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## **Agencies help prevent residents from making wrong choice**

**By: Jason R. Vallee, Record-Journal staff**

MERIDEN - One million Americans either attempted or committed suicide in 2007, according to the National Center for Disease Control and Prevention. State officials reported last week that nearly 4,000 of those incidents occurred in Connecticut and it remains the third leading cause of deaths for people ages 10-24 and the second leading cause of death for those 25-34.

The numbers have been staggering in the past couple of years according to Margie Hudson, violence prevention program coordinator with the state Department of Public Health, and five state agencies have come together in an effort to help prevent Connecticut residents from making the wrong choice.

"When it comes to suicide, we don't have all the answers but we can help people. By raising awareness, we can inform and inspire people to reach out or inspire those who are reached towards to provide help," Hudson said last week during a suicide prevention campaign kick-off event at the Connecticut Police Academy in Meriden.

The event brought together organizations from across the state, including the state Department of Public Health, the Office of the Child Advocate, the state Department of Children and Families, the Connecticut Police Academy and the Interagency Suicide Prevention Hotline, said kick-off organizer Lt. Stan Konesky Jr., retired Branford officer and instructor at the police academy.

Konesky said suicide remains a problem in society and as the economy continues to struggle, these organizations are working to improve life for everyone.

Suicide is an issue should be important to everyone, Konesky said. For every person who commits suicide, he said an average of six family members are directly affected, as well as countless friends.

Unfortunately for many area residents, the effects of suicide have been felt within local communities in the past year with the suicide-related deaths of

Daniel Jakiela, a popular Meriden school resource officer, and Thomas Gaffey Jr., the son of state Sen. Thomas P. Gaffey, each drawing attention in the area.

Meriden was the only community hit either. In Wallingford, the names weren't known community-wide but police said they had more suicide victims in a four day period near the end of May than the department had seen in either 2007 or 2008.

"Police are often asked to deal with cases involving suicide or attempted suicide on a regular basis and they can be some of the most difficult situations to deal with," said Wallingford Police Chief Douglas Dortenzio, who also serves as president of the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association. "To come together will provide a combination of resources and efforts that will be beneficial to each agency and to the residents of the state."

When students at Wilcox Technical High School were asked to consider helping with the production of posters and pamphlets as part of the interagency effort, it took no time for the school to accept the challenge. Principal Richard Cavallaro said not only were the students willing, but they chose to step up despite the recent death of Gaffey Jr., a classmate and friend.

Graphic arts instructor Virginia Skoglund and senior students Ashley Pomalba, Valerie Archibald and Fredy Rios received an award during the ceremony for the school's efforts in producing literature.

Asked after the program what motivated them, the students each said they wanted to take a proactive approach in honor of Gaffey and said they were hopeful the literature produced would prevent others from making the decision to take their own life.

"The students at Wilcox should be commended for taking such a proactive approach and creating more of an awareness to prevent future tragedies," said Sen. Thomas P. Gaffey in a phone conversation Wednesday. "Tommy would be very proud of them."

Although there is still a lot of work to do at both the state and local level to improve the resources available for residents and to enhance suicide prevention efforts, former Lt. Gov. Kevin Sullivan said the campaign is a step in the right direction.

"We need to recognize this as a health issue and something that we can do something about if we can lower the stigma attached to it and raise that sense of

connection. Even when life seems hopeless, the message is this: talk to someone. It can only get better," Sullivan said.

"Talking does matter. Talking about the issues associated with suicide can be the door to prevention, the door to the way back for those who have lost hope."

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