



The Stigma of Suicide: Ending the Silence

One person dies by suicide every five hours in New York State and suicide is the state's 12th leading cause of death.

"Suicide is the ultimate outcome of stigma," said Jessica C. Pirro, LMSW, Chief Executive Officer, Crisis Services and Vice-Chair of the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition.

Stigma can affect individuals with mental health issues who struggle to find support and compassion. Stigma can also impact suicide loss survivors who have lost loved ones to suicide and feel guilty or embarrassed about the cause of their death.

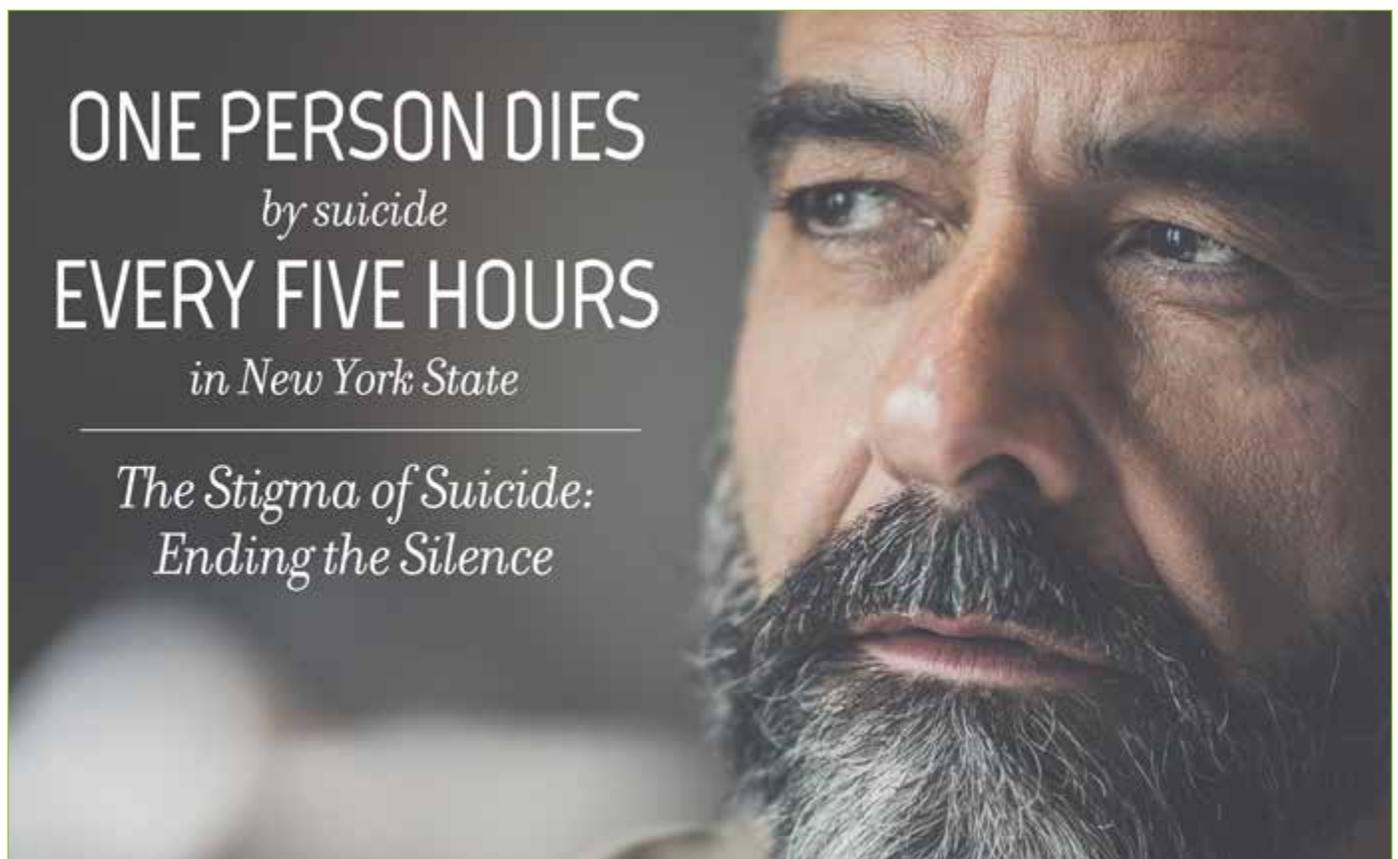
"We are working to support individuals with mental health struggles and families who are suicide loss survivors," Pirro said.

Suicide is not easy to talk about. Widespread stigma creates fear and inhibits people from speaking out. However, talking about suicide reduces the stigma and encourages people to seek help and share their stories. Pirro says we need to normalize safe conversations and understand that a person who attempts suicide could not get the help they needed.

Lisa Boehringer is a suicide loss survivor whose sister died by suicide 25 years ago. She describes her experience following her sister's death.

"People assumed that there was something wrong with my family, my sister must have been 'crazy' or on drugs," Boehringer said. "We need to get the point of taking care of our mental health just like we take care of physical health."

Continued on Page 2



Continued from Page 1

For several years, Boehringer stayed silent about her sister's death.

Now she is working to teach people that it's ok to talk about it, and get the message out into the community.

"Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, people should not be embarrassed to reach out," Boehringer said. "There is always support and help if you are struggling."

Boehringer works as a licensed clinical social worker and is a Crisis Prevention and Response Coordinator with the Buffalo Schools.

According to Pirro, we should not be afraid to speak up about suicide and mental illness or to seek out treatment for an individual who is in need. There is a disease behind it and it's important to acknowledge that someone in suicidal crisis is overcome with pain and their decision is to end the pain.

"Suicide loss survivors struggle greatly during their moments of grief. They are questioning why, may feel guilty and often feel responsible," Pirro said.

Seeking to understand why suicide occurs is also an important step in eliminating stigma. Crisis Services and other stakeholder groups are studying data from suicide investigations in Erie County with the goal of finding patterns or trends and ultimately prevent suicide deaths. This is a project of the Suicide Prevention Center of New York with a grant from the New York State Health Foundation.

Continued on Page 3

A Sister's Story

It's been more than twenty years since my younger sister, Beverly, died by suicide. It was 1993, I was 20 years old and my life was going well. I lived in an apartment with a best friend and I was doing well in



college. I used to go to sleep with a smile on my face. That all changed when my sister killed herself on January 9, 1993. It is still the most difficult thing I've had to deal with in my life. It took me years to accept the death, and years to be able to talk about it without crying.

At the time of her death, there was no "National Suicide Prevention Week" or an "Out of the Darkness Walk for Suicide Prevention." We didn't talk about it at school, or have lessons on how to help our friends or ourselves. No one wanted to talk about it. I didn't want to tell anyone about it. I remember struggling with what to tell people about my family; do I mention I have a sister who died or do I leave her out? If I say she died, they will ask how and then I have to say she killed herself and then comes the judgment and awkwardness. Something must have been wrong with her or our family. Someone must have done something wrong. Weren't there any signs? Why did she do that? Suicide only happens to other people.

Unfortunately, suicide can affect anyone. But now, perceptions of mental health are changing. Research shows that our mental health is just as important as our physical health. Talking about mental health and suicide is encouraged and helpful. Helping others has showed me what hope feels like. Helping others to know that it really is ok to not be okay. Don't be afraid to ask for help, or to help someone else. I started talking about it to somehow honor my sister, but I remain dedicated to it for everyone else. There is hope.

Lisa Boehringer

If you, or someone you know,
are suicidal please call:

Crisis Services at 716-834-3131

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
(toll-free) at 1-800-273-TALK

There are many other efforts underway in our community to prevent suicide, eliminate stigma and provide help to individuals and families in crisis.

Ten area teachers participated in a four-part workshop designed to certify them as "Suicide Safety for School Staff Trainers." The Suicide Prevention Coalition has already trained 3,831 Erie County school personnel in this Suicide Safety for School program. Members of the Anti-Stigma Coalition also sponsor on-going trainings and seminars to educate people about mental illness.

A new men's mental health public service announcement produced by Crisis Services and the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Erie County, will encourage men to speak up and ask for help. The rate of suicide is highest in middle age white men and in 2017, men died by suicide 3.54 times more often than women.

The Emergency Outreach Program is the mobile unit of Erie County Medical Center's Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program (CPEP). Crisis teams are sent to meet individuals who are experiencing suicidal tendencies and provide them the services they need in order to remain safely in the community

The annual Out of the Darkness Walk presented by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) provides a space to honor lost loved ones and to give people the courage to open up about their own struggles. It continues to change our culture's approach to mental health.

The Let's Talk Stigma Campaign continues to educate the community about the importance of speaking about mental illness and providing resources for people who need help. ■

WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST MEMBERS



Visit letstalkstigma.org/current-members for more information on our current members



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/support/pledge.

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 Karl Shallowhorn, Chairperson, at kshallowhorn@chcb.net.

A Q&A with Say Yes Buffalo

The mission of the Say Yes Buffalo partnership is to strengthen the Western New York economy by investing in the education of Buffalo's future workforce. The primary goals of the partnership are to convene the school district, parents, teachers, administrators, state, city and county governments, higher education, community based organizations, businesses and foundations to increase high school and postsecondary completion rates. Our vision is that every student can graduate high school and college when given the proper supports, resources, and opportunities. We recently spoke with **Betsy Behrend, senior director for operations & communications**, about the Let's Talk Stigma campaign.

How does the campaign align with your work?

In addition to supporting the mental health of those that we serve, Say Yes Buffalo also actively seeks out ways to support its staff in managing their own mental health. With support from leadership, Say Yes staff established a Self-Care Committee that regularly shares information about the importance of self-care and mental health as well as provides activities to help staff practice self-care.

What impact is the Campaign having in the community?

Addressing stigma attached to mental health is an enormous task but an important one. The work that this campaign has done to create a platform for advocates to come together and speak out is a critical step if we are to end stigma in our community. We are grateful to the funders and partners supporting this work – it is only through our collective efforts that we can create the circumstances necessary so that all in

our community can have their mental health needs met and thus have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Why did your organization choose to become a member of The Anti-Stigma Coalition?

Acknowledging the importance of mental health in addition to physical health is critical if we are all to reach our full potential. Say Yes Buffalo is dedicated to removing barriers for students and their families in Buffalo so that all students graduate high school and earn a postsecondary degree and we know that sometimes those barriers are related to mental health. We also know that for many of those we serve there is stigma attached to talking about these issues and that can be a further barrier. Participating in the Anti-Stigma coalition gives us a platform to connect with other local organizations dedicated to mental health and resources to share with our staff so that we are better positioned to support Buffalo students and their families. ■

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT



Visit our events page at

LETSTALKSTIGMA.ORG/EVENTS

For a list of local mental Health Events in your community



ERIE COUNTY
ANTI-STIGMA
COALITION

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