

High school group working on bullying/suicide prevention initiative

By January Rutherford - 10/20/17 11:12 PM

A major public health problem in Indiana is taking the lives of many teenagers.

It's not a virus or infection that can be spread from person to person, and it can't be cured with medication.

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among Hoosiers age 15 to 34 and the third-leading cause among 10- to 14-year-olds, according to the 2017 Suicide in Indiana Report.

Students in Seymour High School's Jobs for America's Graduates program don't want to see another classmate and friend think about, attempt or commit suicide.

They are coming together to find and implement ways to prevent suicide and bullying at the schools and in the community as part of a community service initiative.

The issue is one all JAG programs in the state are tackling, said Seymour JAG specialist Celeste Bowman.

JAG is a state-based national nonprofit organization that assists students with barriers to success by helping them

overcome challenges in order to graduate.

The class focuses on project- and service-based curriculum to help students develop leadership, organizational, conflict resolution, verbal and written communications, time management and other job-related and employable skills. Students receive career preparation and life skills training while in school and one year of adult mentoring after graduation to ensure their continued success.

"According to the data, 9.9 percent of Indiana high school students report they have attempted suicide in the past 12 months, and 19.8 percent reported seriously considering attempting suicide in the past 12 months," Bowman said. "That scares me."

If those figures were used for Seymour High School, it would mean about 148 students have attempted suicide in the past year and about 297 have seriously considered it.

"That's just going off the state percentages. I don't know how accurate those are for our school corporation," she said. "I do know I've had

students who have told me they have attempted suicide or have considered suicide."

For Jackson County, the suicide rate is listed at 13.4 suicides per 1,000 people, but Bowman believes that number is low.

"Since May or June, I know of five people who have died by suicide in Jackson County," she said. "One of those who died was one of my JAG graduates."

Paige Underwood, a current Seymour JAG student, said many of the conversations she and her classmates have had about the problem revolve around how to prevent bullying and keep suicide from happening.

Although there's not a proven direct cause and effect between bullying and suicide, that doesn't make bullying OK, Bowman said.

"What the research shows is persistent bullying can lead to worsening effects of isolation and rejection and exclusion, which leads to depression and anxiety, which contributes to suicidal behavior," she said. "So the vast majority of young people who are bullied don't die by

suicide. Most people have multiple risk factors.”

Underwood said she knows of many students who have attempted suicide and said there is no program currently available at the high school to identify and help those students.

Principal Greg Prange said school counselors work one-on-one with students to try to address issues.

A group of counselors from the schools is working to build a suicide protocol and prevention framework for the school corporation, said Assistant Principal Catherine DuBois.

“There are some needs for being able to identify that beyond self-reporting and students being aware and paying attention to their peers,” DuBois said. “We want to be able to identify that ahead of time.”

Bowman also is working with Lin Montgomery with the Jackson County Health Department to offer training for teachers on dealing with students with suicidal thoughts. That training will be conducted sometime after the winter break, Bowman said.

During the annual JAG Indiana training event over the summer, Nathan Harmon from Kokomo spoke about his battle with eating disorders, divorced parents, drug addictions and suicidal

thoughts with JAG specialists.

In 2009, Harmon was drinking and driving and was involved in a wreck that killed the passenger in his car, Priscilla Owens Boswell. He served nearly four years in prison for his actions.

With support from the Owens family, who forgave him for the death of their daughter, Harmon has dedicated his life to spreading the message that “Your Life Speaks!” emphasizing that everyone’s life is important and that everyone has the ability to overcome all obstacles and situations.

He now travels the Midwest speaking to thousands of students and inspiring them to not give up on life. The Seymour JAG program is working to bring Harmon to Seymour to present five convocations this school year. The first two programs will be Nov. 14 for students at Seymour High School.

Harmon will speak to the public at a communitywide event during the evening Nov. 17 in the SHS auditorium and then will return in the spring to talk to students at Seymour Middle School and the Seymour Middle School Sixth Grade Center.

Bowman said JAG has invited several service providers, including Centerstone, Christopher and

Associates, Schneck Medical Center and Mental Health America of Jackson County, and faith-based groups to attend the presentations in order to provide information to students and the public on resources dealing with suicide that are available in the community.

“Right now, we are in the process of searching for corporate and business sponsors,” Bowman said. “Our goal is \$3,000 to provide these five events.”

There are different levels of sponsorship available, including platinum at \$1,000, gold at \$500, silver at \$250 and bronze at \$100.

Seymour JAG already has collected \$1,700.

“We’re getting closer to our goal,” Bowman said.

Also as part of their efforts to address suicide, bullying and other issues teens are facing today, JAG is planning to make a program called “Stay Sharp” available to local schools to be offered during health classes.

The program, which is funded through a grant, is provided by Teen Challenge, a residential substance abuse recovery program in Kokomo. It is led by teens who share their stories of making bad decisions and the consequences those decisions had not only on them but on their families.