

Raising awareness about suicide has never been more important

- By Terry Jacoby For MediaNews Group
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The COVID-19 pandemic has isolated people at home, making more people depressed and prone to suicide. (circa 1960 Photo by Raymond Kleboe/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)
Raymond Kleboe

Providing mental health support is more urgent as the world struggles with the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Michigan's suicide rate has been steadily increasing since 2007, and the novel coronavirus has pushed these numbers to epidemic proportions.

Since 1999, Michigan's suicide rate has risen 33%, which is higher than the national rate increase of 25%, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention reports that suicide in Michigan is the second-leading cause of death for individuals 10 to 34 years old, and there is an average of one death by suicide every six hours in Michigan.

"We understand that many pressing issues cry out for attention and resources at the present time, however, Michigan's suicide rates have reached epidemic proportions," said Gail Urso, co-founder of Kevin's Song, a charitable organization generating public awareness about the causes of suicide, its prevalence in society and possible preventive measures.

“The urgency to provide mental-health support and raise awareness about suicide has never been more important,” Urso said. “In navigating the journey from trauma to resilience, we must unleash the greater strength of our communities as we respect, care about and learn from each other and create a world without suicide.”

Kevin’s Song will host its fifth annual Conference on Suicide: Equity and Equality in Suicide Prevention, Jan. 21-23. The three-day online summit features a prestigious roster of leading experts on suicide and supportive resources for up to 1,000 participants.

The first two days of the conference will look at suicide through a social-justice lens, challenging existing bias and belief systems. It will share information about suicide, suicidal people and the repercussions of suicide at personal and community levels. It also will emphasize prevention in all demographics with a special focus on high-risk and underserved communities.

The Kevin’s Song conference comes at a critical time.

“More people are socially isolated from friends and loved ones and are attempting to cope with the chronic stress caused by the coronavirus,” Urso says. “This includes fighting their own illnesses or being concerned for the health and well-being of loved ones. The tragic loss of life has resulted in fear and despair, impacting the mental health of individuals worldwide.”

Urso notes the physical and emotional exhaustion that the pandemic has taken on first responders and frontline health-care workers as infection and death rates continue to climb. People feel isolated and lonely. And many people are out of work, facing economic hardships that aggravate an already complex issue.

“This year’s conference is especially important as the continuing pandemic has widened fault lines across society and demonstrated once more the fragility of the human condition,” she says.

“The pandemic has further exacerbated mental health and suicide prevention issues for already vulnerable groups and individuals and brought to light the ongoing social justice issues right here in Michigan, including access to health care. We intend to address these challenges head on at this year’s conference and invite anyone affected by suicide to please join us.”

The second annual School Summit, presented by the Children's Foundation, runs concurrently on the first day of the conference, bringing together educators to share best practices about innovative programs for students, teachers and parents.

"We're doing a better job at helping students recognize the warning signs and finding the resources that they need but we can always do more to increase the conversations not only at school but also at home," said Stephanie Lange of Macomb Township, student assistance specialist for Dakota High School and sex education supervisor for Chippewa Valley Schools.

Lange, who earned a master's in social work from the University of Michigan and a bachelor's in sociology from Oakland University has worked in the field of social work since 1995 in many capacities including intake, assessment, screening, therapist, supervisor, clinical director, community organizer, field liaison, trainer, professor, researcher, and prevention specialist. Lange will be doing a breakout session during the school summit that explores how schools can become more LGBTQ (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Questioning) friendly.

What's the current terminology for the LGBTQ community?

How do gender roles/heteronormativity impact students.

How can schools accommodate name changes and pronoun usage or support the development of GSA clubs at the secondary level and be sure the health curriculum is inclusive are a few of the topics that Lange will discuss during her presentation.

Joining Lange during her breakout session will be a senior in high school, who will talk about her own personal journey as a member of the LGBTQ community.

"This conference is important because its putting a special focus on what school staff might need to know and what approaches are available to them, which will resonate differently with every school district," Lange said, depending on the area, its size and incidents of suicide.

The Saturday program, Surviving Suicide, called a journey of hope and healing, is dedicated to survivors of suicide loss and attempt survivors. Keynote speakers will share personal stories of suicide loss, grief and hope. A portion of this program — a 90-minute discussion with a panel of survivors of suicide loss — is free of charge and open to the public via Facebook LIVE broadcast by Kevin's Song and Detroit Public Television from 12:30 to 2 p.m.

“The conference is an opportunity for anyone — whether or not they are affected personally by suicide — to come together and be part of the solution,” Urso says.

Kevin’s Song was founded by John and Gail Urso in honor of their son, Kevin, who took his own life in 2013.

For more information visit kevinssong.org or call 313-236-7109