Families, communities are hurting
Kansas is one of many states trying to address a rise in the number of youth suicides; it has created a new state-level position to strengthen prevention

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“Suicide among teens and young adults reaches highest level since 2000”
“How suicide quietly morphed into a public health crisis”
“Teen suicides are reaching record highs, forcing schools to ‘break the silence’”

This is just a sampling of the headlines that have become the norm throughout the United States in recent years. In my home state of Kansas, we continue to grapple with the stark reality that there aren’t quick answers or proven solutions to prevent youth suicides. Unfortunately, in fact, we have moved dramatically ahead of our neighboring states in youth suicide rates — and often lagged behind these same states in taking legislative action.

However, we have begun to take some important policy steps. We’re requiring school-based prevention training, for example, and more recently, we devoted a position within state government to meet our state’s new aspirational goal — zero youth suicides.

Here is a closer look at what we’ve done so far in Kansas, and what lies ahead.

Step 1: Require training in schools
Between 2005 and 2015, the number of suicides by Kansas 18 years old and younger more than doubled. Our legislative response in 2016 was to pass the Jason Flatt Youth Suicide Awareness Act (SB 323), making Kansas the 19th state to take such action since 2007. In our state, the bill was sponsored in memory of Cady Housh, a Kansas teen who took her own life the day after learning her high school soccer teammate had committed suicide.

Under SB 323, statewide suicide-prevention training is required of all school employees. Approved by the Kansas Board of Education, this training must take place every year and be at least one hour in duration. Under the law, too, each school must have a crisis and recovery plan that it can implement in the wake of a student’s death by suicide.

Since passage of this law, in hearings held by our Senate Education Committee, we’ve learned that SB 323 is viewed as a positive step by students and parents; however, implementation in each school district has been spotty.

To make matters worse, SB 323 didn’t stem our state’s rising tide of suicides: Between 2016 and 2017, there was a 50 percent increase in the number of reported youth suicides (from 20 to 32).

Step 2: Gather ideas to do more
To further investigate this disturbing trend, Kansas Attorney General Derek Schmidt (through a collaboration with the Tower Mental Health Foundation) created a state task force to review our state’s prevention efforts and develop new policy recommendations.

It was an honor to serve on this task force with leaders in education, mental health, law enforcement, social work, the legal system and health care. We received compelling information on the scope of the problem. For example, a survey of our state’s students (sixth-, eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders) showed that:

• 29 percent of the student respondents reported depression symptoms,
• 18 percent had considered suicide and 12 percent went so far as to make a suicide plan, and
• 5 percent reported attempting suicide.

Our task force met monthly, traveling across the state to conduct day-long meetings and receive testimony from a wide range of people — yes, national experts, but also family members and professionals who have been directly affected by youth suicidal ideations or suicides.

By the end of last year, we were ready to release our list of recommendations.

Step 3: Invest in prevention coordinator
That list included the aspirational goal for Kansas of zero youth suicides. We also saw the need for someone in state government to lead us in moving toward this goal.

Earlier this year, following the task force’s recommendation, the Kansas Legislature passed HB 2290, which created the position of youth suicide prevention coordinator within the state attorney general’s office. Gina Meier-Hummel became our state’s YSP coordinator in August.

When I talked with Gina in mid-September, she told me that she had spent her first month meeting with and listening to state agency employees.

Next, Gina will have these workers play substantive roles in assisting communities throughout Kansas to build action plans to prevent youth suicide. Meanwhile, she has begun traveling the state to meet with family and community members personally impacted by suicide.

“The bad news is we have a lot of hurting families and communities,” she said to me. “We are clearly behind other states in addressing this epidemic.”

“The good news is there are many impactful efforts occurring across our state in certain regions, and the state agency staff, providers and advocates are starting to work well together.”

She added this about the importance of HB 2290: “The approval of this position, the fact that it’s codified into state law, has created a real sense that the issue of youth suicide in Kansas is receiving the focused attention that is needed.”

Next step: Find new ways to reach teens
Gina, state agency staff and others are participating in conversations to update the state’s suicide prevention plan — last revised in 2014. By increasing the collaboration with individual providers and communities, we can better target funding for prevention action plans and improve the capacities of our local communities.

Gina also has been learning from the experiences of other states on how to reach and help teens struggling with depression and/or considering taking their own lives — for example, the use of tip lines and apps.

“It’s my hope that we will know the cost to implement a statewide app and have a detailed plan by the time the Legislature returns in January,” she told me.

When we do return, I remain prayerful that my colleagues will join me in keeping our sights on taking important steps toward achieving the aspirational goal for having zero youth suicides in Kansas.

Sen. Molly Baumgardner is chair of the Kansas Senate Education Committee and also served on the Kansas Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force.

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