Suicide: A Tale of Access

Written by Patty Schachtner, State Senator 10th District
Friday, 22 June 2018 08:05

http://newiprogressive.com/images/stories/S5/depression-suicidebygun-s5.jpg

Ease of access to firearms contributes to suicide risk, as does lack of access to mental health resources in many communities. We can reduce the suicide rate, but we must recognize it is an epidemic driven in part by systemic, policy decisions.

SOMERSET, WI - Suicide has touched communities across the nation. The deaths of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain – like all deaths from suicide – are tragic. While tragic, their deaths refocused the national attention on what is a growing suicide epidemic.

Recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that suicide rates in the United States increased by 25 percent between 1996 and 2016.

Behind these numbers are lives. Stories that were cut short. Suicide is also a story - but one of access: ease of access to firearms and lack of access to mental health resources.

More than half of all people who die by suicide use a firearm – the most lethal method for suicide. Wisconsin's rate is even higher - nearly three in four who die by suicide use a firearm. Close to 85 percent of suicide attempts by firearm are fatal. In contrast, five percent of people who attempt suicide through other widely-used methods die.

A suicide attempt by firearm is near-instant. There is not the same level of planning required compared to other methods, meaning there is less time for people to reconsider or seek help

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during an attempt.

The time between suicidal thoughts and a suicide attempt is important because of how it relates to impulsivity. A 2001 study regarding suicide attempts and impulsivity found that 70 percent of people spent less than one hour between considering suicide and committing an attempt; 24 percent said less than five minutes. Not having a firearm can reduce the effects of impulsivity, and in turn, reduce the number of suicide attempts among individuals who are in that mental state.

Ease of access to firearms can also contribute to elevated suicide risk. Most notably, this includes unsecured storage of firearms at home. Researchers found that gun owners who practiced safe storage of firearms at home were 60 percent less likely to die from a firearm-related suicide, relative to gun owners who did not safely store their firearm.

Unsecured storage of firearms has implications for children too. In 2016, 633 children committed suicide with a firearm. Many of these children found the firearm at home: unlocked, easily accessible, and loaded.

Compounding this problem is the lack of access to mental health resources in many communities. In Wisconsin, 46 of its 72 counties contain federally-designated mental health professional shortage areas. Mental health shortages make it difficult for individuals contemplating suicide to seek professional help. It also makes it more difficult for individuals with a mental illness, who are at greater risk of suicide, to receive care.

Rising suicide rates are an epidemic, and it is an epidemic driven in part by systemic, policy decisions.

Wisconsin's suicide rate has been higher than the national average for all but one year between 2008 and 2018. We can reduce the suicide rate, but we need to have real conversations about where we are and where we want to be.

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If you or someone you know is considering suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK [8255]. Trained counselors are available 24/7.

State Senator Patty Schachtner represents Wisconsin's tenth senate district. The district covers parts of Burnett, Dunn, Pierce, Polk, and St. Croix counties. She serves as the chief medical examiner for St. Croix County and has investigated deaths by suicide. She is a gun owner and practices safe gun storage methods.