

Program reveals startling findings on youth and suicide

By MELANIE HENNESSEY

The Champion

About four per cent of Halton youths who participated in a Regional mental health program have at some point in their lives tried to commit suicide.

That's one of the startling findings in a report from Halton Medical Officer of Health Dr. Bob Nosal that details data collected over the past five years from area youths who participated in Youth Net, a mental health promotion and early intervention program.

The report, which was received for information by Regional council Wednesday, revealed 12 per cent of youths who participated had serious thoughts about killing themselves, while six per cent in the last three months had contemplated suicide.

"Our data shows that an average of two youth in each discussion group indicate suicide ideation and/or behaviours," the report says.

It notes that over the past five years, anywhere from 20 to 50 youths in the program each year needed to be referred to a mental health practitioner due to serious issues like acute suicidal thoughts.

While Halton Manager for Youth Health Josée Coutu said the numbers presented in the Youth Net data are fairly consistent with statistics from its sister programs across Canada, she still considers the number of youths who have tried to commit suicide "a very sad and concerning figure."

"Should we be alarmed? Yes," she said.

Ms Coutu said one of the goals of surveying those who take part in the Youth Net program is to identify individuals who need help.

"We try to identify them before they've fallen off the track altogether," she said.

Those youths who do need assistance would then be connected with a mental health liaison nurse, and the best course of action for their situation would be determined.

Ms Coutu said in a few extreme cases, youths who were acutely suicidal were taken to the emergency room, but she noted that doesn't happen very often.

Dr. Nosal's report also says that 18 per cent of youths in the program felt totally depressed a few times a month in the last three months, while two per cent felt totally depressed all the time over the last three months.

The report goes on to say that 30 per cent of youths felt totally stressed out a few times a week or all the time in the last three months and a further 33 per cent felt totally stressed out a few times a month over the same period.

Ms Coutu said there are a variety of factors that play in youths' stress levels.

"It's safe to say it's (from) relationships with parents, academic pressures and a lot of financial pressures," she said.

She noted relationships with peers can also be a source of stress for youths.

The data analysis also found that 25 per cent of the youths who participated in Youth Net discussion groups had sometimes or regularly been seriously concerned in the last three months about their mental or emotional health.

The Youth Net program facilitates discussion groups for youths in schools and other settings.

The program's objectives include promoting early identification

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JOSÉE COUTU

and intervention for mental illness and decreasing the stigma associated with it.

Partners involved in the Youth Net program include Halton

Region, the Halton branch of the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, both local school boards, the Burlington and Oakville YMCAs, the Halton chapter of the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario, Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital, Halton Healthcare Services and Equilibrium, a depression or bi-polar disorder support group.

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