

Officials: Reported suicide attempts, safety checks spike in The Woodlands

Area groups mobilize to offer support, prevention

BY **ANDREW CHRISTMAN**

With reported suicide and attempted suicide rates increasing in Montgomery County and throughout the state of Texas, local officials are examining strategies to combat the rising numbers.

In the area patrolled by Montgomery County and Harris County law enforcement officers in The Woodlands, the number of reported suicides or suicide attempts has grown from 25 in 2016 to 115 in 2018, according to statistics provided to The Woodlands Township from Montgomery County Sheriff's office in its annual report.

CONTINUED ON 56

SUICIDES A GROWING CONCERN

The number of responses to suicides or attempted suicides has been rising in The Woodlands since 2013.



*Includes data from Montgomery and Harris Counties.
SOURCE: MONTGOMERY COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE / COMMUNITY IMPACT NEWSPAPER

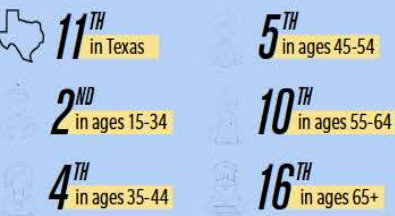
EDUCATION GUIDE

- 36** EDUCATION Local health care offerings increase
- 37** BY THE NUMBERS Statistics from The Woodlands area



43 DINING FEATURE Mary'z Mediterranean Cuisine

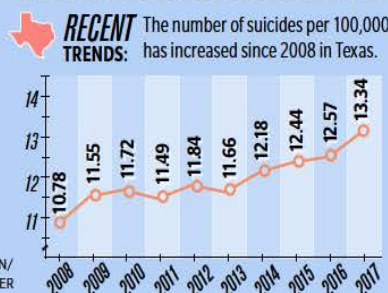
SUICIDE AS A LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH



SOURCE: AMERICAN FOUNDATION OF SUICIDE PREVENTION / COMMUNITY IMPACT NEWSPAPER

From 1999-2016, there was an **18.9% INCREASE**

in the suicide rate across the state of Texas.



The number of suicides per 100,000 has increased since 2008 in Texas.

POTENTIAL SIGNS OF THOUGHTS OF SUICIDE

Experts say certain signs may indicate an individual is at risk for suicidal thoughts or attempts, but there are steps others can take to help them. Here are some signs to watch for:

- Feeling like a burden
- Being isolated
- Increased anxiety
- Feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Increased substance use
- Looking for a way to access lethal means
- Increased anger or rage
- Extreme mood swings
- Expressing hopelessness
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Talking or posting online about wanting to die
- Making plans for suicide

SOURCE: CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION / COMMUNITY IMPACT NEWSPAPER

CONTINUED FROM 1

Precinct 1 Justice of the Peace Wayne Mack spoke of the statistics at The Woodlands Township board of directors meeting Jan. 23 and discussed what is being done to combat the issue.

"We need to have a community response," Mack said. "Collaboration is the key; everybody needs to be on the same page."

A 'SILENT EPIDEMIC'

Montgomery County saw an average of two or three successful suicide attempts per week last year, Mack said. He said his inquests indicated there had been around five suspected suicides in the previous 10 days this year.

"Suicide, in our nation, is a silent epidemic," Mack said. "It is the second-leading cause of death between the ages of 10 and 35."

Following Mack's presentation, board of directors Chairman Gordy Bunch said the statistics he has seen indicate there is a higher number of attempts in affluent communities, such as The Woodlands, which he believes are because of the expectations and pressure to succeed and do well.

"There are people that don't present like they have suicidal tendencies," Bunch said. "And yet they still occur. Mental health is an issue that is hidden a lot of times."

Another issue across

the state is a lack of resources for those seeking help for their mental health. The Woodlands area has multiple nearby offerings, such as Montgomery County Youth Services, Tri-County Behavioral Healthcare, and The Woodlands Behavioral Health and Wellness Center, but Mack said he believes there still are not enough psychiatric hospitals across the state.

"I believe there are 150 or 160 counties in Texas that don't even have a psychiatrist ... in their county," he said.

Part of the battle against suicide, he added, is raising awareness.

"Any understanding and education we can provide to our citizens about this issue, I think will be empowering," Mack said.

Evan Roberson, executive director of Tri-County Behavioral Healthcare, said the organization's number of patients in need of crisis services have increased over the past three years, with last year showing a growth of nearly 20 percent and this year anticipated to be the same.

"In the first four months of the year, we had already utilized half of our total funding," Roberson said. "Usually, the first four months are our slower months. We're concerned about the pace we're on for folks showing up in crisis. A lot of those people are

suicidal ... but we're seeing an increase in persons seeing crisis mental health care across our service area."

Despite the increasing numbers, Roberson said there are positives as well, as he believes the numbers show the stigma of seeking help is beginning to fade.

"You can't underestimate population growth. Montgomery County is literally just getting bigger; some of the increased demand is a factor of that," Roberson said. "More people are saying, 'I have a problem, I'm going to get treatment.' Previously, people just buried it."

LOCAL, STATE EFFORTS

While the number of suicides across the state and county has been increasing in recent years, The Woodlands Township has actually seen a slight decrease in suicides from 2017 to the present, Montgomery County sheriff's office Capt. Tim Holifield said.

"For 2017, Montgomery County recorded 11 suicides in The Woodlands Township," Holifield said. "In 2018, we had 10 suicides in The Woodlands Township."

What the sheriff's office is seeing spike, however, is the number of welfare checks on people contemplating

suicide and successful interventions in The Woodlands Township. Holifield said there has been an increase in the number of welfare checks from 47 to 111 there.

"We have actually intervened and gotten them help," Holifield said. "We're seeing those numbers trending up, and that's what it should do. It's a law enforcement response to a community problem."

However, Justice of the Peace for Precinct 3 Matt Beasley said any number of suicides is a problem for the community.

Mack has formed a community task force to continue facing the issue head-on.

The task force will meet for the first time May 16 at the Lone Star Convention Center in Conroe, which Mack said will be promoted through social and traditional media.

Local groups formed to increase suicide awareness include Cassidy Joined for Hope. The organization, led by founder and The Woodlands resident Kim Hess, who lost her daughter to suicide in 2015, focuses on spreading awareness in area schools to prevent teen suicide.

"We knew the answer and part of

STEPS FOR HELPING SOMEONE AT RISK

1. Recognize warning signs
2. Contact friends, family members or mental health professionals
3. Ensure the person is in a safe environment



SOURCE: CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION / COMMUNITY IMPACT NEWSPAPER

the solution had to come from the teens," Hess said. "We were able to start a student-led school club."

The first club was established at College Park High School, and it has expanded to schools including the Lone Star College-Montgomery campus. The organization brings in guest speakers, and members have monthly discussion topics. The goal of the group is to get students to look out and care for each other, Hess said.

State legislators are also weighing in on the issue. State senators Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, and Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, announced their support in a Feb. 13 press release of Senate Bill 10 in the legislative session, which will "establish a partnership among Texas health institutions on statewide mental health research and strengthen

judicial training on juvenile mental health."

While SB 10 focuses on identifying and getting help for at-risk youths, it would also establish the Texas Child Access Through Telemedicine program to connect at-risk students with behavioral health assessments and intervention programs.

The press release states Texas Senate leadership has increased the budgeted state funding for mental health by \$750 million to a total of \$7.6 billion.

Locally, members on The Woodlands Township board of directors expressed an interest in raising the awareness of suicide, which Mack said would inspire other communities to do the same.

However, what Mack said he would like to see members of the community have the most is hope.

"If we can give people hope that are in crisis, that's the biggest part of the battle," Mack said.

GRIEF AND RECOVERY

While there are resources available around The Woodlands area for helping to cope with mental health issues, groups such as Survivors of Suicide provide resources for family members and friends of suicide victims.

Facilitated by Jenny Lee in The Woodlands, the group encourages attendees to speak about their loss to help with the grieving process.

"We talk about getting through the holidays ... family issues and how to handle guilt," Lee said.

The group has seen gatherings as small as two and as many as 15 attend to seek help with their grieving process, according to Lee.

"Grief is a process you have to go through," Lee said. "You have to let yourself go through it and feel all of the emotions. You don't ever get over it, but it does get better. You have to work your way through the process."

She said she feels Montgomery County is taking the right steps in getting the word out about the indicators of suicide.

"Hopefully, that is going to help the stigma go away so people won't feel afraid to ask for help," she said. "It's a mental health issue. If you have a heart attack, you get help for your heart. This is like help for your brain."

Mack said he hopes the task force he is forming will add to the dialogue.

"What we want to try and do is bring together everybody that wants to have a conversation about suicide prevention, awareness and mental health first aid," he said.

Tell us what you think. Comment at communityimpact.com.

PLACES TO FIND TREATMENT

The Woodlands area is home to many resources for individuals and their families seeking support services.

- 1** Tri-County Psychiatric Emergency Treatment Center
706 FM 2854, Conroe
- 2** The Woodlands Integrative Care Hospital
1006 Windsor Lakes Blvd., Ste. 200, Conroe
- 3** Montgomery County Youth Services
8701 New Trails Drive, Ste. 118, The Woodlands
- 4** The Woodlands Behavioral Health and Wellness Center
2700 Research Forest Drive, Ste. 130, The Woodlands
- 5** Grace Point Counseling Center
9201 Grogans Mill Road, The Woodlands
- 6** Interfaith Community Clinic
101 Pine Manor Drive, Oak Ridge North
- 7** Family and Youth Institute
25511 Budde Road, The Woodlands
- 8** Summit Counseling
295 Sawdust Road, The Woodlands

