



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO NEWS RELEASE

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THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SUICIDES *Mental Health Experts Release Latest Suicide Statistics; Highlight Warning Signs of Suicide and Encourage People to Get Help*

May is Mental Health Month and County of San Diego officials decided to kick it off highlighting the connection between the economic crisis and suicide.

“These are difficult economic times and the anxiety and strain are bringing more stress into people’s lives,” said Supervisor Dianne Jacob, Chairwoman of the County of San Diego Board of Supervisors. “While it’s true that unemployment and economic downturns are associated with increased rates of suicide and suicide attempts, it’s impossible to determine exactly what factors cause people to end their lives,” added Jacob at a news conference outside the Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA).

Jacob was joined by Nick Macchione, HHSA Director; Dr. Jennifer Schaffer, Director of HHSA’s Behavioral Health Services; Dr. Glenn Wagner, County Chief Medical Examiner; and Stan Collins, representing Community Health Improvement Partners and the Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program.

In San Diego County, the number of suicides increased 17 percent during the last five years, reaching 366 in 2008.

The biggest increase took place in 2007 when the number of suicides reached 356 compared to 313 the previous year. Preliminary data for the first two months of this year indicates that about one suicide is taking place in San Diego County every day.

“The causes of suicide are complex. Research has shown that the majority of people who kill themselves have depression or another mental or substance abuse disorder,” explained Schaffer. “Most people who are depressed do not kill themselves; however untreated depression could increase the risk of suicide. People think about hurting themselves when they feel hopeless, powerless, and despondent.”

Suicide can be prevented. It’s important for people to recognize the risks and warning signs and get help immediately.

Some of the risk factors of suicide include:

- A mental or substance abuse disorder
- Adverse life events
- Family history of mental or substance abuse disorder
- Family history of suicide
- Family violence, including physical or sexual abuse
- Prior suicide attempt

(more)



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Some of the warning signs of suicide include, talking of hurting or killing oneself, hopelessness, divorce or separation, loss of job, increased alcohol or drug use, and isolation from family and friends.

Recently, the County's Medical Examiner's Office reviewed several suicides that could be attributed to financial distress.

"Based on our investigative reports many suicides tend to be impulsive and drastic reactions to temporary conditions," said Wagner. "Some investigations show evidence of the economy being a contributing factor."

The pressure and anxiety generated by the economic crisis are causing more people to turn to the County's Access and Crisis Line for help.

During March 2009, the hotline received more than 7,400 calls; a 2 percent increase compared to the same month last year.

"We believe the slight increase is the result of the harsh economic times. To be sure, in early February hotline administrators began tracking calls related to economic stressors," said Macchione.

From February 6 through the end of March, 33 calls were from people concerned about their finances.

On average, the County's Access and Crisis line receives about 90,000 calls every year. Ninety-six percent of those are from people calling to inquire about mental health services.

Reaching people early is important to avoid or delay the onset of mental illness and decrease the symptoms and intensity of the disease.

The County is developing many new preventive services to increase suicide awareness and provide early intervention. The efforts will be focused on several different population groups including, older adults, individuals exposed to community or domestic violence, people living in rural or Native American communities, and veterans.

Funding for these new services will come from about \$16 million the County will receive annually from the Mental Health Services Act, approved by voters in 2004.

"Suicide is a major public health concern. Our efforts to raise awareness of suicide and mental illness will continue," concluded Macchione.

People in suicidal danger should call 911. Help is also available by calling the County's Access and Crisis Line at (800) 479-3339.

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