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ISSUES & articles

about Mental Health in Sedgwick County Government

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## Suicide Prevention is Everybody's Business

One out of every five Kansans who dies from suicide is from Sedgwick County. Each year, there are more suicides in our community than homicides, yet no one speaks of the 16-year-old boy who couldn't handle another day of being bullied at school, or the 87-year-old grandmother who suffered from hopelessness and desperation and how they both ended their lives. Conversations about suicide do not happen openly because it's uncomfortable, and many of us just don't understand it.

Society used to hide chemical dependency, domestic violence, smoking and drunken driving, but in the past 20 years these issues have been brought into the public spotlight for scrutiny, often leading to solutions. But many say mental illness and suicide remain behind closed doors, and will, until we start talking about it.

In 2009, a history of mental illness was reported in approximately 66 percent of Sedgwick County suicides. In our communities, stigma becomes a very real problem for people who have a mental illness. It once was a common perception that having a mental illness was due to some kind of personal weakness. People would hide their feelings, not seek treatment, and in some cases increase the risk of suicide. We now know that mental health disorders have a biological basis and can be treated like any other health condition. Even so, we still have a long way to go to overcome the many misconceptions, fears and biases people have about mental health and the stigma these attitudes create. We could go a long way in reducing our suicide rate by accepting people as they are, removing the social taboo, educating ourselves and helping those in crisis find help.

Suicide can be prevented. While some suicides occur without any outward warning, most people who are suicidal do give warnings. You can help prevent the suicide of loved ones by learning to recognize the signs of someone at risk, taking those signs seriously and knowing how to respond. Learn the **warning signs** of suicide:

- Unrelenting low mood
- Pessimism
- Hopelessness
- Desperation
- Anxiety
- Emotional pain and inner tension
- Withdrawal from friends and or family
- Sleep problems
- Increased alcohol and/or other drug use
- Unexpected rage or anger
- Recent impulsiveness and taking unnecessary risks
- Threatening suicide or expressing a strong wish to die
- Making a plan and seeking access to pills, weapons or other means.

What can you do if a family member or friend mentions suicide? **TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. DO NOT LEAVE HIM OR HER ALONE.** Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings and accept those feelings. Don't be sworn to secrecy. Offer hope that help is available. Take action. Remove the means, such as guns or stockpiled pills. Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide. **Get HELP IMMEDIATELY by calling 9-1-1 or the Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Hotline 24 hours/7 days a week at 316-660-7500.** The topic of suicide will continue to challenge us all to increase our awareness and education. Help us help prevent the tragedy of suicide in our community. For more information about mental health services in Sedgwick County, you can make a confidential call to COMCARE of Sedgwick County at 316-660-7540.