

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Suicide Prevention

The Great Hall of the State House in Boston is often the site for the presentation of policy agendas by various public interest organizations. People come from all parts of Massachusetts to advocate for their causes in that center of legislative activity. One recent presentation drew my attention because the cause affects families in our towns and because it seemed to reach for an impossible goal. It was sponsored by the Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention.

I attended the presentation because of a promise to a constituent, not really expecting to be affected by the experience. That changed as each speaker took the microphone. The first information to catch my attention was that suicide is more than twice as common as homicide in the state. We considered homicides to be epidemic when they numbered 185 in 2002. In that same year, the last year with complete statistics, 425 people committed suicide.

Suicide usually results from depression, a treatable mental illness. Yet it is the 14th leading cause of death in Massachusetts, with men four times as likely to commit suicide as women. The purpose of the program was to publicize the severity of the public health problem and spread the information that these numbers can be reduced.

Private citizens as well as public officials spoke as suicide survivors, individuals whose family members took their own lives. A state senator spoke of his brother's suicide. A district attorney whose brother took his own life was another speaker. And public health professionals offered their proposals for increasing public awareness of how to prevent suicide in the future.

Here are some of the ways the state is working to reduce suicide and some suggestions for ways that individuals to help save lives.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health is now in its fourth year of operating its Suicide Prevention Program. Governor Romney responded to the alarming number of suicides by funding services in his budget proposal. The state provides training for school personnel, elder service providers and a number of other professionals.

Signs of Suicide, SOS, is a comprehensive school-based prevention program that works to engage instructors, students and their families in searching for children at risk. The goal is to treat depression with the ACT technique: Acknowledge signs of suicide and take them seriously. Care about the comments and voice your concern. Tell a responsible adult.

The school-based programs are successful in increasing reports of students at risk and actually reducing suicide attempts. What about the majority of suicides, those between 25 and 64 years of age. If we are not in school, it's up to us to learn and respond to signs of suicide. Something as simple as a friend suddenly getting his affairs in order might be a sign, or repeated expressions of hopelessness about the inability to cope with life. The website www.StopASuicide.org has helpful advice on identifying and responding to those signs.

Other helpful websites include Suicide Prevention Resource Center, www.sprc.org, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, www.afsp.org. A suicide hotline is available at 1-800-SUICIDE.

Suicide is sometimes referred to as a permanent solution to a temporary problem. That characterization, however, fails to recognize the lasting pain and suffering of the family and the wide circle of friends who are left behind. When I mention to others that I am writing this article, every one of them talks of dealing with that pain at some level. I hope someone who reads these words will be able to ACT on its ideas and help save another family from losing a loved one to suicide.