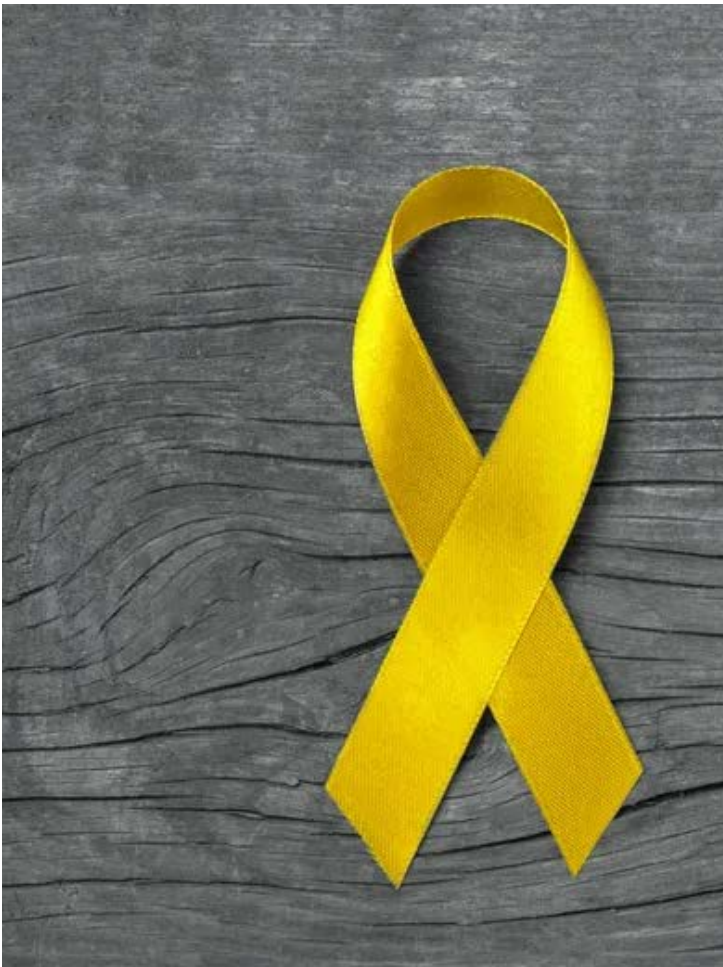


Suicide prevention starts with each one of us

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By [Umair A. Shah](#)

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Every 11 minutes, a person dies by suicide in the U.S. In 2021, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 12.3 million adults contemplated suicide, 3.5 million made a plan, and 1.7 million made an attempt (in addition to the 9% of high school

students who also made an attempt). In Washington state alone, 1,229 adults died by suicide that same year.

Washingtonians face significant mental health challenges. We must — as individuals, families, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and communities — talk openly about mental health challenges so people know they are not alone in the crises they face. The 1,229 Washingtonians lost to suicide is 1,229 too many.

I write to you as the secretary of health for Washington as we face an ongoing suicide crisis. Among the many health issues statewide, suicide prevention must be a priority. It is undoubtedly complex, and health professionals still miss opportunities to connect with people in crisis. While it is clear we have much work to do, we continue to make progress. Let me share a few victories.

In July, we celebrated the one-year anniversary of the national 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (988lifeline.org). Anyone can call, text, or chat with the 988 Lifeline 24/7, 365 days a year and connect with a trained counselor and resources. Reaching out for help is free and confidential. Services are available in English and Spanish, with additional interpretation services in over 250 languages.

Washington not only met federal 988 standards, but also dedicated additional funding to increase access and tailor services to Washingtonians. Across our state, 988 crisis centers answered 65,029 calls, 11,808 texts, and 13,064 chats in its first year of service. There is no doubt these efforts saved lives. In May, Gov. Jay Inslee signed HB 1134 into law, which increases 988 capacity and funds critical mobile units and training for local crisis teams.

Meeting the specific needs of groups who have a higher risk of suicide, including American Indian and Alaska Native communities, LGBTQ+ people, veterans and rural residents, is paramount. In our state, suicide rates are highest among our American Indian and Alaska Native communities. Washington's Native and Strong Lifeline is the first program in the nation staffed by Native crisis counselors. People with a Washington area code can call 988 and choose option 4 to connect with a Native counselor fully trained in culturally specific crisis intervention and support.

We also know LGBTQ+ youth face higher rates of suicidal ideation and bullying, with data showing lower risk in schools and communities with LGBTQ+ supportive resources. And veterans face specific mental health needs unique to their experiences. 988 has specific dedicated access options for both groups.

While the 988 Lifeline is a vital resource for those in crisis, I wish we lived in a society where the need to have such a resource was not necessary, where we valued (and adequately invested in) all forms of both physical and emotional health. We are far from this, so 988 remains critical to people in crisis.

So, what else can we do? First, we can learn to recognize signs of loneliness and suicide. People thinking about suicide may talk about wanting to die, express guilt or shame, or say they feel like a burden to

others. They may express feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, or having no reason to live. Recognizing these and other signs is critical to getting people the help they need as soon as possible.

But getting that help is often easier said than done. We, especially those of us in public health and service, must work to create a society where access to quality and affordable mental health resources is a reality.

While public funding is crucial, we can all normalize talking about mental health issues in our homes, with our friends, at work, and online. Openly sharing our own struggles gives others the chance to support us and may make it easier for them to ask for support in return. Remember that asking direct, compassionate questions to those around us decreases risk. If you or someone you know needs support, call or text 988. You are not alone.

We can do more. We must do more. It starts with each one of us.

Umair A. Shah is the Secretary of Health for Washington state.

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