September 2023

TEXAS Health and Human Services

Connection to Hope: A Suicide Prevention Newsletter

OMHC - Office of Mental Health Coordination

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Suicide Prevention Awareness Month

The History of Suicide Prevention Awareness Month

Every year in September, suicide prevention advocates around the United States host events and provide trainings to raise awareness about suicide. In 1975, the American Association of Suicidology sponsored the first National Suicide Prevention Week. The goals are to educate and inform the public about suicide prevention, the warning signs, and to decrease stigma, thereby encouraging help-seeking. On September 10, 2003, the International Association for Suicide Prevention and the World Health Organization worked together to dedicate one day each year to share the message that suicides are preventable and provide messages of hope and help. The goal was to direct people who may be struggling with thoughts of suicide to care. World Suicide Prevention Day is now observed in over 60 countries. National Suicide Prevention Week is observed the week corresponding with World Suicide Prevention Day. In 2008, September was first observed as National Suicide Prevention Awareness Month. This September, get involved in an event in your community to raise awareness about suicide and promote help-seeking. Take advantages of opportunities to learn more about how you and others can support suicide prevention efforts. The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) is offering a five-part webinar series highlighting different aspects of suicide prevention. Details about the webinars and registration links are included below.

- September 1, 2023: 11:00 a.m-12:00 p.m. **Dustin Schellenger – Texas Law Enforcement Peer Network: Reducing Stigma in Help-Seeking**; register here.
- September 8, 2023: 12:00 p.m.-1:00 p.m. **Dr. Jonathan Singer – Youth Suicide Prevention**; register here.
- September 15, 2023: 1:00 p.m.-2:30 p.m. **Lessons from Lived Experience: Survivor of Suicide Attempt Panel Discussion**; register here.
- September 22, 2023: 10:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m. **Justin Bohannon – Make a Vet Sweat: Utilizing Physical Fitness and Nutrition to Combat Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Suicide Among Military Veterans**; register here.
- September 29, 2023: 10:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m. **State Suicide Prevention Team-Language Matters**; register here.

Zero Suicide at the Harris County Sheriff's Department

A Safer Tomorrow Starts Today

On July 19, 2023, HHSC's Office of Mental Health Coordination was invited to participate in a full-day training and brainstorming session at the Harris County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) on Zero Suicide implementation. Sheriff Ed Gonzalez of Harris County has committed to taking a new approach to suicide care in the Harris County Jail which includes looking at how the Zero Suicide framework, developed for healthcare systems, can be adapted to work in the county jail setting. "A Safer Tomorrow Starts Today" is a partnership between HCSO and The Harris Center for Mental Health and IDD to focus on key suicide prevention measures for people in custody as well as corrections officers. Participants in the one-day event were tasked with brainstorming creative approaches to implement this unique set of suicide prevention principles in a corrections setting. Conversations, planning, and implementation are scheduled to continue in the coming months as leadership build upon the momentum created from the dialogue at the kick-off session.

Suicide Safe Care in Schools

Best Practice Examples from Three School Districts

It's important for every individual who works at a school to be aware of the risk factors and warning signs of suicide because when people know what to look for, pay attention to those around them and act when they see something, they create a safe and supportive place for students to ask for help. Suicide safer schools do their best to ensure that a comprehensive suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention plan is in place and that all school staff are aware of their role in helping youth.

Here are a few examples of what Texas public schools implemented last school year and what they will be providing this year to promote suicide safe care and overall mental wellness for their students.

Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (ISD), in Houston, has a student population of 116,913 – 20.2 percent African American, 44.8 percent Hispanic, and 21.6 percent White (2021-2022). In September 2022, Cypress-Creek High School hosted its middle school feeder patterns and presented on "Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Resources" from the Emotional Backpack Project with Mental Health America of Greater Houston. Cypress-Woods High School hosted "A Walk for Tomorrow" to raise money for suicide prevention initiatives and services. District-wide initiatives included:

- Suicide Prevention Community Newsletter in English and Spanish
- Spanish Mental Health Awareness Trainings in collaboration with College Baylor of Medicine (Virtual Event)
- Partnership with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to present "Talk Saves Lives" virtual suicide-prevention training.
- District wide parent night presentation with a local mental health provider, The Semi Colon Group, specializing in suicidality and self-harm treatment
- Distribution of suicide prevention PSAs for campuses to present over their announcements or student news CCTV: English and Spanish

Prosper ISD, located in Collin and Denton counties, has a student population of 21,700 – 9.5 percent African American, 16.1 percent Asian, 13.3 percent Hispanic, and 53.0 percent White (2021-2022). In the 2019-20 school year, as part of their strategic plan, the district worked together with students, staff, parents, and the community to implement the Hope Squad program Hope Squad Program in their secondary campuses. A year later, they expanded it to all their elementary schools. Hope Squad is a school-based, peer-to-peer suicide prevention program that trains, and mentors students nominated by their peers to provide outreach with, and support to, fellow students.

In addition to Hope Squad, Prosper ISD held mental health/suicide prevention classroom lessons, lunch activities, and a parent event on mental health and suicide

prevention awareness. This year, one of their professional school counselors will host a podcast series on suicide prevention and mental health awareness and resources for parents.

Bridge City ISD, located in Bridge City along the Texas-Louisiana border, has a student population of 3,090 – 1.3 percent African American, 2.4 percent Asian, 18.9 percent Hispanic, and 73.8 percent White (2021-2022). The school district is one of four school districts, in the last five years, that participated in the Texas Education Agency's Project Advancing Wellness and Resilience in Education (AWARE) grant awarded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Project AWARE is intended to strengthen community and school-based supports for the mental health, wellness, and resiliency of students.

For the last couple of years, the Floral Design students have been creating beautiful flower arrangements containing uplifting messages of hope and resources, such as the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, and placing them throughout their school. Each bouquet revealed unique expressions of the students' feelings, radiating hope, strength, and resilience Bridge City ISD Floral Program. They serve as a constant reminder that mental health is something to be nurtured and cherished, and that reaching out for support is a sign of strength, not weakness.

The Tiny Evie Rocks Story

Providing Hope to Those Impacted by Suicide

Tiny Evie Rocks is a non-profit organization located in Tyler, dedicated to empowering community members to come together, spread kindness, enjoy exceptional music, access local resources, and gain life-saving knowledge. Tiny Evie Rocks was born out of the experience of Michael and Jessica Domingos after the loss of their daughter to suicide. Tiny Evie Rocks started out as a campaign to paint kindness and mental health awareness rocks for others to find in their daughter's honor and has since grown exponentially. This is their story:

"Four years ago, our lives were forever changed by an unimaginable tragedy. Our dear daughter, Evie, who was only 12 years old, lost her battle with the hidden struggles of emotional turmoil and took her own life. The pain we felt seemed unbearable, but from that darkness, Tiny Evie Rocks was born.

In the midst of our grief, we made a powerful choice to transform our heartbreak into something meaningful. We wanted to take action to prevent others from the same pain that shattered our world. And so, Tiny Evie Rocks was created, driven by a mission to bring light, hope, and understanding to the community.

Over the last three years, our organization has grown and expanded its efforts in equipping individuals with life-saving intervention skills through programs such as Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) and AS+K About Suicide To Save A Life Gatekeeper Training. These workshops empower individuals to recognize warning signs, engage in compassionate conversations, and connect those in need to life-saving support.

We didn't stop there. We knew that music has the power to heal, inspire, and unite, and could be used to connect with our community on a deeper level and foster a sense of belonging. We began organizing music-centric events where people could come together, celebrate life, share stories, engage in education, and raise awareness about the strength within. As we continue this transformative journey, we hold Evie's memory close to our hearts, treasuring the joy she brought into our lives. Tiny Evie Rocks has become our way of honoring her, a beacon of light that emerged from the shadows. Through our programs, events, and unwavering dedication, we strive to honor Evie's spirit by spreading awareness, fostering understanding, and bringing hope to all those who need it.

Though the pain of losing Evie will always remain, we have transformed it into a force for good. Every life saved, every heart healed, and every flicker of hope kindled in the shadows reminds us of our purpose. Together, we can build a world where inner strength matters, where nobody suffers alone, and where every young person finds the support they need to overcome their darkest moments. Evie's legacy lives on through Tiny Evie Rocks, showing us the power of love, resilience, and the unshakable belief that even in the face of tragedy, hope will always find a way."

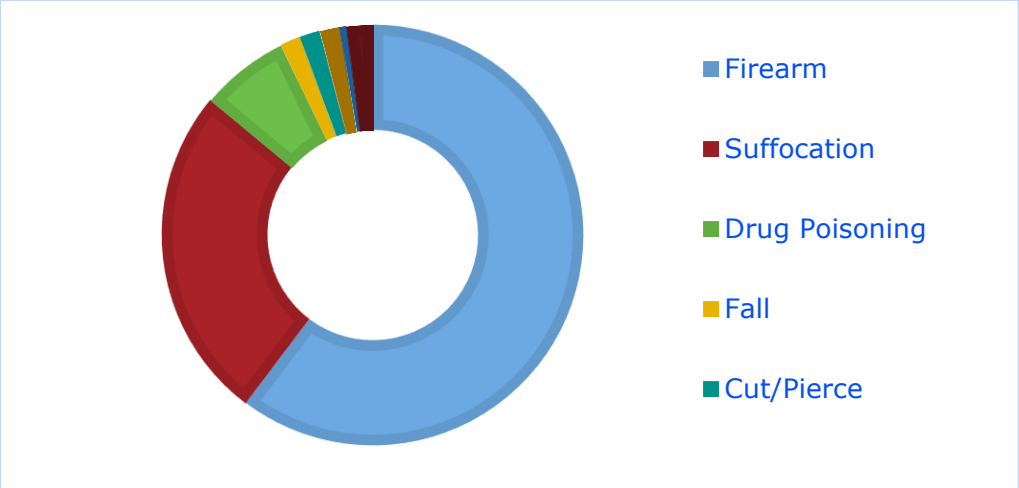
Jessica Domingos,
Executive Director and Co-Founder

Tiny Evie Rocks will be hosting the Evie Rocks Tyler Suicide and Mental Health Awareness concert at True Vine Brewing Company in Tyler on September 9, 2023.

To learn more about Tiny Evie Rocks and their events and trainings, please visit: https://tinyevierocks.org/ or their social media @TinyEvieRocks

Data Corner

2021 Texas Suicide Mortality by Means[1]



Firearms accounted for 60.3 percent of suicide deaths in 2021. This was an increase from 2020 when firearms accounted for 58.3 percent of suicide deaths. For the 2021 national suicide mortality, firearms accounted for 54.6 percent of suicide deaths. Other leading causes of suicide death in Texas include suffocation (25.7 percent), drug poisoning (6.8 percent), fall (1.6 percent), cut/pierce (1.6 percent), non-drug poisoning (1.6 percent), and drowning (0.5 percent). The remaining two percent of Texas suicide deaths were a result of other means.

Self-Care

HHSC is reminding people about the importance of health and wellness through resiliency and hope. Resiliency and hope are two protective factors for maintaining health and wellness. Hope promotes a general positive outlook and resiliency is the ability to recover and continue in the face of adversity. Below are some ideas to maintain your health and wellness:

- Build hope by starting each day in a positive way to have an impact on your mood. You can use a daily mantra or think of five things you are grateful for.

[1] CDC WISQARS

- Keep an optimistic outlook and think about things that you are looking forward to.
- Build a future focus and determine your pathway to get there.
- Build resiliency by being flexible, adaptable, and improvising during unpredictable times. Think of unpredictable things and circumstances as being a learning experience or challenge instead of it being difficult or a problem.
- Keep things in perspective by looking at things in a broader context.
- Make connections with others. Be open to assisting others and accepting help and support when needed.

Together, resiliency and hope reinforce each other and act as powerful supports against life's challenges. These protective factors can contribute to improved mental and physical health, better problem-solving skills, and greater overall life satisfaction.

Share Your Success Story

The State Suicide Prevention Team would like to recognize you! If you have a suicide prevention program, success story, or event you would like to share with others, please email suicide.prevention@hhs.texas.gov to have it featured in the next edition of the newsletter.