



## Showcasing Solutions

Green Lake County Health and Human Services and community partners commit to Zero Suicide in Wisconsin.

Zero Suicide is an initiative in Wisconsin where behavioral health care organizations commit to suicide prevention on a system-wide level across the community. Green Lake County's Health and Human Services Behavioral Health is one of the organizations in Wisconsin that has embraced Zero Suicide.

### The Problem

When Green Lake County looked at their suicide data they found that, with only one or two exceptions, every death by suicide was a person that never had contact with their agency. "That troubled us," said Nichol Wienkes, Behavioral Health Manager – Green Lake County Health and Human Services. "Suicide has ripple effects, and we want to help families that are affected and prevent further risk."

### The Solution

Green Lake County was aware of Zero Suicide and decided to initiate the program in their county. They were also expanding their crisis staff at that time which made the timing right.

The first year of Zero Suicide involves training, participating in a learning community, and planning. Green Lake County established a dedicated steering committee that intentionally explored how they could continuously improve their suicide work. "We examined how we could reduce suicide, reach the people who need help, and how to get improved practices in place in our systems," Wienkes said.



*Green Lake County Behavioral Health participated in "Be Seen In Green" to generate awareness of Zero Suicide.*

Their steering committee is broad, including crisis workers, behavioral health professionals, administrative staff, children and families representatives, other county departments, and two neighboring counties. They sought people with an interest in suicide prevention.

### Accomplishments

Green Lake County implemented a workforce study to explore what behavioral health staff saw their role being in working with people who were suicidal. From the study they built a work plan. The study will be done periodically and expand to include other county staff.

Increased emphasis on outreach was another area Green Lake County focused on. A "light a candle" activity in September encourages organizations to light and display candles to generate awareness on suicide and the county's crisis line.

Reaching out to people who have had a crisis contact is another initiative Green Lake County has had success with. People who have had a crisis contact, and who grant permission, receive a caring contact – a mailed postcard with an inspirational note. Community members participate in writing the cards, and an art contest provided the postcard design in the program's second year.

### The Results

"When we started our Zero Suicide initiative people looked at our Behavioral Health staff as the ones to handle this work," Wienkes said. "We don't get that response any longer. We've done a lot of education on why everyone needs to know about suicide prevention and that everyone has a role in talking about suicide."

Zero Suicide has focused on prevention which has energized staff. Often the work county staff touch is after a tragic situation has occurred. The shift to prevention has helped with staff burnout by building confidence through education and looking to address problems before they become tragedies.