Palmer Ridge HS

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Headline: **State Officials Still Developing Strategy to Combat Teen Suicide**

Subhead: *Many believe best strategy is to defer to school boards to combat mental illness*

Officials and legislators at the state of Colorado will continue to heavily rely on school districts to address mental health issues.

This is especially pertinent to El Paso County residents as two high school students, one from Discovery Canyon (DCC) and one at TCA, took their own lives this past week – adding to an already alarming number of teen suicides in the area during the current academic year.

At DCC, nine students took their own lives over the course of the 2015-2016 school year.

Paul Lundeen, R-Monument, whose district includes these suicide stricken schools, believes in applying “distributed authority” in order to solve the problem. This method would involve relying on school and district officials to mitigate the problem.

In application of this philosophy, Lewis Palmer School District 38 has focused on implementing a new program called Path2Empathy. The program is aimed at empowering younger generations to “experience and mobilize empathy” in order to change the atmosphere and culture of their schools. When asked about this program, Rep. Lundeen noted that “We are all individuals that have different perspectives,” and agreed that communities need to come together for the benefit of all students.

The tragic epidemic in El Paso County may be attributed to the white majority that lives in the Monument area. According to the US Census Bureau, 79.8% of the population in El Paso County is of white race. In 2015, the highest U.S. suicide rate was among people of Caucasian (white) descent, increasing the risk El Paso County teens are at for suicide.

The high frequency of suicide at DCC is an example of a suicide “cluster,” a common pattern seen worldwide. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 1-5% of suicides occur in clusters.

The ideology behind this is that when students struggling with depression and anxiety witness and/or hear about another teenager taking their own life, they are encouraged to carry through with their plan to take their own life. In addition, if an adolescent loses a close friend or acquaintance, they may become so absorbed in their own grief that they may become suicidal.

Former senior vice president for the New York City health and hospital corps, and current Lieutenant Governor of Colorado Donna Lynne, a Democrat, believes that the best way to combat teen suicide is at the local level. As a whole, Colorado has the ninth highest suicide rate in the country.

“One of the things about any social issue is being transparent about it – acknowledging there is a problem – to the extent of local school boards and administrators admitting there is a problem in my school district. We need to have a mechanism for a student to get help and talk to someone such as a counselor, hotline, teacher, parent,” said the Lt. Governor. ”Young people need an environment in their schools where they can feel accepted.”

In order to address the concern, the state of Colorado has established a crisis hotline for those individuals struggling with mental illness.

Recognizing the problem means examining the role of the Board of Education on the issue.

Colorado Commissioner of Education Dr. Kay Anthes states that the role of the board is to “help implement public policy.” Dr. Anthes is hopeful that this public policy will include more mental health legislation from the general assembly, who during the summer of 2016 passed the “Suicide Prevention Through Zero Suicide Model” which aimed at expanding suicide education for local officials.

By 2019, the State of Colorado will receive $65 million from the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Intervention (CMMI) in order to implement and test the State Innovation Model (SIM). Entitled “The Colorado Framework”, this SIM plans to create a system of clinic-based and public health supports, expanding and improving upon the community mental health centers in Colorado comprised of approximately 1,600 mental health care providers.

“We rely on Safe2Tell, hotlines, and mental health services that are actually helpful. Students can also seek professional help in and outside of their schools. We need to make sure that the district has support so that they are able to better support the students,” stated Dr. Anthes.

Dr. Anthes remains positive in her hopes for future support in halting suicide. “Making sure that school districts have the support and resources that are actually helpful. In this legislative cycle, additional support for mental health professionals could be useful where they are going into different schools.... We know that we need to dig into why and how to prevent it.”