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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Stressful times may increase suicides  
Many suicides are preventable: Now is the time to learn how**

It is common knowledge that illness caused by coronavirus can result in death. Less known is that deaths by suicide also are likely to rise during this epidemic.

The recent suicide of a beloved emergency room physician, Dr. Lorna M. Breen, who treated COVID-19 patients in New York City is just one coronavirus-related suicide casualty. A recent article published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, "Suicide Mortality and Coronavirus Disease in 2019 -- A Perfect Storm?" raised the alarm that suicides are likely to increase as a result of the pandemic.

Safe Communities, a nonprofit coalition of more than 300 government and private organizations, wants the public to recognize that helplessness and anxiety from the epidemic can lead to tragic consequences.

"People feel isolated," said Cheryl Wittke, executive director of Safe Communities. "Many have lost jobs and worry about having enough money or food, and it feels like this is never going to end."

It is important that co-workers, family or friends recognize when someone might be thinking about suicide and take action. Anyone considering suicide or family or friends concerned about them should contact the confidential Journey Mental Health Crisis Line by calling (608) 280-2600 or texting 741741. The service is free and available 24/7, according to Hannah Flanagan, manager of Journey Mental Health's Crisis Unit.

Warning signs someone could be thinking about suicide:

- A previous suicide attempt or loss of a loved one or friend to suicide
- Recent crisis in job, relationships, finances or housing
- Talking about suicide or wanting to die
- Changes in eating or sleeping behavior
- Increased alcohol or drug use
- Giving up contact with family and friends
- Giving away prized possessions

Suicide prevention experts say that suicide often is a spur-of-the-moment decision. If deadly materials are not readily available when a person decides to attempt suicide, it can delay the attempt. This allows more opportunity for helpers to intervene, according to Rachel Edwards, nurse manager at UW Health's adult psychiatry unit.

Edwards chairs Safe Communities' Zero Suicide Initiative, a collaborative of all area health care organizations working to prevent suicide among their patient populations. "Working with patients to keep lethal means out of reach -- called Collaborative Safety Planning, and to identify reasons for wanting to live: for example, people they love and who love them; pets they need to care for; activities they enjoy -- are all strategies shown to reduce suicide risk" she said.

Firearm and ammunition purchases in Wisconsin have skyrocketed during this epidemic, and to prevent suicide it's important to store these guns safely. Firearms are more likely to be used for suicide than for personal protection, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The increase in the numbers of new guns in homes where residents may not have had time to take the necessary precautions to keep them out of the hands of other family members can increase risk of



suicide. Resources are out there to help, including your local gun shop” said Jean Papalia, Safe Communities Gun Shop project coordinator.

Medicines around home also can lead to tragedy. Wittke recommends prescription medicines, especially opioids, be locked up. Area residents can obtain a free lockbox by calling Safe Communities, at (608) 512-8328

Other steps that concerned family members can take:

- Remove firearms temporarily from the home.
- Ask a friend who can safely store the gun, or the local gun shop to store them until the risk is lessened.
- Use cable gun locks and lock up weapons or ammunition still in the home.
- Dispose of unused prescription medicines. Find out where to dispose of them through the MedDrop program at [safercommunity.net/meddrop/](http://safercommunity.net/meddrop/).
- Carefully monitor family alcohol and drug use.

Safe Communities is also offering a free, 1.5 hour suicide prevention course via Zoom called Question, Persuade, Refer -- the CPR for suicide prevention. People who take this evidence-based class report feeling more confident that they will recognize signs that someone is at risk, and will know how to seek help for a friend, loved one or co-worker. Visit [safercommunity.net](http://safercommunity.net) for class listing and registration.

“Nine of every 10 people who die from suicide have a treatable mental illness or substance abuse disorder,” said Wittke. “Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, and although our current situation may feel hopeless, there is an entire community who cares and wants to help.”

Safe Communities suicide prevention activities are funded by Dane County and Sustaining Members of Safe Communities.

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Safe Communities is a nonprofit coalition of more than 300 organizations working together to save lives, prevent injury and make Dane County safer. Funding is provided by federal, local and foundation grants, project sponsors, memberships and individual donors. For more information, visit [SaferCommunity.net](http://SaferCommunity.net).

#### Additional Resources

Journey Mental Health Crisis Line:(608) 280-2600; text 741741

National Suicide Prevention Line:1-800-273-TALK (8255)1-800-SUICIDE (784-2433)Veterans Press 1, En Español Oprimá El 2

#### **Available for Interviews:**

Jean Papalia, Coordinator, Safe Communities Gun Shop Project and QPR: 608 577 6200

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