides: Prevention has support

By Jon Brodtkin/ Daily News Staff
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Massachusetts will lead the nation in funding for suicide prevention this fiscal year, targeting a problem that is often ignored but kills more residents than homicide and AIDS combined, according to a statewide advocacy group.

The \$1.25 million being spent in the fiscal year that began July 1 is more than twice the amount spent by the state the previous fiscal year, said Gregory Miller, coordinator of the Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention in Newton.

The funding increase is due to a one-time appropriation of \$750,000 included in the health care reform bill approved by the Legislature and Gov. Mitt Romney, Miller said.

The coalition formed in 1999 to raise awareness about suicide and convince politicians to devote money to prevention.

At the time, suicide "was on nobody's radar screen," Miller said. "There was not a penny of federal or state funding for suicide prevention, yet it's two to three times more common than homicide and a greater problem than HIV/AIDS."

Miller said even this year's increased funding is a "drop in the bucket" compared to funding for homicide prevention and AIDS treatment.

The 429 Massachusetts suicides in 2004 outnumbered the deaths caused by homicide and AIDS combined. There were 175 homicides and 211 AIDS deaths that year, according to Department of Public Health statistics.

The actual number of suicides may exceed those counted by health authorities, partly because of the stigma attached to mental illness, said Martin Cohen, president of the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation.

"If a kid drives into a bridge abutment, the police will say it's a motor vehicle homicide," Cohen said. "They won't say it's a suicide because, quite honestly, they're trying to protect the family."

When people die from poisonings, it is sometimes not clear whether they intended to kill themselves, and these deaths are not counted in suicide statistics.

If half of all poisonings of undetermined intent were self-inflicted, the number of suicides in Massachusetts would rise 60 percent, according to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, a national group based in the same Newton office that houses Miller's coalition.

The DPH began receiving money for suicide prevention within the past six years, according to associate commissioner Sally Fogerty.

Mental illness and depression is often seen as a problem people should be able to take care of themselves, Fogerty said. Devoting money to preventing suicide is a step toward convincing the public that severe depression is a treatable illness, she said.

"We react to homicides, but for some reason we don't react to suicides," Cohen said. "I think as a society we don't understand it."

The DPH has contracts with seven community-based groups to prevent suicide, including Screening for Mental Health Inc. in Wellesley. Fogerty said the DPH will expand the services provided through those groups.

The agency will also use its new money to train elders and elder care givers to recognize depression, to screen for depression in middle-aged men and enhance services for people who survived suicide attempts or have family members who committed suicide.

The latter task includes working with clergy and funeral directors who have contact with family members after suicides, Fogerty said. Research has shown friends and family of people who killed themselves have an increased risk of also committing suicide, she said.

People ages 30 to 49 have the highest suicide rate among any age group in Massachusetts, according to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.

Nationwide, federal statistics show suicide is the third leading cause of death among people ages 15 to 24. Fifty-four Massachusetts residents age 24 or younger killed themselves in 2004.

Screening for Mental Health has a school program called SOS Signs of Suicide that involves up to three classroom sessions and has been used by 3,000 high schools nationwide and 14 in MetroWest, according to Sharon Pigeon, who runs the program.

A scientific analysis showed the program reduced suicide attempts by 40 percent, Pigeon said. The Wellesley group is now rolling the program out to middle schools with a grant from the MetroWest Community Health Care Foundation.

The middle school program will be available free of charge this school year to 25 MetroWest communities, including Ashland, Holliston, Natick, Framingham, Milford, Marlborough, Needham, Hopedale, Southborough, Northborough and Sudbury.

The program includes a video, posters and other tools to help kids recognize the signs of depression in themselves and others, and seek help from adults. Signs of Suicide also aims to train parents and school staff so they can recognize depressed children and connect them with the help they need.

Remington Middle School in Franklin piloted the program last school year and identified two eighth-graders who subsequently received mental health counseling, said Karen Ingerman, a school adjustment counselor there.

"The kids seemed engaged. They participated in the activities, they listened very attentively," Ingerman said.

Kids injuring themselves is also a problem, even if they do not intend to commit suicide, Pigeon said. Many teens cut or burn themselves to relieve psychological distress from tension, anger or emptiness.

"More and more kids are using self-injury as a maladaptive coping skill to deal with stress," Pigeon said.

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