

Hotline is Lifeline for Many

By Sherry Squires

The road to suicide is a dark and lonely one. Unfortunately, it is too well traveled.

Idaho suffers from one of the highest per capita suicide rates in the nation, with suicide being the second leading killer of 15-24 year olds and people 65 and older.

Despite the high numbers, few roadblocks are in place for those walking the line toward suicide. The Idaho Suicide Prevention and Hotline Service strives to be a voice of reason in the darkness.

Boise State communication professor Peter Wollheim serves as director for the non-profit agency. And most of its hotline volunteers are BSU students.

The statewide hotline operates around the clock for those contemplating suicide, those who want to help a suicidal person or those dealing with the suicide of a loved one.

Trained volunteers try to defuse crisis situations in a confidential setting and direct callers to personal, professional and community resources.

Wollheim says although the work is taxing, the opportunity to connect with people appeals to the volunteers.

"We can't solve life's problems," he says. "But you go in with that mentality that no one dies on your shift. You get people to promise you to live six hours, or a day, or a week. You can do that."

Stephanie Huber, 27, has been down the road with many callers during her 18 months as a volunteer. After hearing Wollheim mention the hotline during a class, the senior nursing major got involved.

"It gives me a sense of fulfillment for helping other people," Huber says. "There's a need. And I enjoy talking to people. Even in that circumstance, there's still a human connection."

Listening is one part of her duty. She also is charged with assessing the risk of suicide. Does the caller have a plan? The means? Is there a timeline? Is there a method?

Volunteers like Huber spend two weekends training before taking to the phones. They learn suicide statistics, develop procedures for helping others and role play based on past calls to the hotline.

Huber says she has encountered everything from people who are worried about a friend or family member committing suicide to desperate souls who just want someone to call 911 for them.

Volunteers average two to three calls during a six-hour shift. Some calls last only 10 minutes; others for hours.

"I learn something about myself with every call," says Huber. For volunteer Scott Ahrens, 29, serving the hotline is personal. His brother killed himself two years ago.

"I didn't want others to go through what I did," he says. "As long as I help anybody, that's all that's important."

About 3,500 callers reached the hotline this past year.

As far as Wollheim is aware, no one has committed suicide during a call. But if statistics ring true, about one in 20 of the callers actually go on to complete suicide.

Volunteers document information about each caller. Though each is unique, some common threads can be found. Most callers are female. The majority are 15-19. About 43 percent of all callers have experienced family violence or abuse.

About 97 percent of them are Caucasian, 89 percent are employed and most are married.

Regardless of their dedication, the hotline volunteers won't get all of the calls for help that are out there. That's why

the Idaho Suicide Prevention and Hotline's mission is much broader.

Wollheim has been involved with the hotline for six years. He has taken many calls, but today he focuses most of his energy on raising awareness.

There is no money set aside in the national budget specifically for suicide prevention or education. The state of Idaho spent \$10,000 last year.

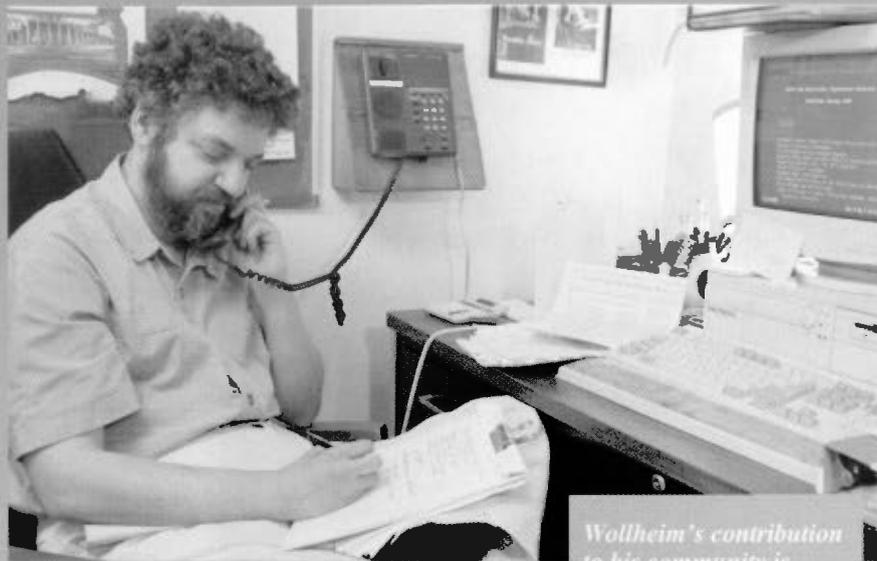
But, Wollheim says, those who work in law enforcement estimate that Idaho taxpayers spend about \$1 million a year for medical care and other services related to suicide attempts and completions.

Wollheim's group trained Girl Scout and Ada County Boys and Girls clubs leaders on suicide prevention this past year. The group also works with coroners to provide support and referrals to families immediately following a suicide.

He hopes in the near future to help train school principals and teachers, nurses, pharmacists, cab drivers and even service club members.

And eventually, if resources become available, volunteers would call regularly to check on people who are alone and may need assistance.

"We want to create a safety net," Wollheim says. "I don't want to talk about suicide. I want to talk about suicide prevention." □



Wollheim's contribution to his community is keeping its members alive.

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