

Brief Summary of the Results of the Berrien County Suicide Prevention Community Survey

In order to help the Berrien County Suicide Prevention Coalition assess and focus on the most critical needs, staff at Riverwood and Berrien County Health Department helped prepare a survey for the Coalition in the spring of 2015. The responses from the survey were analyzed by the Health Department and graduate students at Andrews University.

A total of 966 people participated in the survey. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 25 and 64 years, and three-quarters of the sample was female. The quantitative or objective questions in the survey were analyzed by the deputy health officer at the Berrien County Health Department and revealed the following information:

Just over half of the participants (51.2%) knew someone who had attempted suicide and 52.7% knew someone who completed the act. Even a higher percentage (68.4%) knew someone with a mental illness. However, almost all respondents (98.6%) believed that youth under age 18 should be educated about suicide prevention. Similarly, nearly every respondent (96.1%) indicated that more support is needed for families of people with mental illness or thoughts of suicide.

The survey included two important qualitative or open-ended questions. In one question, respondents were asked to list three community resources for receiving support for someone with mental illness, not specific to suicide. The other question asked what the respondents felt needed to be done in Berrien County to prevent suicide. Further, the question asked for three things in order of priority.

With three possible responses to each question, there were over 4,000 answers to examine. A team of graduate students undertook the analysis of these responses as a class project with the help of their instructor. In the question regarding resources, Riverwood was overwhelmingly the most frequently reported source. Churches and health care providers (including hospitals) were the second and third most popular responses. The responses to this question highlight the need to make people more aware of the other valuable resources that are available in the county.

Regarding the question that asked what should be done to prevent suicide, two major themes were mentioned. One major theme was the need for education in all areas of the community—students, parents, educators, physicians etc. The responses indicated that the education should include both general public awareness and specific signs and symptoms related to suicide prevention. The second major theme related to the area of counseling—the accessibility to counseling and increasing the availability of counseling.

Using the information from the survey, the Coalition is finalizing a strategic plan to address the needs that were revealed.