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Marin unveils first countywide suicide prevention strategic plan

New position created, suicide prevention coordinator, to oversee plan implementation



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For the first time, Marin government agencies, schools, hospitals and law enforcement have joined in a countywide effort to prevent suicide by area youth and adults.

On Tuesday, officials from the Marin County Behavioral Health and Recovery Services division will unveil an 124-page “Marin County Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan” to the county Board of Supervisors. The meeting starts at 9 a.m. in the supervisors’ chambers at the Marin County Civic Center, 3501 Civic Center Drive, San Rafael.

“It’s the first time the whole community has come together on this issue,” said Jei Africa, behavioral health and recovery services director. “It’s not a siloed approach — we’re really talking about how we can all come together and offer coordination of care.” A suicide prevention coordinator will be hired later this year to oversee the strategic plan, Africa said.

Monica Whooley, whose son Gabriel, a senior at Drake High, died by suicide on Dec. 14, 2017, was one of four Marin teens who died by suicide between 2017 and early 2019. On Thursday, after Whooley had seen an advance copy of the Marin County suicide prevention plan, she said it appeared people are getting the message — but that it should go even further.

“There’s been some progress made in different school settings,” Whooley said. “But I think there needs to be a more comprehensive approach, with more consistency across every school.”

At the schools, the Marin County Office of Education is also updating its own suicide prevention and post-incident plan, “Crisis Response: Suicide Prevention and Post-vention Protocols.” The 80-page plan, which has already been updated several times since it first came out last fall, has been presented to all Marin schools that serve seventh through 12th grades, according to Jonathan Lenz, assistant superintendent.

“Regardless of the cause of death of youth, every death should trigger a crisis response on every systemic level — family, school, school district, MCOE (Marin County Office of Education), medical field and county,” Whooley said.

Whooley recommended that groups such as the Marin County School/Law Enforcement Partnership — also called SLEP — act as a public hub to unite the whole community and provide support and information after tragic incidents. She suggested SLEP staff keep minutes of the meetings so there can be public accountability.

Kate Ruehle, whose son Warren, a senior at Novato High School, [died on Feb. 8, 2019, by suicide](#), agreed that there needs to be a coordinated response, whatever the cause of death.

“I think people get too caught up with the silos — whether it was a suicide or a drug overdose,” Ruehle said. “These are sudden, tragic deaths, premature deaths. They are children — and they’re dying.”

Ruehle said she supports the rollout of both the MCOE and the Marin County suicide prevent plans.

“It gives me so much hope, that all the agencies are coming together, instead of working at cross-purposes,” Ruehle said.

Ruehle was instrumental — with Michelle Cortez, assistant principal of Marin School of the Arts at Novato High School — in the recent opening of a comprehensive wellness campus within the broader campus of NHS. Wellness centers already have been put in place in the three comprehensive high schools in the Tamalpais Union High School District — Redwood, Drake and Tamalpais High School in Mill Valley.

Dr. Matt Willis, Marin County public health officer, said the loss of children inflicts enormous trauma upon the community and increases general stress levels.

“It’s important to acknowledge this (trauma and stress),” Willis said. “Finding healing in the community helps us to move on and limits the risk that the incidents will be repeated.”

Willis said the county’s new suicide prevention strategic plan goes a long way in that regard, because it not only deals with prevention, but also with post-incident response protocols.

“With (the countywide plan), we have an answer to the inevitable questions that come up, as to what can be done to prevent (future incidents),” he said.

Ruehle, meanwhile, added she gets great comfort from her friend Michael Pritchard of San Rafael, [a professional comedian](#) and motivational speaker who has devoted decades to helping children and youth in Marin and the Bay Area. “In the words of Michael Pritchard, ‘We need to address folks who are lonely and isolated; we need to be an anchor of love in stormy seas,’” Ruehle said. ““We all need to take a breath.””

THE PLAN

The Marin County suicide prevention plan to be presented Tuesday to the Marin County Board of Supervisors has seven key strategies. Those are:

1. Establish leadership, oversight and accountability to the strategic plan.
2. Develop a coordinated system of care.
3. Launch public campaign to raise awareness on warning signs and available resources.
4. Provide trainings and education to all Marin residents.
5. Provide outreach to all residents — included targeted outreach to groups who are disproportionately affected.
6. Foster safe and healthy environments on all school campuses.
7. Reduce access to lethal means for those at risk.

HOW TO GET HELP

If you need help, or know someone who does, call Marin’s 24/7 suicide prevention and crisis hotline at 415-499-1100.