

Youths and Families Get Community Support to Stop Travis County Teen Suicides

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AUSTIN, TX (February 11, 2008)—Austin area school, health and mental health officials are mobilizing community efforts to prevent a youth suicide cluster in Travis County. When youth suicides or attempted suicides occur closer together in space and time than is considered usual for the community, it is considered a suicide cluster. Clusters can put at-risk students in jeopardy of death by suicide because some youths may have a tendency to identify with destructive solutions adopted by the person who has attempted or has died by suicide.

“From July to November of 2007, anecdotal information on suicide deaths for youths aged 15-19 in Travis County indicates there were five deaths by suicide for youths of this age. There has also been another death within recent weeks and yet another youth has been hospitalized and is in critical condition from a suicide attempt only days ago. This anecdotal information compares with only four deaths for this age group in all of 2005, the last year for which we have official death data,” said Merily Keller, co-chair of the Texas Suicide Prevention Council.

“It is important to understand that a suicide cluster may involve not just children or adolescents who know one another. Young people who are far removed from or entirely unknown to suicide victims may identify with their behavior and resort to suicide as a result,” said David Evans, Executive Director of Austin-Travis County MHMR Center.

Representatives from Austin-Travis County MHMR, Austin Independent School District (AISD), Austin PTA Council, Austin-Travis County Suicide Prevention Coalition, Mental Health America of Texas, Seton Shoal Creek Hospital, *A member of the Seton Family of Hospitals* and St. David’s HealthCare are on heightened alert that a large number of young people are dying by suicide in the Austin area. These organizations are leading the charge to increase public awareness about suicide prevention in an effort to save the lives of young people in the Austin-Travis County area. They are preparing doctors, students, school staff, parents, faith leaders and others who work with young people how to identify symptoms of suicide, know what actions to take if a person is suicidal and where to get help.

“To help address and answer questions students may have about suicide and other mental health issues, Mental Health America of Texas, National Alliance on Mental Illness Austin and Depression Bipolar Alliance-Texas, Austin Area PTA and the Jason Foundation at The Oaks Treatment Center is creating Suicide Prevention/ Mental Health Wellness resource centers in AISD high school libraries,” said Mary Ellen Nudd, vice president of Mental Health America of Texas. “Students can access print copies of the materials during campus library hours. Many of the materials are also available through the provider organization’s websites.”

“These centers will have materials targeted to teens and their parents. The centers will include brochures, books, posters and bookmarks that highlight youth mental health and mental illnesses, depression and suicide prevention. The information will be readily accessible for students and family members to take with them,” said Charlotte Winkelmann, assistant director of Student Support Services at AISD.

“It is imperative for all parents, educators, youth leaders, faith leaders, medical and mental health clinicians to know the warnings signs for suicide and talk to young people about the importance of seeking help for themselves or friends who have suicidal thoughts—especially since a young person is often the first to know that another youth is considering death by suicide,” Sherry Blyth, Associate Director of Crisis Services at Austin-Travis County Mental Health Mental Retardation Center (MHMR).

Some Warning Signs That A Person May Be Suicidal:

- Threatening to hurt or kill him/herself, or talking of wanting to hurt or kill him/herself
- Looking for ways to kill him/herself by seeking access to firearms, available pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person
- Hopelessness or feeling no reason for living; no sense of purpose in life

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2- Austin Groups Unite to Stop Youth Suicide Cluster in Travis County

- Increased irritability, rage, or uncontrolled anger
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped – like there’s no way out
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Anxiety, agitation, unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Dramatic mood changes

The more “clues or warning signs,” a person exhibits, the higher their risk of suicide.

Some Ways to Be Helpful to Someone at Risk of Death by Suicide

- Be aware. Learn the warning signs.
- Ask the person if they are thinking about suicide. Talking about suicide does not cause someone to be suicidal.
- Be willing to listen. Allow for expression of feelings. Accept the feelings.
- Don’t be judgmental, lecture on the value of life or debate whether suicide is right or wrong.
- Don’t be sworn to secrecy. Seek support.
- Offer hope that alternatives and treatment are available.
- "Don't leave them alone!" Take action! Remove means (weapons, pills, poison, etc.) and get help from individuals or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention.

Some People or Places Who Can Help in a Crisis

- A community MHMR or health center
- A school counselor
- A suicide prevention/crisis intervention center
- Psychiatrist, psychologist, or therapist, or other mental health professional
- A doctor
- A religious/spiritual leader

In January 2008, as officials recognized the possibility of a youth suicide cluster in Travis County, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention-Central Texas and Austin-Travis County MHMR with support from Seton Shoal Creek Hospital and other community groups brought in a national suicide postvention expert to work citywide with more than 300 mental health professionals and primary care doctors, AISD counselors and staff as well as parents and interested community members on suicide prevention methods to stop the cluster from becoming a contagion and postvention methods to address the current suicides in the community. Key stakeholders have continued to meet to develop postvention protocols based on national guidelines to share with area school, city, county, medical, faith and other groups since many of the recommendations are counter-intuitive but essential safety procedures.

“Postvention is an important intervention conducted after a suicide, largely to support and debrief those affected; and reduce the possibility of suicide contagion,” said Paul Whitelock, MD, medical director at Seton Shoal Creek Hospital. “Postvention procedures help to recognize those bereaved by suicide that may be vulnerable to suicidal behavior themselves and may develop complicated grief reactions. Postvention also helps alleviate the distress of bereaved individuals, reduces the risk of imitative suicidal behavior, and promotes the healthy recovery of the affected community.”

“Of those who die by suicide most have an underlying mental health or substance abuse condition,” said Keller. “The majority of suicidal individuals do not want to die; they just want their emotional pain to stop. Take all suicidal talk seriously and take action to get that person to help.

For more information on suicide prevention in Texas please go to www.TexasSuicidePrevention.org. If you or someone you know is in crisis and needs help, please call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Locally, individuals can access help at Austin-Travis County MHMR Psychiatric Emergency Services/Mobile Crisis Outreach at 512-454-3521 or Seton Shoal Creek Hospital at 512-324-2029 or by calling 911.