

Coalition Aims to Reverse Suicide Rate

Imagine yourself at the shopping mall in a packed movie theatre, capacity 320. Suddenly, everyone in the room disappears: 256 males, 64 females. Fifty-eight (19%) are young people, ages 15–24; and 27 (9%) are seniors over the age of 70. The rest are in a mid-age group.

If what just happened seems remarkable, consider that it represents both the number and demographics of suicides that occur during a typical year in Iowa. The male-to-female ratio should have caught your eye (although females attempt suicide more often than males, males are much more successful in their attempts). You also might have noted that nearly one in five of the suicides is a person under the age of 24—in Iowa, suicide is the second leading cause of death in that age group.

Health care and mental health providers, teachers, public health officials and survivors of suicides came together in November, 2005 at the invitation of Polk County Health Department. This first meeting led to the formation of the Polk County Suicide Prevention Coalition, which now has more than 150 members.

When we talk about suicide, our culture almost always focuses on the method. That's wrong. Instead, we should be identifying and talking about the causes: depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and the access to lethal means for those with suicidal thoughts. In many cases, suicide is highly preventable.

During its early years, the coalition focused largely on education and outreach to the community through several active work groups. An awareness-raising walk is held each September at Des Moines Area Community College. Coalition members also are working to have suicide prevention information displayed prominently in phone directories and to produce public service announcements that aim to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness. There is also a work group focused on the unique needs of schools, whose members are sharing suicide prevention resources, crisis plans and training activities. The school group involves Polk County schools, colleges and two school-related agencies.

The Polk County Suicide Prevention Coalition meets on the first Thursday of every month from 8:30 – 9:30 AM at 2309 Euclid Avenue (River Place). Anyone is welcome to attend. For more information about the Coalition, contact the Health Department at 286-3430.

Suicide resources

9-1-1 For a suicide attempt in progress

800-273-TALK (8255) national crisis line

800-SUICIDE (784-2433) national crisis line

Suicide Prevention Resource Center <http://www.sprc.org/>

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention <http://www.afsp.org/index-1.htm>