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'Your world stops.' Whitewater School District ramps up suicide prevention

By Jonah Beleckis jbeleckis@gazettextra.com Aug 12, 2018



Lanora Heim



WHITEWATER

When Lanora Heim wakes up to go to work, she doesn't expect to take a student to a funeral home to pick out a casket for the student's parent.

She doesn't expect to inform a student that one or both of the student's parents had died.

But this year, she's had those days.

In late June, Heim, the Whitewater School District director of pupil services, went before the school board and told them suicide was a serious problem in the district and surrounding area.

As the one who sometimes is tasked with giving the news or stepping in to help a student who lost a parent, Heim explained how the district could address suicide prevention.

"I don't know people would realize the level of school district support," she said. "Your world stops. Everything else in your job and your world stops, and you figure out what you can do for them at that moment."

Through the Jefferson County Department of Human Services, the Whitewater district is a part of a Zero Suicide group aimed at enhancing suicide prevention and intervention resources.

“We’re very seriously working on what can we do to have some prevention and intervention that’s successful,” Heim said.

In the same month she spoke with the school board, she also presented elsewhere on supporting emotional needs of students. She pointed to 2017 data that showed:

- 29 percent of students felt sad or hopeless almost every day for a period of two weeks or more.
- 23 percent of girls and 6 percent of boys seriously considered attempting suicide in the past 12 months.
- 7 percent of girls and 3 percent of boys attempted suicide at least once in the past 12 months.

Zero Suicide is a national organization. Jefferson County Human Services Director Kathi Cauley said the local group started in 2015.

The Whitewater School District joined within the last year, Heim said.

Cauley and Heim both said crisis contacts from those younger than 18 have been dramatically increasing in recent years.

“It’s really escalating,” Cauley said.

Data on the number of student suicides was not immediately available, but Heim said she could think of at least two students who took their own lives in recent years.

Whitewater has had its own suicide prevention curriculum, but Heim said they are ramping it up.

Instead of a once-a-year, state-mandated presentation, she wants to integrate more material throughout the year for all students.

“We don’t want to just do, like, ‘OK, what’s the required, you know, tornado drill to do once a year or something,’” she said.

“We want to do something that’s really helping children and giving them some skills and things to do to actually prevent it.”

As part of the suicide prevention training, participants receive green laminated cards.

They include six questions from the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale Screen.

They’re kept handy for whenever someone might start discussing suicide or related thoughts.

“A lot of school district members carry that around,” Heim said.

And Heim hasn’t used those questions only for students.

“I’ve had to do that with children. I’ve had to do that with parents. I’ve had to do that with staff members even,” she said.

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- The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 24/7 free and confidential support for people in distress and resources for loved ones, 1-800-273-8255 <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>
 - Rock County crisis line: 608-757-5025
 - Walworth County: 262-741-3200 or 800-365-1587
 - Jefferson County: 920-674-3105