States Work to Prevent a Top Cause of Death Among Youth

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Suicide rates are climbing in the United States—a recent study showed the age-adjusted rate increased 24 percent from 1999 to 2014—and suicide is among the leading causes of death for young people. Many state leaders are working to end the suicide trend by adopting training requirements for schoolteachers.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Health Statistics released a report in April 2016 that found suicide rates had increased from 10.5 to 13 per 100,000 people from 1999 to 2014, with a greater average annual increase after 2006.

Suicide rates increased for most groups, males and females ages 10 to 74. This came after a nearly consistent decline from 1986 through 1999, the report said. For females, the percent increase from 1999 to 2014 was greatest among youth ages 10 to 14. For males, the percent increase over the time period was greatest among adults ages 45 to 64.

The April report noted that suicide involves psychological, biological and societal factors. It is a complex issue that, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, is a bigger risk among some groups, including men in midlife and older men; American Indian and Alaska Natives; and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

In recent years, more states have adopted mandates that teachers get training in youth suicide and prevention. According to the CDC, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for age groups 10 to 34; and it’s in the top 10 causes of death for other age groups.

Kansas state Sen. Greg Smith introduced the Jason Flatt Act, which requires teacher training, in his state after realizing the risk of suicide among young people through his role as executive director of The Kelsey Smith Foundation, which was named for his daughter who was murdered in 2007.

“We go around and do what we call safety awareness seminars all across the United States, concerning these different risk factors (for death among youth),” Smith said. “Suicide is the number two risk; homicide is the number three risk for any child between the ages of 13 and 24. So, I was interested just because of that fact alone, the fact that it’s such a big factor in young people’s deaths.”

In addition, a mom whose daughter had committed suicide approached Smith, who is also a public school teacher, with the Jason Flatt Act.

“She brought it to my attention, and she asked if I could do anything to help,” he said.
The Jason Flatt Act aims to align training in youth suicide awareness and prevention with states’ continuing education requirements, according to The Jason Foundation, which is pushing for the legislation across the country. The act was first adopted by Tennessee in 2007; a total of 19 states have passed the law.

So far in 2016, three states have adopted the Jason Flatt Act: Alabama, Kansas and South Dakota.

On June 1, Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback signed the legislation that Smith introduced. The act will go into effect on Jan. 1, 2017, and it requires the state Board of Education to provide at least one hour of suicide awareness and prevention training per calendar year.

Smith said the Jason Flatt Act had overwhelming support in the community, including many families who had lost family members to suicide. The bill enhances public safety and saves lives, Smith said, and “that makes sense to me.”

Suicide training requirements also have been adopted outside of the Jason Flatt Act.

In Missouri, Gov. Jay Nixon signed legislation on June 3 intended to help prevent youth suicide and cyberbullying. Effective at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, any licensed educator will have the opportunity to complete up to two hours of training in suicide awareness and prevention as part of professional development hours required for state Board of Education certification.

In addition, the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will develop training guidelines and materials related to youth suicide.

The law also clarifies the definition of cyberbullying.

“Every student should feel safe at school, and every teacher should have the resources and training needed to keep them safe,” Nixon said in a governor’s office press release. “This is an important piece of legislation that can improve and save lives, and I appreciate the work of the legislature to bring it to my desk.”