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Nampa, ID 83686
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FOR YOUR INFORMATION

The Idaho Statesman

Boise, Idaho

Wednesday, March 28, 2018

Betsy Z Russell

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'Suicide is everyone's problem.' Now, schools will be better trained to stop it

All Idaho school personnel must be trained in suicide awareness and prevention, under legislation that Gov. Butch Otter and suicide-prevention advocates celebrated at a ceremony in the governor's office on Wednesday.

The governor had earlier signed HB 634, the Jason Flatt Act, into law; it takes effect July 1. Idaho is the 20th state to enact such legislation. It's not expected to cost the state any additional money, as the training will be included in existing in-service training programs for teachers and other school employees, and will tap into readily available training programs.

"The Jason Flatt Act brings youth suicide prevention education to Idaho," said Shannon Decker, executive director of the Idaho Suicide Prevention Coalition. "It's been a long road and this is a crucial first step, but it's only a first step. It's going to take a lot more voices and words and people stepping up to make this really come to fruition in this state."

Decker said numerous organizations in Idaho have come together to bring about this and other steps toward suicide prevention in the state, including "impactful legislators who've been persuasive in talking with their colleagues to help us bring this to the governor's desk."

[Related: Idaho has a gun violence problem. But it's not mass shootings.]

The bill's lead sponsor was Rep. Caroline Nilsson Troy, R-Moscow. A half-dozen senators from both parties attended the ceremony in support of the bill, along with numerous suicide-prevention advocates.

Sen. Mary Souza, R-Coeur d'Alene, told the crowd, "Thank you for all you have done in communities. ... Up in my district, which is Coeur d'Alene, we just had a tragic loss of one of our school principals to this very problem. And no one knows the complications that drive someone to this decision. But we are concerned, because as an authority figure, his actions are translated to all of those students in our district. So we have to fight even harder now to explain to students how to deal with their life problems and give them the support that they need."

Otter said he asked Souza to speak at the ceremony because of the Coeur d'Alene death. Coeur d'Alene High School Principal Troy Schueller died last Wednesday.

"Suicide is everyone's problem," the governor said. "I used to think how selfish that kind of an act was, especially when I lost a really good friend that I had no idea - I wished that in some way he would have sent me a signal, that there was something I could say. ... This is a great opportunity for us all to reflect on ourselves and

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reflect on the needs that those around us have, and we never know. ... It's a day-to-day, minute-to-minute effort that we all have."

Idaho had the 8th highest suicide rate in the nation in 2016, 57 percent higher than the national average; it is the second leading cause of death for Idahoans age 15-34 and for males up to age 44. In 2016, 351 Idahoans died from suicide, nearly one a day.

In recent years, Idaho has stepped up its response to the problem. In 2016, lawmakers created the state Office of Suicide Prevention with \$1 million in ongoing state funding, including state funding for the state's 24/7 suicide prevention hotline. An array of groups committed to carrying out a coordinated statewide suicide prevention plan.

Lt. Gov. Brad Little said, "I will tell you from my experience as a legislator, awareness of this is much higher today than it was five years ago. You can tell by the number of legislators here."

Stewart Wilder, president of the Live Wilder Foundation, which is dedicated to preventing youth suicide, said, "This is a very emotional day for me. This is a piece of legislation that really sets us on the right path moving forward really toward comprehensive suicide prevention in our state - comprehensive prevention, treatment and diagnosis. It all came about really because we're all working together, collaboratively, with all of our stakeholders."

Wilder, who lost his son to suicide at age 17, recalled an early conversation with Sen. Marv Hagedorn, R-Meridian, as the state's suicide prevention coalition was forming. "He said, 'This is brilliant - this is what we need in our Legislature,'" Wilder recalled.

"To all of our legislators, we can't thank you enough for your support to move this through," he said. "Every time we're alerted to the loss of a child, I go back to our horrible night. Whatever we can do to keep another parent from feeling that kind of grief and the turmoil and the fallout that comes with it, it is something that is worth fighting for, and we're all going to get there."

IF SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS IN EMOTIONAL CRISIS Call the Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or text HELLO to 208-398-4357. Warning signs to watch for: Talking about wanting to die. Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live. Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain. Talking about being a burden to others. Increasing use of alcohol or drugs. Acting anxious, agitated or recklessly. Sleeping too little or too much. Withdrawing or isolating themselves. Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge. Extreme mood swings. Other things you can do to help: Do not leave the person alone. Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide. Listen. Allow expressions of feelings. Accept the feelings. Be nonjudgmental. Don't debate. Don't lecture on the value of life. Don't act shocked. This will put distance between you. Don't be sworn to secrecy. Seek support. Offer hope that alternatives are available but

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do not offer glib reassurance. Take action. Remove means, such as guns or stockpiled pills. Get help by calling the hotline or visiting Suicidepreventionlifeline.org. Source: Suicide Prevention Lifeline

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