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On National Suicide Prevention Day and Every Day, NJAMHAA and AIR Reinforce the Critical Need for Mental Health Education and Services

MERCERVILLE (September 10, 2013) – The crisis of suicide is continuing in New Jersey and across the nation, as evidenced by several tragedies that occurred in just the past several weeks, let alone previous months and years. “This devastating trend clearly indicates a critical need for education and action to save young people’s lives,” said Shauna Moses, Associate Executive Director of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA) and a Board member for Attitudes in Reverse® (AIR). “Both NJAMHAA and AIR are determined to eliminate stigma and other barriers so that everyone who experiences mental health challenges can receive the help they need – help that has been proven many times to be highly effective. The first step is gaining education, which AIR provides. The next step is seeking services, which NJAMHAA members deliver,” Moses said. To build awareness and illustrate the effectiveness of these educational, clinical and other resources, NJAMHAA and AIR presented *Back to School: Take a Breath – and Pack a Good Mental Health Tool Kit*, on September 10, 2013, which is National Suicide Prevention Day.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among high school students. Nearly one in six high school students (15.8 percent nationwide) has seriously considered suicide, and one in 12 (7.8 percent) has attempted suicide one or more times during the 12 months before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s most recent survey on youth risk behavior, which was published in June 2012. Among college students, suicide is the third leading cause of death. Approximately half of mental health disorders develop by the age of 14 and two-thirds of cases develop by the age of 25. However, only about 40 percent receive treatment. Without treatment, the risk of substance abuse and suicide increases.

“Clearly, students must be educated about signs of mental health disorders and suicide risk, how to get help and to not feel shame about needing help. There must be no barriers to receiving the services they need,” said Debra L. Wentz, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer of NJAMHAA, a statewide trade association representing 180 providers of mental healthcare, addiction treatment and various support services, such as supported education and skill-development programs.

“I applaud NJAMHAA and AIR and all the community-based partners and advocates for their work to eradicate the stigma that often prevents people in crisis from seeking help,” said Department of Human Services (DHS) Commissioner Jennifer Velez, Esq. “How do we tell the people we love that no problem is too big and no situation so desperate that it can’t be faced? That’s the crucial message of this event: that suicide is not the answer.”

More

Commissioner Velez encourages all partners to not only use the resources offered by NJAMHAA and AIR and share information about them, but also to help raise awareness of the state's new suicide prevention hotline - NJHOPELINE - 855-654-6735 – where callers can reach live, trained counselors 24 hours a day.

“This event is a tremendous opportunity for us to build on our mission to save lives by providing education about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. Our educational program is designed to eliminate stigma, which imposes a harmful barrier for youth to seek the services they need – services that can alleviate or prevent hopelessness, which all too often has devastating consequences,” said Tricia and Kurt Baker, Co-Founders of AIR.

The Bakers and their daughter, Katelyn, established AIR in 2010, soon after their son/brother Kenny completed suicide following a long battle against severe depression and anxiety and the family faced discrimination over the cause of Kenny's death.

“We aim to educate students and school faculty and staff about the connection between suicide risk and mental health disorders,” the Bakers said. “In our educational program, *Coming Up for Air*[™], we reinforce the fact that these disorders are real, biological illnesses that are treatable and should not be a reason to feel embarrassed. We also emphasize that mental health disorders must be addressed just as broken bones, heart conditions and many other health issues are addressed: as promptly as possible, without fear or shame on the part of individuals with the disorders and without stigma or discrimination from health professionals, educators or anyone else.”

These presentations are clearly having an impact, as illustrated by comments from students, such as the following: “Thank you for making me aware of the possibility that I could have a mental illness. After the AIR presentation, I got help and I got diagnosed with depression and a social anxiety disorder. So, thank you again for giving the presentation, ultimately helping me to make the decision to get help and save my life.”

“I am delighted that NJAMHAA gained the opportunity to partner with AIR. It's a natural match. While AIR provides the essential education to students, NJAMHAA members provide the critical treatment and support services that are proven to be effective. We hope many more students will receive life-saving services as a result of our presentation,” Dr. Wentz added.

“NJAMHAA and AIR share a vital mission of saving lives. Everyone must be educated about mental health disorders and the availability and effectiveness of services. Everyone's life literally depends on it,” Moses said.

Based in the Greater Trenton, New Jersey area, the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA) is a statewide trade association representing nonprofit behavioral health agencies. Founded in 1951, NJAMHAA represents 180 hospital-based and freestanding providers of mental health and substance use treatment services throughout New Jersey. In aggregate, NJAMHAA members help more than 500,000 children and adults with mental health and substance use issues annually and employ approximately 98,000 members of New Jersey's workforce. NJAMHAA's mission is to champion opportunities that advance its members' ability to deliver accessible, quality, efficient and effective integrated behavioral healthcare services to individuals who have mental illnesses and/or addictions, and their families. NJAMHAA is committed to recovery and wellness for all individuals. For more information about NJAMHAA, please visit www.njamhaa.org.

Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR) was established by Tricia, Kurt and Katelyn Baker of Plainsboro, NJ, in 2010, soon after their son/brother Kenny completed suicide following a long battle against severe depression and anxiety. Their mission is to save lives by educating students about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. In the first two years, they have presented to more than 11,000 students in middle and high schools and colleges in New Jersey and New York, and they have been invited to present at other schools in New Jersey, as well as Georgia and Vermont. AIR also promotes the mental health benefits of dogs and includes dogs in their advocacy and educational program. The organization also has an AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds[™] program, through which displaced dogs with the ability to serve as Emotional Support Dogs, which are more than pets, are matched with individuals who have mental illnesses or developmental disabilities, thereby saving two lives with each match. For more information about AIR, please visit www.attitudesinreverse.org.