

# Partnership in Action: The Bucks County Suicide Prevention Task Force

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"The Suicide Task Force will cast a wide net for membership and must include professionals in private and public practice of mental health, clergy, educators, survivors, the Coroner's office, funeral directors, medical professionals, and emergency responders," said Bucks County Commissioner Diane Ellis-Marseglia. With these words, the Bucks County Commissioners including Commissioner Chairman Rob Loughery and Commissioner Charley Martin, not only unanimously approved the formal commencement of the Bucks County Suicide Task Force in September 2013, but set a tone of partnership and shared governance for this ongoing major county initiative.

The Bucks County Suicide Task Force is unique in that way. Although the project was sponsored by County government, leadership of the task force is a shared public-private partnership at the chair level as well as through multiple committees that have a community participation focus.

While the task force has overarching goals of reducing

stigma, increasing the number of individuals seeking support, supporting individuals who have lost loved ones to suicide, and decreasing suicides in the county, most of the work happens through community involvement in subcommittees including the following:

- Suicide Prevention Adult Subcommittee which works to provide face to face education in the community regarding suicide prevention.
- Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force whose mission is to reduce the incidence of youth suicide through collaboration with school communities.
- Families Subcommittee, whose goal is to provide support for survivors of suicide, help raise awareness, have an active role in suicide prevention, and advocate for legislation that supports the improvement of the mental health system and treatment options.
- First Responder Subcommittee which has three primary goals: helping first responders cope with responding to suicides, prevention among first responders, and educating first responders about helpful things that they can do or say when they work with survivors.
- Transition Age Youth Subcommittee, which focuses on identifying the best ways to prevent suicide among young adults in their late teens and early twenties.

Most of the accomplishments of the task force have come

through the work of the subcommittee partnerships that allow professions and community members to unite around an area of expertise or passion of the individuals participating.

Much has been accomplished in the three years that the Task Force has been in existence including the Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) initiative designed to educate Bucks County employees and community members to recognize the signs of suicide development of a First Responder Hotline and our Bucks County Suicide Prevention Walk.

## **Question Persuade Refer (QPR) Initiative**

In September 2017, Bucks County introduced an exciting opportunity to provide education to Bucks County employees through the QPR Initiative. Bucks County collaborated with Magellan Behavioral Health to provide a train the trainer course for county employees and behavioral health providers. 19 professionals were trained to instruct on QPR. The goal of the initiative is to train all Bucks County Employees and community stakeholders such as, First Responders, Primary Care Physicians' Offices, Schools, etc. QPR Gatekeepers are trained to understand and recognize a mental health crisis. They learn the warning signs that someone may exhibit when they may be contemplating suicide and are given the language to talk about suicide. They can help with the simple QPR steps and by providing hope. 20 trainings

were scheduled and offered to all Bucks County Employees. In addition, the Bucks County Correctional Facility has included the training as part of their mandatory in-service training for all correctional staff. Other trainings were offered to staff in Mental Health residential providers, Lenape Valley Foundation, Magellan, Pennel Mental Health Center, Educators, and Bucks County Community College students. To date, more than 300 participants have been trained as QPR gatekeepers.

## **Bucks County Suicide Prevention Walk**

This year the Task Force teamed up with many of the County school districts for a collaborative event that took place on Sunday, April 30, 2017 at 10:00 am, at the Bucks County Technical High School, in Fairless Hills. The "Hold on You Matter," walk goal was to raise awareness and money in order to significantly reduce the number of deaths by suicide each year. The event was marketed through various media outlets resulting in more than 500 participants who took part in a successful community event that raised more than \$50,000. The money raised will support suicide prevention efforts throughout the County.

## **First Responder Hotline**

A new level of support is being offered to our first responders in Bucks County, and a peer helpline was developed based on a Warmline model. Warmline

provides support, a listening ear and can provide information about available services. The First Responder Support Team (FiRST) which is supported by the crisis program LVF, began taking calls in January of 2017. The FiRST group consists of active and retired first responders who volunteer their time to receive calls, 24/7, to offer a supportive ear to any first responder in need. Initial calls are triaged by a trained crisis worker to assess if there is a need for crisis intervention. If the caller is not in need of crisis intervention then a volunteer is contacted to provide outreach to engage the caller.

The Task Force also supports other projects including an annual prevention conference that is sponsored by one of our largest providers, Lenape Valley Foundation.

Additionally, Lenape Valley Foundation was selected as one of 20 organizations nationwide to be a part of this year's learning community on Zero Suicide and is the lead agency for an annual Candlelight Vigil held every fall.

Presently, the County is planning for an awareness walk scheduled for Spring of 2017. The walk is the direct result of collaboration among our County of Bucks Commissioners and several local school districts.

The Task Force partnership also has many more tangible accomplishments in the short time it has been in existence including creating business cards that are distributed specifically to first responders in postvention efforts. This is the card that will be used to contact the County to send a basket of resources to the family after a

suicide.

One of the biggest accomplishments of the Task Force has been the posting of National Suicide Prevention Lifeline signs at train stations system-wide. The signs offer a number (1-800-273-TALK) that is available to provide help 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The local hotline will be supported by another of the County's community partners in suicide prevention, Family Services Association. This number has also been posted on all of the Bucks County Transport vehicles that provide transportation services to individuals throughout the county.

While many agencies are doing good work in this area, in Bucks County it is our strong belief that we will only achieve our Task Force mission "through advocacy, education, prevention, intervention, and postvention we will work to eliminate suicide" if we first focus on the **"we."** This Task Force is a community-wide partnership of county government, private providers and professionals, and caring members of our Bucks County community. Together we will continue to move forward until we achieve that mission.