Suicide hotline starts online chat service to reach young people who don't make phone calls

Syracuse, N.Y. - A Central New York suicide telephone hotline is adding an online chat service to reach out to young people who are unlikely to seek help by making phone calls.

Contact Community Services, which operates a 24-hour crisis telephone counseling and crisis hotline, will launch an online crisis chat on its website today where people can chat one-on-one with a trained counselor.

Contact has seen a steady decline in calls from young people over the past five years, said Cheryl Giarusso, the agency's director of crisis intervention services.

"They don't want to talk on the phone," Giarusso said. "They want to text or chat. They have their thumbs on a keyboard 24/7."

A Pew Research Center report published last year showed the median number of daily text messages sent by teens ages 12 to 17 rose from 50 in 2009 to 60 in 2011. It also showed teens have cut way back on talking on the phone.

Teens prefer online chat because it offers more anonymity and eliminates the fear of being overheard, said Wendy Stein, Contact's communications director. People who use chat tend to reveal more than if they were talking on the phone, according to Stein. "It's a much safer way for them to communicate," she said.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds nationwide, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Contact is adding the service during national suicide awareness week.

4 things to know about suicide

1. A suicide occurs every 14.2 minutes in the United States.

2. While suicidal people often have mental illness, a person who considers suicide is not always mentally ill.
A job loss, trauma, break-up or death of a loved one can lead anyone to thoughts of suicide.

3. Some people believe asking a vulnerable person if he or she is considering suicide increases the danger of self-harm. Just the opposite is true. Asking the question opens up communication and lowers anxiety and the risk of an impulsive act.

4. For help, call Contact's hotline - (315)-251-0600 - or visit its online crisis chat.

Source: Contact Community Services

Contact's crisis chat will initially be available 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, when young people get out school. The hours will be expanded in the coming months, Giarusso said.

The chat service also will eventually be linked to a chat program operated by the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, a national network. Contact is part of that network. The link will allow people in crisis to be routed to another crisis center if Contact's chat service is not available.

Contact's crisis hotline receives about 22,000 calls annually about suicide, depression, abuse, relationships, financial problems and other issues. The hotline is the call center for nine counties in Central and Northern New York.

If Contact's telephone counselors believe callers are at risk of harming themselves or others they ask for permission to alert 911 so police officers can be sent to callers' homes to help. Most callers give permission, Giarusso said. If callers refuse, counselors will notify 911 anyway, she said.

Contact will follow that same approach on its crisis chat service. If a person in crisis on chat won't give Contact permission to send help, the agency will provide police with the individual's Internet service provider and other information police can use to pinpoint the individual's location.

Before using chat, individuals are asked to register. They have the option of providing their name, zip code, contact information and basic details about their crisis.

While the goal of the new chat service is to reach out to more young people, it will be available to people of all ages. Contact receives most of its calls from people ages 35 to 55 and about three out of four of them are women.

To get the word out about the new service, Contact representatives will visit area schools and distribute wallet cards bearing the web address for crisis chat.

"Kids need someone to talk to," Giarusso said. "What better way to communicate with kids than with chat?"
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