



Suicide Prevention Awareness Month

As a Buffalo firefighter for the past 24 years, Dan Milovich has witnessed trauma, injury, and destruction, and is often in dangerous situations. Firefighters, like other first responders, often keep their emotions bottled up and may struggle with mental health issues. He describes a culture where boys and men are encouraged to “shake it off,” or told, “you’ll be all right.”

In 2015, he experienced the horror of responding to his brother’s suicide. Milovich tried to handle it on his own, but soon realized he needed help. Now he shares his story to help others who might be struggling with mental health issues.

“The job takes a toll on a lot of guys, and they can’t cope,” Milovich said. “They may turn to alcohol, drugs or abusive behavior. I tell them they don’t have to have a tough guy image.”

September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, an opportunity to share information and describe the efforts in our community to reduce risk, increase help and save lives.

People may not be aware that middle-aged men experience the highest rates of suicide in Erie County as well as across the country. A new men’s mental health public service announcement (PSA), produced by Crisis Services and the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Erie County, will encourage men to speak up and ask for help.

According to Milovich, who participates in the commercial, you have no idea what’s going on in someone’s background, and people should not be ashamed or embarrassed to reach out and ask for help.

“Men are vulnerable for many reasons; the biggest is their silence,” said Jessica C. Pirro, LMSW, chief executive officer, Crisis Services, and vice chair of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition. “Stigma and stereotypes continue to isolate people into the thought that suicide is their only answer.”

According to Pirro, if men feel depressed or are struggling, they tend to turn towards self-medication which puts them at risk. Other risks include impulsive behavior, more access to firearms, and lack of seeking ongoing mental health treatment.

Crisis Services offers 24-hour hotline counselors and a mobile outreach team to help people remain safe from themselves or prevent them from hurting others during a mental health crisis.

According to Pirro, responding to the crisis is not the only answer. With each experience, first responders learn how to enhance prevention strategies. Community education, reducing the stigma of mental illness, and helping people to connect to services will help someone thinking about suicide.

Continue article on page 2

“The more we can make talking about mental health the norm not the exception, we will begin to see risk for suicide decrease,” Pirro said. “We owe it to our community to be present with someone at risk. This will help bring light to them during darkness and paralyzing pain that reduces their ability to seek help.”

Many opportunities exist in the community to learn more and get help for yourself or a loved one. Crisis Services is the agency lead for the Suicide Prevention Coalition, a multidisciplinary stakeholder group providing awareness and training to create a community competent in addressing suicide.

While suicide deaths are rising nationally, for the first time in four years, Western New York has seen an 11% decrease in deaths by suicide. The Suicide Prevention Coalition continues to push this conversation forward. Members trained 3,831 Erie County school personnel in the Suicide Safety for School program. There are a variety of activities throughout September to educate the community about suicide prevention, visit our [events page](#). Members of the Anti-Stigma Coalition also sponsor on-going trainings and seminars to educate people about mental illness.

What can family and friends do for individuals that they fear may try to hurt themselves? Pirro says ask them directly – “Are you thinking about suicide?” “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”

If they say yes, don’t panic. Ask them what are they feeling, how long have they felt this way and if they have a plan and means to carry out that plan.

If you, or someone you know, are suicidal in Erie County please call Crisis Services at 716-834-3131. Outside of the area, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (toll-free) at 1-800-273-TALK or text GOT5 to the Crisis Text Line 741741.

“Call Crisis Services at 834-3131 – we can help guide you on what to say and we can talk to your loved one. We can help conduct a safety plan to help them keep safe for the night, the next day etc. until they get linked with ongoing support. If needed, we can see if immediate response is needed by our Mobile Outreach Program,” Pirro said.

Suicide is the end result of not only untreated mental illness, but stigma. When people get connected with help and support, their risk for suicide decreases.

Jessica C. Pirro
LMSW | CEO, Crisis Services

She continued, “Just because someone says they are suicidal doesn’t mean they are ready to act on those thoughts. The sooner we can talk about those feelings and help them plan for their safety we are able to reduce the likelihood of emergency intervention.”

In addition to talking about suicide, other warning signs include helplessness and hopelessness, dramatic mood changes, withdrawal from normal activities, increased alcohol and drug use, aggressive behavior, and impulsive or reckless behavior.

<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>7</p> <p>Mental Health Advocates of WNY (MHA) Benefactor Reception</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>7</p> <p>Mental Health Advocates of WNY (MHA) Benefactor Reception</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>10</p> <p>International Suicide Prevention Day *Multiple Events*</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>10</p> <p>Mental Health Advocates of WNY (MHA) Benefactor Reception</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>11</p> <p>Raise the Roof</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>20</p> <p>Endeavor Health Breakfast and Baskets Fundraiser with Guest Speaker Max Donatelli</p>
<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>21</p> <p>Adult Mental Health First Aid Training</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>26</p> <p>Youth Mental Health First Aid</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>26</p> <p>20th Annual Challenge Dinner and Auction, presented by Southeast Foundation, Inc.</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>27</p> <p>Mindfulness: Introduction to Core Concepts & Clinical Acceptance</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>28</p> <p>Adult Mental Health First Aid Training</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER</p> <p>More Events</p> <p>Check out more local mental health events in your community at letstalkstigma.org/events</p>

What was once my shame is now my super power.

From Shame to Super Power

I've started and erased this story at least a half-dozen times. It's not that the words don't flow, it's just that I get anxious talking about my anxiety because I get anxious about nearly everything.

Far too much of my life has been wasted leaving terrible thoughts and emotions to fester inside my head unchecked. More than 30 years went by between the time I tried to take my own life as a kid in grammar school and my first session with a mental health counselor.

I was filled with shame, inadequacy, and a general feeling that I'd be letting people down if I did anything other than try to tamp down and ignore the brush fire that was burning uncontrolled in my mind.

I had little self-worth, but have always been filled with love and empathy for others. My first stepping out of the shadows came only to help someone else. That being an ear for a friend became more of a pal-to-pal therapy session, and showed me, finally, that help was within reach.

Since those chats started five or six years ago, the weight of depression holding me down has become lighter in a way I didn't think possible. Understanding it a lot better through introspection and professional help has also made living with mental illness much more manageable.

Before, crippling anxiety would leave my mind and emotions spinning out of control, often to the point of physical exhaustion and pain. I'd feel it pulsing deep inside my head and at the tips of my toes. I'd feel burning in my lungs and other organs I couldn't necessarily identify.

Spending time talking about and understanding what is at the root of my anxiety—both the utter soul-crushing kind and the smaller not-wanting-to-answer-a-phone-call kind—helps me contain it.

It's more manageable, but it's still a struggle. St. Francis de Sales tells the story of a man who receives the gift of some precious liquor in a porcelain bowl, and how carefully the man walks home cradling the bowl and careful with each step, making sure not to spill any.

That's the same careful journey I'm taking day to day, or hour to hour, or minute to minute— but as time wears on, I'm spending less time focused on the full bowl and more time focused on enjoying the walk through life.

I will never "be healed," but I have experienced tremendous healing through therapy and putting my story to work to help others.

What was once my shame is now my super power.



Steve Cichon
Journalist | Author Buffalo Pop Culture Historian

Founding Members Elected Coalition Chairs



Karl Shallowhorn, education program coordinator at the Community Health Center of Buffalo, has been elected chair of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition. Jessica C. Pirro, LMSW, chief executive officer of Crisis Services, has been named vice chair. Both are founding partners of the Coalition, which launched the *Join the Conversation* public awareness campaign in May 2017 to eliminate the stigma around mental illness in Erie County and Western New York.

"As the incoming chair of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition, I would like to build on the momentum we have achieved by growing both the number of people who have taken our pledge as well as help with the effort to secure more organizational members," said Shallowhorn.

"In addition, I'm hoping to take our campaign to groups and organizations in our local communities of color where the stigma against mental illness is a significant issue," he said. "Finally, with the help of our core founding membership team, I would like to see us find ways to secure additional funding to keep our campaign moving forward and, in the long-run, be sustainable."

Shallowhorn is a New York State Credentialed alcoholism and substance abuse counselor (CASAC) and has worked in the field of addiction and mental health for over 18 years. He is the author of *Working on Wellness: A Practical Guide to Mental Health* (2010), is a contributing writer and blogger for BP magazine, coordinates and writes for the United Church of Christ blog *The Journey*.

Shallowhorn is the chair of affiliate relations for the Mental Health Association in New York State Board of Directors, as well as serving on the Erie County Mental Hygiene Community Services Board, and the Boards of Housing Options Made Easy, the Just Buffalo Literary Center, and the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ. He holds a master's degree in student personnel administration from SUNY Buffalo.

Every day at Crisis Services, Pirro and her team see the immediate impact that stigma has which prevents people from seeking critical help.

"We intervene daily with community members who are contemplating suicide which is the ultimate end result of stigma," she said. "They feel isolated, alone and don't believe anyone can or wants to help. We need to shift that conversation."

Pirro said "That is why the Coalition's campaign *Join the Conversation* is vital to embrace in order to make help and hope the norm not the exception. I am excited to serve in this capacity for the Anti Stigma Coalition and be a part of an amazing movement committed to making people aware of their actions, their language and behaviors to prevent stigma in Erie County."

Pirro has held various local and statewide leadership positions to address response to family violence, sexual assault, mental health and suicide prevention and currently serves as chair of the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Erie County and is a member of the NYS Suicide Prevention Advisory Council. She serves on the board of the National Association of Crisis Organization Directors.

She previously served on the executive committee of the Erie County Coalition Against Family Violence and was instrumental in the development and implementation of the Erie County Coordinated Community Response to Family Violence 2005. She served on the advisory committee that developed Erie County's Family Justice Center and served on the Board of Directors for the NY State Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

Pirro earned her undergraduate degree in child and family studies and her master's of social work from Syracuse University and is a New York State Licensed Master Social Worker.



Spotlight: A Q&A with The Patrick P. Lee Foundation

WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBERS



The Patrick P. Lee Foundation is a family foundation with two core funding areas – education and mental health. The Foundation’s primary investments in education are through its scholarship programs in science, technology, engineering, and math. In mental health, the Foundation’s investments focus on strengthening the mental health workforce, supporting community programs and services, advocating for increased public funding, and building the mental health literacy of the community.

We recently spoke with **Jane Mogavero, Esq., Executive Director**, to learn more about the work of the Foundation.

Q: Why did the Lee Foundation choose to fund The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

The Coalition members represent a variety of nonprofits, community leaders and advocates working in mental health. The breadth of their experiences and commitment to people living with mental illnesses really resonated with the Foundation. We believed that supporting this collective effort would

raise awareness about mental illness and provide a platform for people living with mental illness to share their stories, find support and connect with the services they need to be successful.

Q: How does the campaign align with other community initiatives your foundation supports?

One of our goals at the Foundation is to educate our community about mental health issues. In addition to our support of the campaign, we fund the WNED/WBFO Mental Health Initiative, which ensures there is sustained, in-depth media coverage of mental health issues. Both the campaign and the Mental Health Initiative help to normalize conversation about mental illnesses and build the mental health literacy of our community.

Q: What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

Education is critical if we are going to end the stigma and discrimination against people with mental illnesses. It is encouraging that so many schools, church groups and companies have contacted the Coalition to request speakers and/or materials. While we have a long way to go, our community continues to evolve and grow its knowledge of mental illnesses. Hopefully, this increased knowledge will lead to increased advocacy for mental health services.



Population Health
COLLABORATIVE



WNYHeroes, Inc.
Supporting Western New York Veterans



"Support, Service, & Strength"

ERIE COUNTY
ANTI-STIGMA
COALITION

Join the Conversation

Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition Founding Members: BryLin Behavioral Health System
Children’s Mental Health Coalition of Western New York, Inc. • Community Partners of Western New York
Compeer • Crisis Services of Erie County • Erie County Department of Mental Health • Erie County Office
for People with Disabilities • Fellows Action Network • Fuerst Consulting Corporation • Jewish Family Service
of Buffalo & Erie County • The Mental Health Advocates of WNY • Millennium Collaborative Care • Patrick P.
Lee Foundation Preventionfocus, Inc. • Telesco Creative Group • The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation

BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

Does your organization, church, temple, or community group want to combine forces with our organization? Do you individually want to engage with us to stop the stigma of mental illness? Please consider becoming a member of our Coalition by completing our membership form at letstalkstigma.org/membership-form.

It is going to take a massive community effort to move the needle on stigma, please become a part of the solution. Questions? Please contact kshallowhorn@letstalkstigma.org.