

Passionate Advocates Reinforce that Everyone Must Always Focus on Suicide Prevention

The statistics are so scary, the impact is so real. As much as we do, we need to continue to do more. It really matters to keep doing this every day," said Jennifer Velez, Esq, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS), speaking about suicide yesterday during *Back to School: Take a Breath - and Pack a Good Mental Health Tool Kit*. This event was held by the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA) and Attitudes in Reverse® (AIR) in recognition of National Suicide Prevention Day. Behavioral health and education professionals, staff from DHS and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and other mental health stakeholders attended the event.

"I hope you will continue to build on today so National Suicide Prevention Day is not a once-a-year event, but something we all do every day in our professional and personal lives, so we can help save lives," said NJAMHAA CEO Debra Wentz.

"Suicide is everyone's business. Everybody must work together," stressed Michelle Scott, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor, Monmouth University School of Social Work, and Chair of the New Jersey Youth Suicide Prevention Advisory Council. She illustrated the vital concept of the "competent prevention community," in which all members of a community are concerned about suicide prevention, can recognize signs of risk; integrate activities into established community services; and know how and where to get help and are consistently inclined to do so.

AIR is playing an important role in helping to build competent prevention communities: the co-founders, Tricia and Kurt Baker, and volunteers deliver their Coming Up for AIR™ presentation to students in middle and high schools and colleges. "We want people to know it's okay to talk about mental illness and to seek help," said Tricia Baker.

To build on another part of its mission -- to build understanding and empathy -- AIR launched an *In Their Shoes*™ campaign during the *Back to School* event. They recently collected more than 120 pairs of shoes and tied to them tags with thoughts and emotions that high school students with mental illnesses commonly have. The shoes represent the 234 New Jersey youth who completed suicide between 2009 and 2011, as reported by DCF in its *Updated 2012 Adolescent Suicide Report*.

"While New Jersey has historically maintained one of the lowest youth suicide rates in the nation, the reality is one person under the age of 25 loses their life to suicide about every four-and-a-half days in our state. Although I am extremely proud of the work we have done to raise awareness of suicide prevention, even one life lost is too many. That is why DCF, along with our sister agency, DHS, and our many community partners have worked diligently together to make suicide prevention a top priority. Together, we are making a difference, and I am thankful for the continuous commitment shown by so many individuals to help prevent youth suicide and save precious lives," said Allison Blake, PhD, LSW, Commissioner of DCF.

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