

Suicide prevention: It is everyone's responsibility



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This week Albertans learned about the devastating rise in suicide deaths in our province. It is staggering. Alberta has a high rate to start with (higher than Ontario, for example). More Albertans die by suicide each year than in fatal car collisions. And that was before this year's increase. This new trajectory is beyond alarming.

We often talk about the rate, the trends, the causes ... but in light of all of these big-picture concepts we must remember that these are **people**. These are our friends, neighbours, brothers, fathers, daughters, colleagues.

These are people who do not want to die but rather, people in extreme pain – so extreme that the only solution they can see is death.

When people are at the point of considering suicide, they will often put out 'invitations' or signs – they are looking for someone to reach out to them. Be bold! **Ask directly!** The worst thing that can happen is an awkward moment. The best thing that can happen is life-saving. When people considering suicide are asked directly, they say 'Yes'. Your job is to connect them to help. Don't be worried about solving their problem – you can't solve it anyway. Just listen. And connect them to help. (See help lines listed below).

Is this recent increase due to the current economic downturn in our province? While it is too early to determine this, and

not possible to know without a detailed breakdown of the new data, one thing is certain: **the time to act is now**. We need to take suicide prevention seriously in Alberta: **it is everyone's responsibility**.

The Centre for Suicide Prevention was privileged to present to the provincial Mental Health Review this fall. The bi-partisan committee invited online input from all Albertans, ran many focus groups, and hosted formal presentations from 22 organizations, of which we were one. We recommended Alberta implement a coordinated, multi-pronged suicide prevention approach with dedicated leadership reporting directly to the Premier. Suicide goes beyond the scope of the Health Ministry. It cuts across socio-economic lines, ages and ethnicities; therefore, our reach must extend past Health as well.

To reduce the suicide rate, Albertans must all work together and from all angles. There are four best practices in suicide prevention which will begin to affect the rate when employed in a coordinated strategy. They are:

1. **Open and easy access to mental health care:** including province-wide crisis-line access and universally accessible psychological services;
2. **Responsible media reporting:** as we've seen this week - open, thoughtful, candid discussions about suicide, its prevalence, and where to get help;

3. **Restricting access to lethal means:** make it more difficult for people to access things that can kill them. We commend the City of Edmonton for beginning to erect barriers on the High Level Bridge and Calgary Transit for educating all of their train operators in suicide alertness and prevention; and

4. **Education:** everyone can learn about suicide and how to help others. This category includes research, public awareness campaigns, "gatekeeper training" (equipping people with the skills to identify and intervene with people at risk of suicide), and technical training for our clinicians.

Quebec brought their rate down significantly by employing a similar strategy. Saskatchewan has recently extended their crisis-line services throughout the province. British Columbia has just earmarked \$3 million for gatekeeper training province-wide. Nunavut has a newly-appointed Minister of Suicide Prevention. Alberta needs to act now.

As service providers, let's coordinate our efforts. As Albertans, let's start a domino effect: the more we talk about suicide, the more we will erode its stigma, the more people will feel comfortable offering help, and the more people will feel comfortable asking for help. We all have a role to play and together we can beat this silent killer. **Suicide is preventable.**

