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Walk, Compassion Rally to focus on suicide prevention Thursday in Port Angeles

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PORT ANGELES — A walk and Compassion Rally to raise awareness for prevention of suicide is planned Thursday.

Walkers will gather at City Pier at 4 p.m. and then move up Lincoln Street toward Peninsula Behavioral Health's main office at 118 E. Eighth St., where six people will talk at the Compassion Rally at 5 p.m.

The walk and rally are organized by the Clallam County Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness and Peninsula Behavioral Health.

Suicide is often the culmination of a battle with mental illness, said Rebekah Miller, development coordinator for Peninsula Behavioral Health.

The message of the event will be to understand the healing properties of compassion, according to Debbie Fredson, Peninsula Behavioral Health case manager and NAMI board member who has spearheaded the walk and rally.

"We want to reduce the stigma around mental illness and instill the importance of compassion for self and others," she said.

"If people are informed and aware of support and services, we can build a resilient community to prevent suicide."

Said Miller: "So few people talk about suicide.

"Families who lose a person to suicide often don't get the compassion of those who lose a family member to illness, so we want to start a conversation about that, so people know how to broach the subject.

"I think the world is becoming aware that this is a big problem," Miller added.

The International Association for Suicide Prevention of Washington, D.C., has designated Thursday as World Suicide Prevention Day.

Suicide was the 10th leading cause of death in the United States in 2013, when 41,149 people took their lives, according to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Ga.

That year, suicide was the second-leading cause of death nationwide for those between the ages of 15 and 34.

Clallam County has had 51 deaths from suicide between 2008 and 2010, according to a

community health assessment issued in 2012.

From 2008-10, the rate for Clallam County was 20.9 per 100,000 people, higher than the state rate of 13.4 per 100,000.

The rate in Jefferson County for the same time period was 10.2 per 100,000.

Among the most public suicides have been those from Port Angeles' two Eighth Street bridges, which span Valley Creek and Tumwater Truck Route.

Four deaths by suicide from the spans have been reported since 2009, when the city replaced bridges built in 1936.

The new bridges have 4-foot-6-inch wall railings and stand 100 feet above the gorges.

In 2014, the city of Port Angeles installed signs on the bridges with crisis hotline phone numbers urging those contemplating suicide to call Peninsula Behavioral Health, located three blocks east of the spans.

In April, City Councilwoman Cherie Kidd received consent from her council colleagues to seek grant funding for higher railings to serve as suicide-prevention barriers on the Eighth Street bridges.

On Thursday, those walking to the rally will carry signs and walk to the beat of therapist Erran Sharpe's drum.

Sharpe will be one of the speakers, all of whom will focus on advocacy, support and community education.

Among them will be Dr. Joshua Jones, Peninsula Behavioral Health's medical director, and two clinicians from the agency: Lucille Celestino and Kim Ykema.

Also speaking will be Suzanne Debey, a retired social studies teacher who is the lay leader at the Congregation Olympic B'nai Shalom in Port Angeles and Unity minister Rev. Barb Wilson.

They "will offer their distinctive perspectives on compassion and how to reach out to someone with depression," Miller said.

Isolation increases the risk of suicide, Miller said.

"Conversely having strong social connections protects against it," she added.

She emphasized the value of listening.

"Whether you are looking at somebody who is contemplating suicide or who has lost someone to suicide, the best thing to do is to listen to them in a non-judgemental way," she said.

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