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South Hadley may begin suicide prevention coalition

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SOUTH HADLEY - Town officials are looking into establishing a suicide prevention coalition, which would become the third initiative implemented in response to an alleged bullying-related suicide.

"We've had a tragedy in our town that woke up not only South Hadley, but also the nation and maybe the world," said Selectboard member Marilyn G. Ishler.

Two mental health support centers - The Behavioral Health Network based in Springfield and Riverside Community Care of Dedham - have been assisting South Hadley schools since 15-year-old Phoebe Prince hanged herself in January after being bullied by classmates, some of who are now facing criminal charges for their alleged harassment.

Last month, members from both support centers as well as the state's Suicide Prevention Program director met with various South Hadley leaders who appeared to reach a consensus that the town should take action to prevent suicide, said Selectboard Vice Chairman Robert G. Judge, who is also the board's representative to the town's anti-bullying task force.

"The more we learned, the more we agreed we need to form a coalition," Ishler said.

Following that meeting, Judge mentioned the idea of creating a suicide prevention coalition in South Hadley to his colleagues in late April.

To further explore this idea, Judge said he plans to attend portions of a two-day, statewide conference next week hosted by the state public health department's Suicide Prevention Program.

The ninth annual "Suicide Prevention Across the Lifespan: A Strategic Approach for Your Community" begins May 18 in Marlborough. There, Judge said he plans to attend workshops including one called "Community Coalitions: Getting The Work Done," which, according to a conference announcement, will include an overview of "what community coalitions are doing in suicide prevention throughout the country," as well as what such coalitions are doing locally.

Later in the day on May 18, Judge hopes to more formally propose the coalition's creation to Selectboard members at a scheduled meeting. Board members may vote to create a suicide prevention coalition as soon as that evening, Judge said.

"It's not only the high school kids we have to look at," said Ishler, adding that suicide can be an issue for teens, adults and seniors alike. "We should take advantage of people's interest now to help get more support and to get more involved in bettering our community."

South Hadley created an anti-bullying task force in February, and at the annual Town Meeting on Saturday the establishment of a youth commission was overwhelmingly approved by voters.

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