

State suicide rates near all-time high

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Early last month around 20 people filled a small conference room at Jacksonville State University. Their purpose was simple and somber — to go about setting up a task force in Jacksonville to inform and educate citizens about suicide.

Suicide rates in Alabama steadily rose every year but two from 2005 to 2013, according to the Alabama Department of Public Health. Data shows the rate in Alabama reached an all-time high of 15 deaths per 100,000 people in 2012, and stayed around the same in 2013, the most recent year for which data were available.

In Calhoun County, the number is even higher, with an average rate over the same nine-year span of 15.5 people per 100,000, according to the department. Several recent suicides have sparked action in the community, including a swarm of prevention signs that popped up along major and minor roadways in Jacksonville and other areas, as well as the task force meeting in June.

Jacksonville city councilman Jonathan Tompkins helped set up the June 8 meeting — his nephew killed himself last August, and his son's friend had recently taken his own life, as well.

"I'm here for my desire to help the community," Tompkins said at the meeting.

Several faculty members of the JSU nursing school were also in attendance, along with experts, councilors, local teachers and multiple people whose lives have been altered forever by suicide.

The meeting was primarily to plan future events and to discuss the best ways to go about educating and helping people. The primary points of discussion involved communication with young people who might be in trouble, as well as removing the stigma associated with mental illness and depression.

"The stigma about mental health, we see that might be a reason why," rates have increased, said Abby Litorsky, suicide prevention and intervention educator at Crisis Center Inc. in Birmingham.

Litorsky was at the meeting in Jacksonville in June, and spends much of her time going to schools to educate children on mental health and suicide.

The reason for statewide and nationwide increases in suicide rates isn't immediately clear, according to Sarah Khalidi with Public Health.

"It's hard to tell," she said. "There could be several reasons why that is."

Khalidi mentioned the recession as a possible reason suicide rates have steadily risen, but also said many other factors could be involved.

Gun ownership is likely a significant factor, according to Litorsky.

“We know if someone has access to a weapon, and has thoughts about suicide, that puts them at a greater risk,” she said. “You can survive an attempt with a gun, but you’re more likely to survive another method rather than firearms.”

Litorsky said men are more likely to use firearms than women, and that’s why the suicide rate for men is so much higher, she said.

According to the American Association of Suicidology, women are three times as likely to attempt suicide, while men are much more likely to be successful. Statistics from the organization show the national suicide rate for men in 2013 was 20.6 per 100,000, while the rate for women was 5.7.

“It’s not to say that women wouldn’t use a gun, or that men wouldn’t use another means,” Litorsky said. “But there is a relationship there.”

Litorsky said that 51.5 percent of successful suicides in the U.S. involve firearms. In Alabama, that number is 69 percent, according to the Department of Public Health.

Numbers also show that white people in general are much more likely to kill themselves than non-white people. According to the Association of Suicidology, white Americans successfully commit suicide at more than twice the rate of non-white Americans.

But Litorsky also said that the jump in Alabama’s rate doesn’t seem as large as it might immediately appear.

“To my knowledge ... it’s not a huge difference to me,” she said. According to Litorsky, Alabama consistently ranks somewhere in the 20s in suicide rate by state. According to the Association of Suicidology, yearly rates for states are subject to variability, and conclusions shouldn’t be taken from a single year’s worth of data. However, data shows Alabama’s suicide rate has steadily increased over the course of several years.

“We’re seeing the number of suicides in general going up,” she said. “I’m not sure why, in Alabama, that’s gone up. That’s why it’s so important that people have access to those resources.”

Access to mental health resources, she said, is one of the biggest factors associated with suicide rates. Rural areas tend to have higher rates, and sparsely populated Western states tend to make up the top of the list, she said.