

Town of Acton
Commission on Disabilities (COD)
November 4, 2016
SPECIAL MEETING
Conversation about Community Involvement
in Suicide Prevention

MINUTES

Members Present: Madeleine Harvey (Chair), Nancy Corcoran, Danny Factor, Lisa Franklin

Members Absent: Cindy Patton (Vice Chair)

Associate Members Present: Joan Burrows, Leslie Johnson

Others Present: Laura Ducharme (Acton Community Resources Coordinator), Nadia Franciscono (Visitor), Franny Osman (Board of Selectmen Liaison), Lydia Ewing-Tolley (Visitor)

The meeting was called to order at 1:05 pm.

Ms. Tolley introduced herself, explaining that she is the parent of a student and a graduate of Acton-Boxborough High School (ABHS). She explained the concern and worry that she and her children and others are experiencing around recent suicides at (or following graduation from) ABHS. Ms. Tolley suggested that depression is a major concern in this context, and that community assistance is required if a solution is to be found.

An open conversation took place for the remainder of the meeting. Salient points of the discussion were as follows:

- Medication often can exacerbate the problem. For example, while helping depression, anti-depressants may also cause enough of a stimulant effect to actually allow an individual to take action (such as suicide) that s/he might otherwise not have had the energy or wherewithal for.
- Danny's Place in Acton seems committed to this problem and is hosting a special meeting on November 15th which is open to the public for further discussion on the matter, featuring speakers from the *American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*.

- In addition, there are several other meetings taking place (one already had been held) around this issue. Details were shared via email. These include meetings with Good Grief, and the Riverside Community Care/Trauma Center,
- COD feels the need for additional education on this topic, which is why the special meeting was called.
- Ms. Tolley will send us more information. She feels that group therapy is needed at the schools, in addition to the various events mentioned above.
- Ms. Osman shared a quote from a professional, that asking someone “Are you thinking of killing yourself?” can be very effective in prevention
- It was pointed out by Ms. Tolley that the kids feel powerless and scared. While depression is treatable, there is stigma involved with seeking help.
- Ms. Franciscono suggested the importance of groups exclusively for kids, without parents’ involvement, so that these adolescents feel more comfortable coming forward and expressing their concerns and feelings.
- Ms. Harvey suggested that in addition to depression/mental illness, many other factors likely play a role in teen suicide, such as pressure at school, pressure from parents, overly full schedules resulting in no free time, bullying, homosexuality, opioids, alcohol, social media and more.
- Ms. Johnson described the situation as “the perfect storm,” taking into account all of the possible causes of suicide among high school students and recent graduates.
- Other groups were mentioned that might be helpful, including Acton’s Resident Isolation to Engagement (RITE) committee formed in 2015, and organizations such as Whole Health Action Management (WHAM), Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP) and Compassionate Friends. There is also an Awareness Foundation for Suicide Prevention.
- While the ABHS was commended for its handling of the situation, it was also suggested that more needs to be done, and that while the superintendent had suggested a brief moratorium on homework, the word “achievement” was used in the same paragraph (subtext?) which may not be helpful in this situation.
- All commission members agreed that there is no “blame” to be placed on the school or any administrators, but there was a discussion of what more could be done, or how it could be done differently.
- Ms. Ducharme said that on the basis of calls she has been receiving, “kids are scared.”

- Ms. Corcoran added that introverted youth are not always taken seriously, and are at risk. She also mentioned that she had heard that absenteeism was up since these tragedies.
- Ms. Franciso and Ms. Tolley also mentioned the striving for perfectionism, which sometimes comes from the parents, but often from the students themselves.
- Ms. Corcoran raised the question of whether some of these problems may begin in Middle School, and had this been addressed by the Town? Everyone present agreed that this was relevant.
- Ms. Harvey emphasized the need for a holistic approach: we need to take into consideration the many factors that may lead to teen suicide, not only depression. She also suggested that with respect to recent graduates now in college, they may be facing another whole set of challenges (suddenly finding themselves to be small fish in a large pond) and we need to consider that when grouping them together with ABHS tragedies.
- It was mentioned that based on reports/articles we have seen, the highest suicide rate is among 19-24 year olds, so it stands to reason that the pattern continues as these young people enter college.
- Others points briefly mentioned:
 - Showing kids articles on the subject of suicide may not be helpful. That might just result in their obsessing about it and not being able to change their thought patterns
 - Acton conducts a regular annual survey (Youth at Risk) and publicizes the results
 - It is a “different world” now, with social media often playing a role in these issues, and resulting in less personal connection with others
 - COD’s role (especially with its self-education topic of mental illness and ongoing topic of independent living) should begin with educating ourselves about depression; we may wish to make this a priority for the coming year
 - COD should be added to the Acton school mailing list. Ms. Osman (BOS Liaison) will raise this at the next Board of Selectmen meeting.
- It was agreed that this was an excellent and important meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:15 pm.

Minutes Respectfully Submitted,
Joan Burrows and Madeleine Harvey

