

Coming together

by [ALYX CHANDLER](#)

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Photo by Alyx Chandler.



Suicide, the 11th leading cause of death in the state of Alabama, poses an even greater risk to students and young adults. It is the third leading cause of death for Alabamians ages 15-24, according to the Alabama Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In 2018 alone, two seniors from Oak Mountain High School and one senior from Chelsea High School died. With the recent tragedies in the 280 area, the community and schools have come together to show solidarity and spread a message about suicide prevention awareness.

It was because of the recent student deaths that Laney Gagnon and fellow OMHS moms created the event "Gather: A Call to Community Prayer." The event, held on April 8, was attended by several hundred parents, students and Shelby County residents. It was a response to a student-led prayer vigil held after two OMHS students died over the course of a few weeks, Gagnon said.

Kim Bailey, Shelby County Schools Counselor Coordinator, said that several local organizations have also come to their aid, including the Alabama chapter of American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) and animal-based therapy organization Hand in Paw, in addition to licensed counselor professionals volunteering their time to speak to students.

"In Shelby County, we really want to make sure that parents, students, teachers, all of our staff and all of our administrators are fully aware of the signs and symptoms and the resources for students who are struggling," Bailey said.

Tracie Blackmon, the AFSP public policy chair for the Alabama chapter, recently presented *Talk Saves Lives*, a program that goes over suicide statistics, causes, signs to watch for and advice for how the community can help, at the Chelsea Community Center on April 9 as a first step in introducing suicide prevention to the community.

"We really want to work together to get similar programs in other schools in Shelby County," Blackmon said. "This is the first of its kind being presented in Chelsea, and the need is definitely here already. I hope to give the entire series of educational program to our community because I believe we need it."

Alabama was ranked 50th out of all states for its access to mental health care, according to Mental Health America, and that poor ranking is part of the suicide problem in the state, said AFSP Alabama Area Director Ashley Foster.

"Research shows about 90 percent of those who attempt or die by suicide have a mental health condition, whether it's diagnosed or undiagnosed, treated or untreated," Foster said. "With such limited access to mental health care, lifelines are the best option in some situations."

Foster said that although suicide hotlines are essential resources for students in need, AFSP and Shelby County Schools want to work together and change the dynamic for Alabama students by offering them more accessible mental health and suicide prevention resources.

Involvement

Foster said that although the Alabama Suicide Prevention Plan hasn't been updated since 2011, the state did experience positive change when the Jason Flatt Act was signed into place in May 2016.

According to the Jason Flatt Act, local schools must adopt a policy on student suicide prevention and implement two hours of annual suicide awareness and training programs for teachers and administrators. Since the act passed, Foster said they've seen an increased demand in their services providing education to schools, and expects to see even more schools reach out to them as the year progresses.

"I know that after the [February] suicides occurred," Foster said, "one of the moms [of the deceased] reached out to me because she said she really felt like they needed more education for the parents."

Bailey said they've been in the planning stages for a new mental health outreach initiative for Shelby County Schools since the beginning of the 2017-18 school year. The new program, which they hope to implement in the upcoming school year, will educate on mental health community-wide and "work to get rid of the stigma that mental health has in our community." Bailey said they plan to use the mindset that everybody has mental health, and they want each and every child to have good health, mental and physical.

Bailey said they also plan to offer more programs for parents.

"We address it in the schools with teachers and students but what we are going to do in this instance is talk to community members, talk to parents, stakeholders, as well as our resources we have in the county to make sure everyone know what is available in the schools and what programs we can help provide to the families," Bailey said.

Foster said AFSP wants to "be there in any shape or form that we can," and that they've been in discussion with the schools about possibly doing an on-campus Out of the Darkness Walk next spring.

Foster said ASPF offers many other programs for schools, including more documentary screenings,

More Than Sam initiatives for parents, students and teachers, safeTalk training to become a suicide alert helper, an online suicide prevention training called SignsMatter: Early Detection, Talk Saves Lives and additional community programs that she hopes more schools take advantage of.

Bailey said they will soon be coming out with more details about their new mental health outreach initiative.

The Gatekeeper Approach

Cindy Wiley, the former Counseling Supervisor for Shelby County Schools who now works in a private counseling practice in Birmingham, said one of the hardest parts of dealing with depression and suicide ideation is that "it just doesn't always look like what you think it is."

Even though the younger generation is more involved with their own mental health, Wiley said it can still be difficult for them to notice a decline. That's why the "gatekeeper approach," she said, which refers to everyone in the community watching out and being actively aware of warning signs in each other, is so important.

"If you see something or someone or they say something to you, remember that it doesn't always sound like 'I want to die.' Sometimes it sounds like 'I don't want to be here anymore' or 'I'm really tired of this' or 'I don't know how much longer I can do this.' It's not always a very straightforward conversation," Wiley said.

Not only will adolescents "bottle it up," Wiley said, they are egocentric in nature and can sometimes perceive that no one else could understand them. Brains don't fully develop until they reach 25 or 26 years old, she said, so this makes the age group more vulnerable to impulsive decisions and tragic responses. In addition, certain groups like people who identify as LGBTQ, Blackmon added, suffer nationally from more suicides than straight people.

"I think the school counselors are doing everything they can do with everything they have," Wiley said. "They are really the de facto mental health person in the school but sometimes they are the only counselor with 800 kids."

When students, teachers or parents see someone that isn't acting like themselves, is overly isolated and doesn't seem okay, she encourages them to let a teacher or school counselor know that they might need support. Another option is for parents to reach out for treatment from private practices in the area.

It's never just one thing, Foster said their research has shown over the years. It's when struggles add up and "multiple things convene together at once to give that experience of hopelessness and despair."

Depression is treatable, Foster emphasized, and the combination of medication and psychotherapy is usually most effective.

"It's like if your body gets sick, you would go to a professional to get it treated. With your brain, it's the same deal. Go to a psychologist or a psychiatrist, or if it is a crisis situation, go to the emergency room because it is life or death in a lot of these situations," Foster said.

Blackmon said the first step in suicide prevention is to ask if the person is okay; the second step is to stick with that person; and the third step is to remove the means of suicide.

"I think adolescents get a bad rap because we do only see their behavior. A lot of times we need to look past that behavior and really get to see what is really going on. We see the behavior, then we

react to just the superficial part of the behavior and that's just a manifestation of their emotions," Wiley said.

Whether it's a friend, youth minister, school teacher, coach or parent, the gatekeeper approach focuses on developing relationships with each other to be aware in more than just a parental way, Wiley said. If there is an urgent problem, she suggests calling the Birmingham Crisis Center phone line.

Abby Litovsky, the Birmingham crisis and suicide line program coordinator, said when you call the crisis line, a trained volunteer will answer and listen to whatever you have to say, whether it's processing an issue, venting about a problem or questions about finding resources for a situation.

"Everyone needs and deserves someone to listen," Litovsky said. "Our volunteers are non-judgmental and provide empathy and unconditional positive regard in a genuine way to provide whatever the caller needs."

Go to afsp.org more information about suicide prevention.

RESOURCES:

-Teen Link text services: Teens can text 205-382-5465 and talk to trained counselors about anything. The text messages will be kept confidential.

-Crisis Lines: Locals can call the Birmingham Crisis Line at 205-323-7778 to talk on the phone with a trained counselor 24/7. If the line is busy, call the toll free National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

-Help finding treatment: Go to findtreatment.samhsa.gov to find support groups and local counselors and psychiatrists in your area.

- Psychology Today: To view profiles of local counselors and psychiatrists before setting up appointments, go to psychologytoday.com.

-Out of the Darkness Walk- sign up to join the community suicide survivors and in walking to raise money for suicide awareness and to commemorate those they have lost.

-Emergencies: Never hesitate to call 911 for emergencies.

Tags

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#), [suicide prevention](#), [mental health](#)

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May 10, 2018 6:00 PM - 7:00 PM

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ENTERTAINMENT

[PJ Story Time](#)

May 10, 2018 6:30 PM

[North Shelby Library](#)

COUNSELING & SUPPORT GROUPS

[GriefShare](#)

May 10, 2018 7:00 PM

[Faith Presbyterian Church](#)

EDUCATION & LEARNING

[Great Give 2018 Hoover](#)

May 8, 2018 - May 9, 2018

[Hoover Public Library](#)

EDUCATION & LEARNING

[Greater Shelby Chamber Small Business Mentorship Program](#)

May 11, 2018 8:00 AM - 11:15 AM

[Greater Shelby County Chamber of Commerce](#)

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[Wake Up to Wellness](#)

May 11, 2018 9:00 AM - 11:00 AM

[St. Vincent's One Nineteen](#)

CRAFTS

[BYOC - Bring your own crochet \(craft\)](#)

May 11, 2018 10:00 AM

[Chelsea Public Library](#)

EDUCATION & LEARNING

[BYOC - Bring your own crochet \(craft\)](#)

May 11, 2018 10:00 AM

[Chelsea Library](#)

EDUCATION & LEARNING

[Bottles and Brushes with Elizabeth Polland](#)

May 11, 2018 6:00 PM - 9:00 PM

[Cat-n-Bird Winery](#)

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