and Dakota County partner on suicide-prevention program

Dakota County is on the cusp of becoming the epicenter of suicide prevention.

That is what county officials and the nonprofit group Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE) say they are envisioning will come from a new partnership formed to create what would be the first comprehensive, community-based suicide-prevention program in the United States.

The program, which was launched last week, involves county government, schools, businesses, community organizations, churches and residents working together in an effort to prevent suicide and developing a model that can be replicated elsewhere.

The initiative comes at a time when mental health and suicide have received increased local and national attention amid more than a decade of rising suicide rates.

"My goal is to have everybody in this county know that one death by suicide is too many deaths by suicide," Dr. Daniel Reidenberg, executive director of Bloomington-based SAVE, said in an interview.

Dr. Dan Reidenberg of SAVE discusses a new suicide prevention partnership Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020, at Dakota County Northern Service Center in West St. Paul. (Courtesy of Dakota County)

Reidenberg, renowned nationally for his suicide prevention and mental health work, helped secure a $440,000 grant by the Minnesota Department of Health. The four-year project will organize and coordinate suicide awareness and education, help for families of individuals who die by suicide, training programs, social marketing campaigns and a research evaluation of the project.

"There’s never been an approach where you can bring together all of the stakeholders in a community," Reidenberg said. "It’s really complex, because there are so many facets and so
many different types of programs. And we have to figure out which evidence-based and best-practices programs to implement on limited dollars and limited resources — people — to have the biggest impact. That approach has never been done.

"Dr. Lanny Berman, suicide prevention expert from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, speaks at Dakota County Northern Service Center in West St. Paul. (Courtesy of Dakota County)

Reidenberg will lead the project with Dr. Lanny Berman, an internationally known suicide-prevention expert from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

The project’s executive committee will include key staff from Dakota County public health, social services, community corrections, veteran’s services, the sheriff’s office and the county attorney’s office.

**COMPARING ANOKA, DAKOTA COUNTIES**

Reidenberg said he picked Dakota County as the implementation site partly because of its work with mental health and connections with the community. Also, Dakota County is alone in that it has a full-time staffer dedicated entirely to suicide prevention.

To see what is working well with the program, the team will conduct a case-controlled study. Reidenberg looked around the state for two counties that are nearly equally matched — and found them in Dakota and Anoka counties.

"Population, demographics, all the different signs, they’re equally matched," he said. "And with a lot of different health indicators, too. Dakota County has — in my mind — better infrastructure and a better system within public health and the county to be able to integrate all the things that we need them to do."

The project team will track baseline data from both counties over the next four years.

"We’re going to infuse Dakota County with everything that we can around suicide prevention and compare that to what’s happening in Anoka County, which is going to get nothing," he said.
Tragically, he said, Anoka and Dakota counties also have a significant number of suicides when compared with other counties across the state. Statistics show that in 2018, Dakota County had 54 suicides, or 12.6 per 100,000 people. Minnesota had 745 suicides (13.2 per 100,000), while nationally there were 48,344 suicides (14.2 per 100,000).

NOT JUST A NUMBER

Shelley Allen walked to the podium at last week’s program launch embracing a framed picture of her husband, Aron, who took his life on Aug. 8, 2018, at age 49.

Shelley Allen of Inver Grove Heights holds a picture of her husband, Aron Allen, who died of suicide on Aug. 8, 2018, at age 49. (Courtesy of Dakota County)

“He’s not just a number or a name that you hear about,” she said.

Aron was so much more: husband of 27 years; father of four children; successful; coach to countless kids.

“All those people that knew him couldn’t help but think he was the last person in the world that they knew who would become a victim of suicide,” said Allen, a resident of Inver Grove Heights. “He would’ve never in a million years wanted to leave everything he had. He loved his family more than anything.”

Needless to say, she said, the family was left “beyond devastated and completely heartbroken”— and with so many questions that forever will go unanswered.

As painful as it was for her to share her story with strangers last week, Allen wanted to support Reidenberg. She said he reached out to her through a mutual friend “when I was at the absolute lowest point in my life. He does wonderful work.”

HOW TO GET HELP

- The National Suicide Prevention lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255) will route people to the nearest crisis center.
- Information also is available online at save.org.
Nick Ferraro

A Minneapolis native, Nick Ferraro joined the Pioneer Press in 1997 after graduating from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. He's been a reporter covering Dakota County communities since 2007.

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