

PRINT-Western Illinois Community Leaders Tackle Suicide Prevention

OSF HealthCare Is Working to Expand Mental Health Services

You might be surprised by this but *thinking* about suicide is a common human experience. That's according to Dr. Kristy Keefe of Western Illinois University who has conducted research on the subject and who is training future mental health professionals. Keefe was among panelists at a recent Prairie Communications radio discussion and broadcast in Monmouth that included regional experts who shared information, resources, and critical needs to address suicide prevention and loss.

Suicide rates are at their highest levels since World War II. More than 20 veterans die by suicide every day and one in 10 young adults reported having suicidal thoughts, a 47% increase since 2009.

Reducing suicide is among the top priorities at Peoria-based OSF HealthCare. Behavioral Health Manager Luke Raymond says everyone who comes to an OSF hospital emergency department (ED) is now being screened for suicide and OSF hospital Emergency Departments now have safer rooms to better treat people with behavioral health issues. Primary Care patients are also now screened because 75% of those who reach out about mental illness will do so through their primary care doctor.

But, Raymond says what's really needed for Illinois Western Region is a crisis stabilization center so anyone with an acute mental health issue can get immediate, in-bed treatment for a brief time or until they can find a more permanent placement for extensive psychiatric treatment.

"Rather than wait for hours, or days, or weeks for a psychiatric bed to open up for an acute stay, they can go to this deflection clinic and hopefully get stabilized and hopefully avoid psychiatric hospitalization. If not, at least they can get some treatment started rather than just waiting for a bed to open up," he said.

Raymond hopes legislators understand that communities are struggling to meet the needs of residents with mental health conditions.

"As quickly as we could get it (crisis stabilization center) in place, it would be up and running at full capacity. The mental health need in most of our communities is simply overwhelming. So, whatever resources we can provide to these communities would be of essential value," according to Raymond.

While access to psychiatrists and therapists in the region is limited, OSF has begun integrating telepsychiatrists in the Streator area, allowing people to remotely make contact with psychiatrists over video. The pilot, using [Regroup](#), will be expanded to more areas in the future.

Raymond is encouraged Illinois Medicaid has recently significantly increased reimbursement rates for psychiatric services. The change will allow OSF HealthCare and other providers operate without a significant loss for Medicaid patients who need the care.

Republican State Rep. Dan Swanson whose district includes Mercer, Henry, Knox, Bureau and Lee counties in western Illinois. He serves on the Veterans Committee in the house and he's concerned about making sure they're getting the medical care they need, especially to prevent more deaths by suicide.

"We try to impress upon them (legislative leaders), that we see resources going north but what are we getting in our districts (south of I-80), according to Swanson. "We try to impress upon them, these needs that we have are just as much of the same needs that you have."

Behavioral health leaders stress suicide is preventable and getting the right help at the right time is important. Beth Looney, a behavioral health navigator for OSF HealthCare, lost her husband to suicide eight years ago.

Scott had been suffering with depression, but his death was unexpected and devastating for her and their four children.

The traumatic experience turned Looney into a suicide prevention advocate. She works to promote suicide safer communities and schools. Looney says becoming suicide safer goes well beyond awareness.

It's almost like suicide first aid," Smith explained. "It's not our job to cure a person who may feeling suicidal or hopeless or alone, it's our job to get that person to a safe place where they aren't going to commit suicide or have that opportunity because safety measures are in place, so that as a community as an individual, you are making a difference, and you are becoming suicide safer, and that's our goal."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the holiday months usually have some of the *lowest suicide* rates but an Annenberg Public Policy Center analysis of newspaper coverage showed 64% of stories perpetuated the myth that suicides increase during the holidays.

Looney says suicides are usually planned for weeks, months, or even years, and seasonal stressors aren't usually triggers for a person to commit suicide.

"Ultimately suicide is often related to a mental illness. It's not all the time, we can't rule out other reasons, but the normal risks don't increase related to holiday stress. Business and worry ultimately aren't going to cause someone to commit suicide," said Looney.

Looney says one of the best things to do is to be aware of any changes you see with a loved one or co-worker. She says people who might be feeling hopeless and who are at risk can benefit by knowing others care.

Looney advised, "Taking the time when it's right, in a quiet place, not with a whole group of people, and just asking, saying, 'Hey are you okay? I've noticed that you're not acting like yourself and I care and really worried about you.'"

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is recommending a new national three-digit number that would connect callers with lifesaving resources in times of mental crisis. 988 would route callers to their closest National Suicide Prevention Lifeline crisis center. The number to use now is a traditional length, 800-273-8255 (TALK) or 911.

Looney encourages those who need help, to reach out.

"A simple 3-digit phone number with immediate access to a crisis counselor will have the potential to save even more lives than the current 10 digit number. I pray it passes," she said.

OSF HealthCare has a robust library of mental health resources that can assist you in finding the help you need. [Click here](#) for more information.

OSF HealthCare also provides a digital tool called SilverCloud, which assists people in managing anxiety, depression, stress, or a combination of anxiety and depression. SilverCloud is free to access for adults – even those who are not current OSF HealthCare patients. [Click here](#) to get started with SilverCloud.

There is also a [Survivors of Suicide Support Group](#) which meets on the 2nd Thursday of each month from 6:30-8:00pm at OSF St. Luke Medical Center, 1051 West South Street in Kewanee. Its next meeting, December 12 has been moved to [Cornerstone Community Wellness Center](#) in Sheffield, Illinois as the group looks to expand its reach.