


Two groups look to the community to prevent youth suicide

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Hoping to reach those whom the safety net isn't catching, two groups are teaching community members how to recognize the warning signs and root causes of suicide among youth and young adults.

Angela Duhaime, transition manager for the Southeastern Regional Action Council, or SERAC, said her agency won a \$350,430 grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration on Monday to do just that.

“We obviously are driven by reducing the number of lives lost,” Duhaime said. “But when you start thinking about a person's trajectory to that point, you see a lot of opportunities that were missed.”

In a March report, SERAC said 10 percent of the about 8,500 local middle and high school students it surveyed in 2016 and 2017 reported having seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year. Another 20 percent to 24 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statements “I feel lonely” and “I feel sad most of the time.”

While many schools have counselors and other services in place to recognize and help those struggling with mental health, Duhaime said SERAC is concerned about those who aren't in school, whether because they're home-schooled or have dropped out or graduated.

“We're not duplicating services,” she said. “We're wondering, how do we go beyond that and get into the community? And, can there be even earlier community involvement?”

She said SERAC will use part of its three-year grant, which targets ages 12 to 25, to train members of the Ledyard, Waterford, Montville and Lyme-Old Lyme prevention councils on how to recognize and talk to at-risk youth. Those members then will go into their communities and put into practice what they learn.

The goal is to reduce by 25 percent the number of 12- to 25-year-olds feeling sad and hopeless, Duhaime said.

Duhaime said it's “timely” that SERAC got the grant now because the substance abuse prevention agency **has nearly doubled (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20180424/norwich-based-substance-abuse-group-selected-for-expansion>)** its coverage area from 20 towns to 39 and is increasing its focus on mental health.

At 9.7 deaths per 100,000, Connecticut has one of the lowest suicide rates in the country — likely because of its prevention efforts, Duhaime said — but it still has **seen a 20 percent hike (<https://www.theday.com/local-news/20180611/cdc-says-suicide-rates-rising-steadily-nationwide-and-in-connecticut>)** since 1999.

The state Office of the Chief Medical Examiner said 402 people died by suicide in Connecticut last year but Duhaime said many in her field believe that number is low.

She used overdoses as an example: A medical examiner may only consider one a suicide if there's an accompanying note rather than an accompanying post on a social media website — and it's the medical examiner who makes the call.

“With the technology explosion, the way people express warning signs looks different every 30 days,” she said. “I do support the thought that (suicide) is underreported.”

At the International Field of Conflict Conference in Mashantucket last weekend, Duhaime presented with tribal member Scott Barton, another local leader working to prevent suicide and substance abuse among youth and young adults. The two often bounce ideas off each other.

With a five-year, roughly \$980,000 grant the tribe received from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in 2016, Barton **launched a project** (<https://www.theday.com/local/20170802/mashantucket-pequots-launch-suicide-prevention-program>) called Skeehch Wuyeeekan, Pequot for “good medicine.”

In a project update Barton sent by email, he said he and his team have hosted speakers who addressed addiction and bullying. They helped organize the Children's Mental Health Awareness Day event, in its 10th year. They sent 12 young women and three chaperones to a wellness camp in Oregon, where they learned about other tribal communities and how to better contribute to their own.

The tribe also has looked at how historical trauma — for Native Americans in general and for the Mashantuckets specifically — impacts the mental health and well-being of tribal members.

In the update, Barton said “the real heroes” are those on the Youth Council and the five youth who sit on the Good Medicine Advisory Board.

Barton said because of their efforts, three tribal youth were asked to participate in a webinar for other federal grantees this summer.

“They asked to have a seat at the table and to be involved and they have advocated, educated and opened our minds to what it is like to be a Native youth today — the good, the bad and everything in between,” he said. “I am so hopeful for the future of our community with great youth leaders like that.”

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