

Suicide among the young — searching for answers

More than 50 experts meet to seek solutions

By Melissa Fletcher Stoeltje

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Jordan Harris' suicide spurred her mother to create a foundation.

Last spring, a member of the Child Fatality Review Team, which examines child deaths in Bexar County, approached Marian Sokol and asked a concerning question: What might be fueling a spike in the number of youth suicides?

In 2014, nine children under the age of 18 took that most drastic and irreversible of steps — ending their young lives. That was more than twice the number of any given year in recent times, and approached a high point of 12, set in the early '90s.

Sokol, head of the Children's Bereavement Center of South Texas, called two longtime child advocates in San Antonio, asking, "Who is the local leading authority on youth suicide?" They didn't know. She called her friend Helen Loring Dear, vice president of Porter Loring Mortuaries, and asked the same question.

Dear didn't know either, but spoke of the emotional pain she'd witnessed in families who'd had to bury young ones lost to suicide.

Together, the two set out to find out the main repository of knowledge about youth suicide in San Antonio, and came to a startling conclusion: There was none. In its place was a hodgepodge of local and state agencies and nonprofits, all working on the problem of youth suicide in their separate silos, usually not communicating across lines, often duplicating efforts.

On Friday, Sokol, Dear and more than 50 representatives from a host of entities — mental health groups, state agencies, school districts, advocate organizations and more — came together to confront youth suicide with one voice and perhaps come up with a coordinated solution.

“I want to see something happen sooner rather than later,” Sokol told those gathered for the first roundtable, which convened in a large conference room at Valero. “Our children can’t wait.”

After a nearly five-hour meeting, the group arrived at a host of possible goals, including reducing the stigma around mental illness and suicide among youth, fostering collaboration between the various groups, and improving access to mental health and substance abuse treatment for families.

Sokol said the wealth of information would be analyzed and summarized, after which the new coalition — headed by the bereavement center, Clarity Child Guidance Center and Voices for Children of San Antonio — would reconvene to plan a course of action.

Dr. Anil T. Mangla, assistant director at Metro Health, peppered the group with alarming statistics from the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which drove home the urgency of their discussion.

The survey, based on the self-reports of high school students across the U.S. every two years, shows that students in Bexar County are in line with national percentages when it comes to being at risk for considering and attempting suicide.

For example, almost 30 percent of high school students in the county said they struggled with feelings of sadness and hopelessness in the past year, one of the major markers for suicide risk, Mangla said.

“That is dangerous,” he said. “Kids who felt hopeless were seven times more likely to attempt suicide compared to other kids.”

When it came time to talk about solutions, Victoria M. Bustos with the Region 20 Education Service Center suggested taking the survey data to state legislators. School counselors already are overloaded with cases, she said, and plans to saddle them with even more academic-related work will further strain their ability to help troubled students.

“The data will talk,” she said.

The conference began on a personal note when Ellen Harris of North Richland Hills, a suburb of Fort Worth, whose daughter, Jordan, killed herself in 2012 after enduring six months of depression, urged those assembled to battle the shame that surrounds suicide.

“Our most important mission is to bring this conversation to light,” said Harris, co-founder of the Jordan Elizabeth Harris Foundation, a nonprofit that supports research and education on depression and suicide prevention. “People don’t want to talk about this, but most have some sort of personal story about how mental illness or suicide touched their lives.”

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The National Suicide Prevention Hotline Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255.

Visit www.TexasSuicidePrevention.org for local, state and national resources.