

July 16, 2018

ABOUT

Rising Female Suicide Rates a Concern for Virginia

The rate of female suicide in Virginia has climbed 24 percent since 2010. Nationally, the rate of female suicide has risen 50 percent since 2000, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While males continue to be a large majority of those who die by suicide in Virginia (76 percent in 2016), and the rate has increased for men as well, this trend among women is troubling and requires further examination from Virginia mental health stakeholders.

Mental health is commonly a factor in many suicides with some studies of select cases showing up to 90 percent of those dying by suicide have an underlying mental health illness. However, many conditions go undiagnosed. The CDC reports that up to 54 percent of those who die by suicide do not have a diagnosed mental health illness at the time of death. Over 1,100 men and women in Virginia died by suicide in 2016 and these studies show many likely had an undiagnosed and untreated mental health concern.

One encouraging step Virginia is taking to assist residents with mental health challenges is expanding same-day access to mental health assessments. The same day access mandate, which has already been implemented by Community Service Boards (CSBs) in some regions, is slated to become available statewide by July 1, 2019. Same day access will help to meet immediate mental health needs and decrease wait time to see a mental health practitioner. Virginians will be able to call or visit a CSB and get assessed the same day. Based on that initial assessment, a treatment visit is scheduled within 10 days. This is an important improvement because longer wait times often lead to no shows and lost opportunities to connect clients in crisis with treatment.

However, diagnosis and treatment are only part of the equation when looking at this particular trend. The rising suicide rate among females comes despite the fact that women have historically been more receptive to mental health treatment and seek services at higher rates than men.

One explanation may be shifts in the lethality of suicide attempts. Studies suggest women attempt suicide more often than men but men complete more of their attempts due to the methods they tend to use. Limited availability of lethal methods such as guns and prescription/illicit drugs has been found to lower suicide rates. Virginia currently has the 5th highest number of registered firearms per capita in the nation and the state reports increases in opioid related deaths since 2012, suggesting availability of opioids remains high. Access to these lethal methods could be a factor in the rise of female suicide rates in Virginia, with firearms and poisoning (includes both drug and nondrug intoxications) being in



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the top three methods of suicide deaths among women 25 to 44 and the leading methods for women 45 and older nationally.

A Virginia bill passed in March 2018 has tasked the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS) officials to report on the progress of suicide prevention efforts on an annual basis beginning December 2018. The CDC reports that any statewide initiative against suicide should consider promoting safer environments including less access to lethal means by persons at risk and strengthening access to treatment and care. The DBHDS report should specifically address the factors contributing to the rise in female suicide and discuss interventions that can be widely implemented to fight this deadly trend.

If you or someone you know needs help, call 1-800-273-8255 for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. You can also text HOME to 741-741 for free, 24-hour support from the Crisis Text Line.

-- *Freddy Mejia, Policy Analyst*

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