



# Maine Legislative Youth Advisory Council

## ISSUE BRIEF: SUICIDE PREVENTION

*“Suicide is the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death for youth aged 15-24 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> leading cause of death for youth aged 10-14”.*

-- Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the percentage of Maine’s high school students who seriously considered attempting suicide has significantly declined.<sup>1</sup> However, in 2005, 13 percent of high school students reported having seriously considered attempting suicide and 6 percent actually attempted suicide, indicating that it remains a very real and serious public health issue affecting Maine youth. In response to this concern, the Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC) identified suicide, suicide behavior, and its prevention, to be among its top policy priorities.

Maine has been a leader for other states in its effort to focus on youth in developing a state-wide suicide prevention plan. In 1998, three years after Governor King appointed a Task Force on Adolescent Suicide, the Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program (MYSPP) was established. As a priority initiative of the Governor’s Children’s Cabinet, the MYSPP established a 24-hour suicide hotline, trained educators and others who work with youth in prevention strategies, and encouraged the integration of suicide prevention information into comprehensive school health education.

### MAINE YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAM (MYSPP)

Maintaining its efforts to raise public awareness of suicide and suicide prevention, the MYSPP recognizes evidence that, in many cases, suicide is preventable. Central in its work with state and private sector agencies and individuals are these common goals:

- To increase public awareness about suicide prevention;
- To reduce the incidence of suicide behavior among Maine youth aged 10-24; and
- To improve youth access to appropriate prevention and intervention services.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the MYSPP has made a difference since its beginning in 1998, though its true impact has not been measured and remains unknown. The MYSPP is challenged with meeting the needs of a diverse group of stakeholders, connecting with youth across Maine, and evaluating the overall impact of its work. The LYAC’s objective is to learn from Maine’s youth about how it can help address these challenges and lend itself towards the accomplishment of the MYSPP goals.

### RISK FACTORS

According to the MYSPP, there are several risk factors known to be strongly associated with suicide behavior. Understanding these risk factors is an essential step in suicide prevention. They include:

- Mental illness, depression and /or anxiety
- Conduct disorder / poor impulse control
- Alcohol and/or substance abuse
- One or more prior suicide attempts
- One or more very stressful events, transitions, or losses
- Suicidal ideation and threats of suicide
- Detailed plan for a suicide attempt
- Access to lethal weapons
- Exposure to suicide or suicide of a family member / friend
- Feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness and helplessness

## LEGISLATION

Many school officials are seeking guidance in the development of comprehensive suicide prevention and intervention, as well as guidelines to assist their personnel in responding to suicidal behavior. The U.S. Surgeon General and clinical experts nationwide promote the adoption of suicide prevention protocols by local school districts to increase the safety of at-risk youth and to protect school personnel and the entire school community.

To this end, Maine law requires the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education to “develop a teenage suicide prevention strategy and model suicide prevention program to be presented in the secondary schools of the State”, (34B, § 3007). Maine law also requires schools to work with local public safety, mental health and law enforcement officials to develop crisis response plans to deal with crisis and potential crisis situations involving violent acts by or against students in every school administrative unit, (20A, §1001, sub-§ 16).

## POLICY QUESTIONS

In thinking about how LYAC’s role in the legislative process can address the issue of suicide, suicide behavior and prevention, consider the following policy questions:

- Awareness - One of MYSPP’s messages to youth is, “Suicide is never a good solution to one’s problems and it is not the one most young people choose.” What are some ways to get this message across to Maine youth? What are other ways to raise awareness about suicide and suicide prevention in Maine? What role might the media play?
- Subject Sensitivity - It is important to provide information about suicide rates to increase understanding and awareness of the problem without dramatizing, glorifying, showcasing or otherwise portraying the act of suicide as a common response. With these considerations in mind, how should this kind of data or information be presented appropriately?
- Services - How can youth access to appropriate prevention and intervention services be improved? How can the act of seeking help be destigmatized?
- Risk Factors - What can schools do to address some of the risk factors that are identified to be strongly associated with suicide behavior?
- Training - In addition to trained professionals, should others be trained in suicide and crisis intervention? Who? Teachers? Youth? Coaches? Councilors? Parents?
- Impacts - One of MYSPP’s biggest challenges is to measure the impact it is having on the number of suicide-related incidents. What are some ways that these impacts could be measured?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program, Official website for youth.

<http://www.state.me.us/suicide/youth/index.htm>

Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program, Official website

<http://www.maine.gov/suicide/>

Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Intervention and Postvention Guidelines: A Resource for School Personnel, Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Program, May 2002.

<http://mainegov-images.informe.org/suicide/docs/guidelines02.pdf>

Winthrop Community Study: A Summary of Findings, Maine Youth Suicide Prevention, November 7, 2005.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Maine Chapter

<http://www.afsp-maine.org/index.html>

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<sup>1</sup> Maine High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results, 2005, <http://www.mainechsp.com/survey.html>