

Suicide; Listen Up to Save Lives

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Sen. Smith writes about meeting suicide prevention advocates in western Wisconsin and Madison. It is important to stop the stigma around mental illness and understand what action we must take.

EAU CLAIRE, WI - Recently I joined 700 community members at Carson Park for the Sharing Hope Walk, a fundraiser to promote awareness for suicide prevention. Before the walk began, I read a board describing the walk's importance. Right below the board, there were hundreds of shoes lined up neatly along the course. When I read the bottom of the board, I learned the empty shoes symbolized the number of community members that died by suicide.

Once I saw the empty shoes, I truly understood what brought people there that day. The thoughts I had to share could not compare to the stories I heard from the other speakers. As tears came to my eyes, I realized how fortunate I was to be there with these remarkably strong people who all lost someone dear to them.

In this moment, I knew I was there to listen. As an elected official, it's what I love to do. People share their joy and grief with me because they want to make a difference in their community.

When community members use their advocacy skills to make a difference, it helps legislators, like me, understand community concerns.

The people at the Sharing Hope event wanted change so others would not go through the horrific grief they experienced. One mother shared a compelling story about her son who attempted suicide a dozen times. Her son survived each attempt and was inspired to stay alive because of the kindness of another young man. After he told his new friend that his day “sucked,” he told him the day wasn’t done and things would get better. Unfortunately, her son’s friend and new hero died in a car accident before he could have a full life. Now, when he’s down, he visits the grave of his hero and reflects on that day and how he must keep going.

However, not everyone has a hero to keep them going. We need to continue to use our voice to smash the stigma around mental illness. Policymakers must listen to the advocates and experts to provide resources for those struggling. I will continue advocating for mental health funding for our schools, additional healthcare resources for our communities and proactive solutions to prevent suicide.

Firearms must be part of the suicide prevention discussion. According to Everytown for Gun Safety, firearm suicide makes up two-thirds of all gun deaths and half of all suicides. Also, firearm suicide disproportionately affects rural areas; suicide by firearm rates are 58% higher in rural areas than in urban areas.



Last week, I joined many of my Democratic colleagues to introduce the Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPO) bill to prevent suicide among those most at-risk. ERPO provides a civil process for families or law enforcement to petition a court to temporarily remove firearms from individuals that may be at risk of harming themselves or others. This process is similar to obtaining a temporary restraining order in cases of domestic abuse, child abuse or harassment.

The ERPO proposal is one step we must take to address this issue. It’s been proven effective in 17 other states and Washington D.C., to significantly lower the number of suicides by firearm. We must act and make sure resources are available so family members can protect the ones they love and make sure they know there are better days ahead.

When my colleagues introduced the bill, I was surrounded by healthcare providers, mental health professionals, and activists from Moms Demand Action. Every member of the group had a reason for being there and a story to share. Elected officials need to listen up – we have an opportunity to save lives.

Remember, there are resources available if you or someone you know is struggling. Please visit the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention resource page at afsp.org/find-support/resources/ for a complete list of services.

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