

Clinton, Health, News

Clinton Officials Face a 'Troubling' Increase in Suicides, Highest Number for Area Towns

— Sophia Muce, Laura Arman, 8.30.2024



Clinton, CT (Credit: Google Map Data, 2024)

CLINTON – Three town residents have died by suicide within the last month in what town officials called a “troubling increase” in the number of locals deciding to end their own lives.

According to data provided by the state Department of Public Health, 10.3 out of 100,000 people committed suicide across the state in 2022. But for the town of 13,400 residents, Clinton’s August rate jumped to

22.4.

Human Services Department Director Kathy Grega, a licensed therapist and social worker, told CT Examiner that the town has provided residents with individual and family counseling services, youth prevention programs and health care navigation assistance for years. But given the recent increase, she said the department is looking to hold a series of open forums to teach residents how to help one another.

“Identifying the red flags and being able to feel comfortable and confident in pointing out those red flags to someone absolutely is vital to changing the trajectory of someone who’s feeling that way,” Grega said.

Between 2017 and 2023, Clinton recorded 41 suicides – the highest among its surrounding towns. Branford, despite having more than double Clinton’s population, documented only 29 suicides. Guilford, Madison and East Lyme, all of which have higher populations than Clinton, each documented fewer than 15 suicides within the same time period.

Additionally, a **2017 study** of adolescent suicide risk conducted at the University of Connecticut found that Clinton Public Schools had the highest combined suicide and suicide attempt rate of all the 119 districts in the state from 2010 to 2014. Among residents aged 15- to 19-years old, the study said, the town’s rate – 53.2 suicides or attempts for every 10,000 adolescents – was more than three times the state average.

About two years ago, the department gave select community members and Clinton Public Schools staff suicide prevention training. Grega, who was hired by the town at the start of this month, said she now wants to “piggyback” off of and expand the program to ensure that more residents understand the warning signs through community conversations.

According to Grega, common red flags in residents of all ages include increased use of drugs and alcohol, a lack of or over sleeping, a general

disconnect from friends, family members and activities they once enjoyed. Still, she emphasized the importance of recognizing the warning signs in specific age groups – particularly in Clinton’s youngest and eldest residents.

In an Aug. 30 **article**, the Hartford Courant reported that there have been nine youth suicides across Connecticut in the last two months. At a mental health roundtable hosted by Gov. Ned Lamont on Thursday, officials said the state has funded 59 new school-based health centers to ensure support for struggling students.

Because the COVID pandemic changed daily routines for students, Grega said it is extremely important that the community normalizes feelings of stress, anxiety, depression and fear so adolescents feel that they can openly discuss their mental health.

While the state and town are working to expand mental health services for adolescents, Grega said generational gaps make it especially difficult to identify red flags in older residents.

“Every generation has a different mindset around mental health. [For] the younger generations, it’s more of a staple in their conversations. It’s more accepted in their world for someone to say, ‘I’m struggling with things,’ ‘I’m really depressed,’ or ‘I’m struggling with anxiety,’” she said. “It’s more received in their world... whereas someone who is in their 60s, maybe 70s? Not so much.”

Grega said that because many senior residents were taught to “pull up [their] bootstraps” and ignore their issues, they are less likely to seek help. As they age and watch their loved ones pass away, she said, elderly people often feel lonely and begin to isolate themselves, increasing their risk of suicide.

Grega said does not know the ages of the three residents who died this

month.

While she said the department is still brainstorming ideas, Grega said the town might hold separate community conversations about mental health disorders like depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

According to the American Association of Suicidology, depression is the **most common** psychiatric diagnosis associated with suicide, as those with major depression are about 20 times more likely to attempt suicide.

But because some people contemplating suicide show very signs of depression, anxiety or other mental health disorders, Grega said it is important that Clinton residents communicate with one another and ensure that no one feels alone.

“If me giving you 20 minutes is going to kind of take the pressure off of you and make you feel like it’s not so isolating, I will gladly give you that 20 minutes because it’s about someone’s life being saved,” she said

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