

## Officials encourage efforts to curb suicide

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People just don't talk about it.

Because of the stigma surrounding suicide, its statistics are reported less often than other deaths.

But in an effort to save lives after losing her husband to suicide in 1996, Rose Blakey-Phillips said she realized more discussions needed to begin.

Blakey-Phillips started Wiregrass Suicide Prevention Services five years ago inside A Place to Renew in downtown Dothan. The business offers services to residents considering suicide and to the families of those who have lost loved ones to the deaths.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention reported about 679 – or about 14 suicides per 100,000 people – in Alabama in 2009, which the Alabama Department of Public Health reported was the highest rate in the state since 1960. The number of suicides was 38 percent higher in 2009 than the number of homicides in the state, according to the health department.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported suicide as the 10th national leading cause of death in 2010, with one suicide for every 25 attempts.

Firearms were the leading method in Alabama, according to the state health department.

Blakey-Phillips said 90 percent of suicides are underlined by a mental health issue, such as alcoholism, depression and drug addiction.

While she said the largest number of suicides takes place in April, she said an underlying feeling of hopelessness that can lead to suicide can increase around the holidays due to more drinking, drugging or domestic violence.

“Things get out of control and sometimes people that get overwhelmed don't know where to go for help,” she said.

“One person can be in deep financial trouble and face it, and another be in deep financial trouble and see their only way out as suicide. When we get our identity or our self esteem from our job or money, then when the economy affects that, it makes us feel as though we are nothing.”

Dale County Sheriff's Capt. Marlos Walker said law enforcement's hands are often tied in taking action specifically relating to a person making suicidal threats.

But he said the threats are often connected to domestic incidents that lead to other crimes, such as murder-suicides.

According to the National Institute of Justice, risk factors for murder-suicides include a prior history of

domestic violence, access to a gun, increased threats with increased specificity or a prior history of poor mental health or substance abuse, especially alcohol.

“You always want to talk someone down that is considering taking their life but you especially want to assure the lives of others are not threatened also,” Walker said.

“You see suicides that are often related to some kind of domestic incident.”

While a multi-hour standoff between Dale County Sheriff’s deputies and a gun-wielding Dothan man who authorities said was suicidal last month ended when the man surrendered, Walker said similar situations can often end in multiple deaths.

Blakey-Phillips said a key to assist residents considering suicide is to first remove the means.

“Don’t just hide a gun because they will find it,” she said. “Lock the medicine cabinet and remove knives or things that would be used in suffocation.”

Blakey-Phillips said family or friends of someone threatening suicide should always speak respectfully and should never become angry or suggest the person continue through the process, assuming the person won’t do so.

She also suggested encouraging the person to seek help.

“You can’t force mental health on somebody,” she said. “All you can really do is gently and kindly talk them down ... and encourage them, sometimes not just on one encounter but many.”

Blakey-Phillips said a support group for families and friends who have lost someone to suicide meets at 6 p.m. every second and fourth Monday at A Place to Renew. She said she also hopes to start a hotline soon for local residents contemplating suicide, although there are other local and national resources.

“There have been instances where people have said they would have called a local hotline if there was one, and I do get some references nationally, but there’s something about having local help in realizing your pain is the same as someone else’s,” she said.

“I think that doing this kind of work has really helped me with a lot of my own healing.”