

NEWS ← Efforts aim to prevent suicides

A new state agency and a plan to allocate \$14 million are in the works.

By Phillip Reese
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The state will establish an Office of Suicide Prevention to coordinate deterrence, conduct research and collect data on suicide, the state's mental health director wrote in a letter to an Assembly member earlier this month.

At the same time, an advisory group has created a draft plan that will guide the spending of \$14 million for the next four years in funding earmarked for suicide prevention.

Earlier this year, The Bee reported that suicides among adults under 25 in Sacramento County have increased more than 60 percent since the start of the decade. Two recent nationwide studies - one conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the other by the American Journal of Psychiatry - also showed youth suicides increasing sharply.

"There is no single state agency responsible for coordinating suicide prevention," said Assemblywoman Mary Hayashi, D-Castro Valley, whose bill this session called for the creation of the Office of Suicide Prevention. "My hope is that the office will bring more revenue into California and give the public a sense of what really is happening."

The new office will have several objectives, Hayashi and others said, including:

- Getting state agencies like the Department of Public Health and the Department of Education working together to address suicide.
- Serving as a central depository for suicide data generated by various state and local agencies.
- Establishing a list of practices that are effective at reducing suicide.

Hayashi's bill passed the Sen-

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ate and Assembly. In a Sept. 7 letter to Hayashi, Stephen Mayberg, director of the Department of Mental Health, said the office would be established soon by executive order. The office will be funded through revenue from the Mental Health Services Act.

"This is something where you can make one phone call and get the information that you need," Mayberg said in an interview, describing the new agency.

The new office is also among many recommendations made by community leaders advising the state on a suicide prevention plan, Mayberg added.

The 20-page draft calls for developing community forums on suicide; reaching out to high-risk communities like the homeless; creating a statewide consortium of suicide prevention phone lines; and encouraging better training of public workers.

"There's already about 40 states that have a suicide prevention plan," said Kita Curry, president and CEO of the Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center in Culver City.

The committee drafting the plan is still taking public comments. It has held two public forums this year for input. Katey Holguin, a sophomore at Sanger High near Fresno, was part of a group of students that spoke at one of the forums. She wants a fa-

To read a draft of the state's suicide prevention plan, go to:

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cility in her community where youths at high risk for suicide can get intense treatment.

"Not everyone knows about the county," Holguin said after the meeting, referring to services offered by her county's mental health department. "After my friend committed suicide, we realized there was really no place for kids to go."

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