

## Communities That Care hears presentation on suicide data

**Wednesday, March 18, 2020** <sup>[1]</sup> by **Samantha Anderson sanderson@tnonline.com**  
<sup>[2]</sup> in **School** <sup>[3]</sup>

At the Feb. 21 Communities That Care meeting, the group heard a presentation from Dr. Bill Vogler, of Pinebrook Family Answers. Vogler's presentation came from Suicide Task Force of Lehigh County, of which he is a member.

Vogler originally approached Whitehall Township Mayor Michael Harakal Jr., who urged Vogler to bring his data to the CTC. Harakal was present at the Feb. 21 meeting to hear the presentation.

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The task force has approximately eight members. Vogler stressed the task force only collects data and seeks to share it with the people who can help and effect change.

"We are not the experts — you are," he told the CTC members.

He noted suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the country. Between 2005 and 2017, suicides in Lehigh County increased by 36 percent, according to Vogler.

There were 479 suicides from 2011 to 2019, according to the county coroner's office. The majority of the suicides occurred in the 50-64 age range, with 149. Other majority factors noted in the data included gender: male; ethnicity: Caucasian; education: high school diploma or less; and marital status: single.

Vogler noted the task force identified four areas with the highest number of suicides 2011-19. These are Allentown, Whitehall area, Macungie area and West Bethlehem. The Whitehall area includes Coplay and North and South Whitehall.

Vogler stressed the most common method is to use a gun. He reported there were more hand gun suicides than homicides in the data.

Vogler said the task force was considering working with gun shop owners to identify potential suicide risks.

"We don't want to take your guns," he said. "We just want to make the community safer."

Following gun shot wounds, overdose and hanging are the most common methods. Vogler did say it is often hard for the coroner's office to identify a death as a suicide, especially overdoses.

While the number of youths dying by suicide is low, Vogler warned the number may be rising. The national suicide rate among 10- to 14-years-olds doubled from 2007 to 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The school district is doing great things with the kids, but we can't let our guard down," he said.

He noted the importance of teaching youths how to handle their emotions and make positive connections.

Denise Continenza, CTC coordinator, reported the positive feedback gained from Botvin Lifeskills Training in the schools and other programs directed toward helping students grow emotionally.



In other business, Shari Noctor, chair of Whitehall-Coplay Hunger Initiative, noted the group is expanding its offerings and is looking for partners.

In addition to holding the monthly free community lunches and the summer breakfast camp, the WCHI is working to bring food directly to those who need it. Noctor reported the group is working with an apartment complex in the area to start a yearlong program providing food to families.

She will use this program as a model to start other similar programs in the area. Noctor said one of the biggest challenges for the working poor is transportation to and from programs, so she seeks to bring the food to them.

She has already partnered with several groups in the area but is always looking for more help and more support.

“We need to get the community to help each other,” she urged.

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