

Seeing rise in suicides among Black Cook County residents, city officials and mental health experts work on outreach

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Judith Allen, clinical director of Communities in Schools of Chicago, provides mental health first aid workshops for parents, teachers and anyone who wants to take one. (Jose M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

Mental health challenges among young and older Black Chicagoans were amplified in 2020 by the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and trauma from police brutality.

With 97 Black Cook County residents dying by suicide last year, ranging in age from 9 to 84, according to the medical examiner's office, city officials and mental health advocates say they have been working on ways to respond.

Dr. Wilnise Jasmin, medical director of behavioral health for the Chicago Department of Public Health, says the city has been planning an awareness campaign aimed at decreasing stigma around mental illness that will launch in late spring or early summer.

Using billboards and bus stop ads are among its efforts to increase awareness, says Jasmin. The city also plans to fund mental health response teams that will travel to meet patients and serve predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods.

One way local groups are helping is by training people to recognize signs of mental health issues. Late last year, for example, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Chicago offered trainings targeting faith-based communities.

"We have to be building the community support," said chief operating officer Jen McGowan-Tomke.

Five Black Cook County residents have died by suicide this year; last year's number was the highest total for a single year in more than a decade, according to a Chicago Sun-Times report. [The rise in suicides among Black Chicagoans](#) has forced a renewed look at mental health outreach and support.

"It feels like there's a moment where everyone's talking about mental health in a way that we haven't before," said Colleen Cicchetti, executive director of the Center for Childhood Resilience at Lurie Children's Hospital, who says there's an urgency to invest more resources and come up with new ideas on reaching people who might be at risk.

Suicide is a complex issue, one that is never rooted in any one factor, says Cicchetti. A suicide prevention [strategic plan](#) released in 2020 by the Illinois Department of Public Health noted circumstances surrounding suicide may include many factors — alienation, loss of connectedness, interpersonal or life stressors, grief, illness. The report said suicide was the second-leading cause of death for people 10 to 34 in Illinois.

And the report noted Black residents face extra stressors, including institutional and individual racism.

"Black people consistently receive messages from society that they are to be under suspicion for being violent criminals and that their bodies have no value and can be subjected to violence and violation at any time," the report stated. "These racist

messages can lead to negative self-perceptions and doubts about their value and place in the world, especially in young Black boys.”

Judith Allen, chief operating officer of Communities in Schools of Chicago, a nonprofit working to increase graduation rates, has been offering mental health workshops to teachers, principals and parents.

Within the Black community, she said, “We’re talking about a population where talking is not an easy thing. Sharing your weaknesses is not an easy thing to do. There’s a sort of cultural identity aspect of being private, but also being strong and being able to withstand just about anything.”

Allen added, “You put that together with what’s happening in the world right now, you put that in combination with what happened last summer in terms of racial inequity and racial injustice, it begins to be too much.”

One of her courses trains adults to recognize when kids need help.

“When we have children that are struggling with an issue, sometimes parents will minimize it, or it’ll get mislabeled as a behavioral issue,” she said.

Even before the pandemic, the Health Department report found the suicide rate in Black boys ages 5 to 11 had doubled since 2003, and Black boys were more likely than other youth to show depressive symptoms after seeing videos and reports of police brutality against Black people.

Data from Lurie researchers assessing high schoolers before the pandemic found Black youth were more likely to be considering or attempting suicide. Among Illinois youth surveyed in 2019, 14 percent of Black high school students said they had attempted suicide, compared to 7 percent of white students and 12 percent of Hispanic students.

Now, as COVID-19 means children are facing social isolation, as well as anxiety over whether family members will become ill and potentially die, Cicchetti said reaching out and reducing stigma is even more vital.

“We’ve got to do a better job of identifying kids who are hurting and helping,” Cicchetti said.

Cicchetti’s team created a Stress & Coping Toolkit being piloted in some CPS middle school classrooms. Because supporting teachers is key to supporting children, Cicchetti said they have created a Virtual Learning Community [resource on recognizing trauma and self-care](#) that more than 4,000 Illinois teachers have used.

Jasmin said the city sought input from teenagers for its awareness campaign, finding out, for example, that teenagers were more apt to seek help through texting. She said the city also boosted funds to community based and federally qualified health centers that provide mental health services, which may help hire more therapists.

City clinics provide mental health support regardless of people's ability to pay or their citizenship status; people can search the [Chicago Connects](#) by ZIP code to find individual therapy options.

This is important, Jasmin said, not only for the current need but also as a proactive safety net when the pandemic ebbs.

“As things normalize, it wouldn't surprise me if we would see an actual increased need for mental health services, as people are able to take the time to feel the effects,” Jasmin said.

McGowan-Tomke said it is important to focus on community support and remember help is available.

“We lose sight of hope when those challenges occur,” she said. “There is support, and there is help available.”

The CDC offers the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255) and a [crisis chat](#).

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration also [offers options](#), including a National Helpline that is free and available 24/7 at 800-662-HELP (4357).

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