


# Efforts to combat loneliness, isolation at heart of Sonoma County campaign to curb suicide

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After years overcoming thoughts of taking his own life, Michael Johnson, 39, of Santa Rosa has an important goal top of mind: keeping others enduring their own struggles alive.

Johnson, a suicide prevention advocate and member of the [Sonoma County Mental Health Board](#), draws on his own experiences with suicidal thoughts and related medical care to know that life is worth the fight.

Ten years ago, while living in Los Angeles and working for an animation studio, he began a slow descent into darkness after a marriage engagement fell apart. He did the exact opposite of prevailing advice, isolating himself.

Secure mental health facilities, where the care was often inadequate or even cruel, only made it worse. It was people — family and friends — who kept him alive.

“The only reason I recovered was not institutions but people who supported me and made sacrifices,” Johnson said. “It’s not a bother to the people who love you to hear about your hardship.”

Johnson is a part of a local movement to reshape the landscape of mental health outreach and education, one that’s aimed at reducing the number of suicides in Sonoma County. Though rates have held steady in recent years, they’re much higher than the state average.

Suicide is currently the ninth leading cause of death in Sonoma County, with an average of 73 such fatalities every year since 2016. Last year, there were 75 suicide deaths and the number peaked at 83 in 2019 during the latest 8-year period.

As a share of the population, Sonoma County’s annual age-adjusted suicide death rate of 14.3 per 100,000 people is substantially greater than the statewide rate of 10.5 per 100,000 people.

Across the nation, suicide rates are on the rise. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that rates increased 38% between 2000 and 2022. The national suicide rate was 14.2 per 100,000 people in 2022, a rate similar to that in Sonoma County.

Melissa Ladrech, Sonoma County's Mental Health Services Act coordinator, said that despite the proliferation of virtual connectivity, a growing epidemic of loneliness and isolation is increasing the risk of suicide.

"While people may have connections (through social media), it's not quite the same as having really deep connections and being involved in things that are meaningful in life," Ladrech said.

"Cat videos are fun but they don't necessarily give your life a sense of purpose," she added.

Ladrech and Johnson said the key public health message guiding suicide prevention efforts is simple: "You are not alone."

It's a message that is gaining traction, but there are still a lot of people who could be reached, said Chris Kughn, CEO of Buckelew Programs, a large nonprofit provider of comprehensive behavioral health programs in the North Bay.

Buckelew Programs handles local calls to the national 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, which was launched two summers ago. Since then, the number of calls to the crisis line has increased 47%.

During the 2023-24 fiscal year alone, local 988 counselors at Buckelew received 22,000 calls. Even so, awareness of the new 988 crisis line remains low. A recent poll conducted by [KFF, a health policy research organization](#), found that only 18% of U.S. adults were aware of the 3-digit emergency line.

As part of the next month's national Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, Buckelew is stepping up its efforts to increase awareness about 988. That includes releasing a number of public service announcements aimed at seniors and youth and offering training, education, support groups and outreach events.

Ilene Lelchuk Snyder, a Buckelew spokesperson, said there's also a need for more 988 volunteer counselors to work at the local call center.

## **Charting a course**

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In late 2022, county health officials embarked on a multiyear effort to raise awareness, reduce stigma and provide education and training on suicide prevention. The effort brought together community organizations and resulted in the creation of the Life Worth Living: Sonoma County Suicide Prevention Alliance.

That group developed a 5-year suicide prevention strategic plan, from 2024 to 2029, that calls for a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention.

The plan outlines seven strategies and objectives, including increasing visibility and accessibility of behavioral health support and treatment; strengthening protective factors at the individual, family, and community level; providing specific suicide prevention training and education to county residents; reducing access to “lethal means” of suicide, such as firearms.

The importance of reducing access to lethal means is punctuated by public health studies show that most people who die by suicide did not make a previous attempt. Also, 90% of all people who attempt suicide and survive will not go on to die by suicide in their lifetime.

Public health experts say that the high-rate of long-term survival suggests that many suicidal crises are short-lived, even though there may be ongoing, chronic risk factors that give rise to these crises.

Johnson, the Mental Health Board member, is also part of alliance. He said a key message to get across to those in crisis is that “there is life after recovery.”

“You can hit rock bottom over and over and over again but you can still keep going,” he said. “My goal is to show what you can do with a life in recovery.”

Last year, the alliance held its first “Connection is Prevention” outreach and education event. The event, which is free and open to the public, emphasizes the crucial role that human connections.

This year’s Connection is Prevention event is scheduled for Sept. 7, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Old Court House Square in Santa Rosa.

The event will feature the Bibliobus Mobile Library, the Children’s Museum on the Go, free paletas, food trucks and raffle prizes. More than 35 local organizations are expected to participate and showcase their resources.

Board of Supervisors Chair David Rabbitt is scheduled to proclaim September as Suicide Prevention Awareness Month.

Additional related events are scheduled next month for Cloverdale and Sonoma. For more information about the events, contact [MHSA@sonoma-county.org](mailto:MHSA@sonoma-county.org).

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