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County homeless options stay elusive

Strategies reviewed amid proposed limits

By Bethanie Gengler
NEENAH NEWS

As officials continue to consider county-wide public camping and loitering bans to deal with an influx of homeless people, Winnebago County held a meeting last

week to discuss the issues.

The County Board of Supervisors was expected to vote this past Tuesday on two ordinances that would ban camping and loitering on any county property, but those items were pulled from the meeting agenda.

Instead, a presentation by the Winnebago Housing Coalition called "The Face of Homelessness in Winnebago County"

took place last week, which included discussion on the proposed ordinances targeting the homeless.

Winnebago County housing grant specialist Lu Scheer told attendees that about 3,500 households in the county are living at or below the federal poverty income guideline, amounting to about 5% of

SEE **County homeless** ON PAGE 6

INSIDE



Rolling route

Segway tours offer scenic ride around town

Page 4

On to state

Area tennis teams competing in Madison

Page 11



Photo by David Hall

Harvest selections

The Future Neenah Farmers Market last Saturday attracted families looking for harvest and Halloween decorations and included painted pumpkins shown here. Last weekend's market in Shattuck Park was the final one for this season.

Family raises awareness amid increasing suicide rates

Proper medication part of overall treatments

By Bethanie Gengler
NEENAH NEWS

When Brianna Adamski's brother attempted to end his life by jumping from the East College Avenue bridge in Appleton, it came as a shock to the family.

Though the 19-year-old Appleton East graduate was struggling with depression, Matthew Ilsley sought mental health treatment and was recently diagnosed with bipolar disorder and prescribed medication to stabilize his mood.

The family tried to have Matthew admitted for inpatient psychiatric treatment, but because he didn't have a plan to commit suicide, the doctors couldn't involuntarily commit him.

Adamski said Matthew wasn't offered

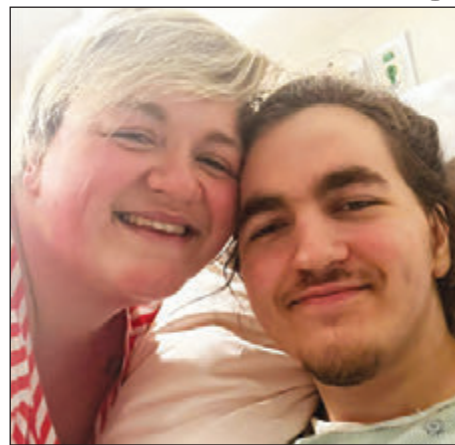
the option to voluntarily commit himself for treatment.

"He really, actually tried to get help," she said. "He was doing literally everything that they were telling him to do. He was doing the right things every step of the way, and they still failed him."

On Aug. 30, Matthew walked out onto a bridge overlooking the Fox River and hurled himself over the railing, 60 feet to the pavement below.

A downtown Appleton trolley driver was among witnesses who reported the incident to emergency services. A doctor driving by pulled over to provide medical assistance and a nurse walking past joined in.

Matthew was rushed to ThedaCare Regional Medical Center in Neenah and then airlifted to Froedtert Hospital in Milwaukee. He died four times and was resuscitated. He stopped breathing for a total of



Submitted photo

Brianna Adamski is shown with brother Matthew Ilsley, who is recovering at Froedtert Hospital in Milwaukee after a suicide attempt in August.

more than six minutes.

He suffered a concussion with a brain bleed, facial fractures, multiple breaks in

both arms, a lacerated kidney, collapsed lung and shattered pelvis bones. He remains at Froedtert recovering.

Adamski said it's a miracle he survived.

"It's just like he's meant to be here, and we all really believe, and he believes, too, that he's here to try and help other people with the same thing," she said.

Suicide attempts from the East College Avenue bridge are so frequent that the city has installed multiple signs with resources for those who may be considering jumping.

"We can help you cross this bridge," the signs say. "Help is just one phone call away."

Adamski believes that her brother never would have attempted suicide if it wasn't for the mood stabilizer lamotrigine – brand name Lamictal – that he had

SEE **Matthew's story** ON PAGE 8



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Matthew's story

FROM PAGE 1

recently been prescribed. The medication is used to treat epilepsy and seizures and is approved for the treatment of bipolar disorder.

On Jan. 31, 2008, the Food and Drug Administration issued an alert that the use of anti-epileptic drugs can increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and behavior.

"He should have had proper screening," Adamski said. "He should have had gene



Bassing-Sutton

mapping done to make sure that he was being prescribed a medication that would suit him, especially because mood stabilizers can cause these bad effects. If somebody is already feeling suicidal, putting them on a med that could make it worse is

just not ideal."

Adamski said her brother is one of the best people she has ever known.

"He is a writer and an artist, and he is an incredibly kind, very gentle soul," she said. "He loves helping people."

She shared an essay that Matthew wrote about his mental health challenges. In it Matthew describes writing as putting his thoughts of destruction into fictional characters.

"To bring the pain you have onto things," he wrote. "To scream it out and let out the pains you have burrowing inside of you; the things that control your actions. Your thoughts, your feelings, the things that bring something called suicide as an option to escape the reality you yourself created. The world is a cruel thing, yet it is so beautiful."

Suicide warning signs

- Talking about killing themselves/wishing it was over/never waking up
- Feeling hopeless
- Unbearable pain
- Feeling like a burden to others
- No reason to live
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol (other risky behaviors)
- Talking about specific ways to take their life
- Aggression/irritability
- Isolating from friends/family
- Saying goodbyes/giving things away
- Dramatic relief from sadness/agitation/anxiety/aggression/irritation

(N.E.W. Mental Health Connection)

For those struggling with suicidal thoughts, dialing 9-8-8 will connect you with the national Suicide & Crisis Lifeline or texting HOME to 741741 will connect you to the Crisis Text Line.

Matthew has a long road to recovery. The family has started a Facebook page called "Matthew's Miracle" to share updates on his prognosis. A fundraising campaign at gofundme.com/f/support-matthews-miraculous-recovery seeks to raise money to support his ongoing medical needs.

Adamski has also started the Fox Valley Suicide Awareness and Advocacy group on Facebook to provide support for others who may be thinking about ending their life.

"I think that it's really important for all



Neenah News

A sign ahead of the College Avenue bridge in Appleton offers support for people who may be considering suicide.

of us to lean on each other," she said.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control shows that in 2022, 49,000 people in the United States died by suicide, the highest number since 1941.

Though the official data for 2023 won't be released until later this year, provisional data indicates the number of suicide deaths will likely surpass those in 2022.

Suicide was the 11th leading cause of death for all ages in the United States in 2022, the second leading cause of death for ages 10-14 and 20-34, and the third leading cause of death for ages 15-19. People ages 85 and older had the highest rates of suicide in 2022.

Nationally, suicide rates declined from 2018-2020, before steadily increasing each year, indicating the COVID-19 pandemic, with its social isolation and economic uncertainty, may have played a factor.

The national trend mirrors local trends, with Winnebago County seeing an increase in suicides this year, with 19 deaths to date. In 2023, the county recorded 27 suicide deaths, up from 23 in 2022.

That's according to Medical Examiner Cheryl Brehmer, who spoke at the county's Judiciary & Public Safety Committee meeting in September. The timing of the announcement was especially poignant as September is National Suicide Prevention Month.

Brehmer said this year the county has seen a significant decrease in suicides by firearm and an increase in suicides by hanging. According to the CDC, firearms were used in 55% of suicides in 2022, while suffocation was the cause of 25% of deaths.

The county refers families who have lost a loved one due to suicide to Community for Hope or N.E.W. Mental Health Connection.

"As our office is considered the 'last responders,' we try to work closely with partnering agencies by providing data regularly to those that specialize in the efforts of suicide prevention," Brehmer said.

Sarah Bassing-Sutton is the Community Suicide Prevention Coordinator with N.E.W. Mental Health, commonly called "The Connection." The organization serves Winnebago, Calumet and Outagamie counties and deals with mental health problems by "improving how the system functions to serve everyone better, rather than one individual's mental health needs."

"So suicide, for example, is a wicked problem that no one organization is going to solve on their own, but through collective impact, we work together to coordinate the system to improve the care such that we're implementing evidence-based best practices and serving folks to improve the outcomes of all," she said.

She explained that suicide is the result of prolonged stress.

"Whether it's chronic pain, whether it is financial stress, whether it's relationship stress, these things that go on for an extended period of time, and there is a seeming hopelessness of them ever improving, that can kind of culminate in a risk for suicide," she said.

Though there's not a particular factor that experts blame for the increase in suicides, Bassing-Sutton said there are recurring themes that could contribute to reducing suicide rates.

"Some of those are simply addressing folks' basic needs and the impact of basic needs not being met on mental health and suicide rates," she said. "Access to care is another one of those overarching themes that when people are not able to get the care that they need for whatever the reason might be."

Social connection is also critical "and really is an impactful lever that we can look at improving and working on as a community that might also impact the suicide rate significantly, just by doing some simple things," she said.

That includes providing support to a person who is experiencing distress.

"Sometimes people need someone to listen," she said. "Sometimes people just need someone to walk alongside them. Sometimes people need to just be heard and validated and to know that they're not alone."

Bassing-Sutton said access to lethal means is often a factor in following through on a suicidal act and she encouraged people to be aware of how firearms and medications are stored.

She noted that Winnebago and Outagamie counties have public health vending machines that include lock bags and gun locks, free to the public. Each county website has information on using the machines under the Public Health Vending Machine tab.

When speaking with people who've survived a suicide attempt, Bassing-Sutton said they tend to be in a place of tunnel vision, where they can't see any other way to solve their pain.

Adamski confirmed that in her brother's case, that's true.

"He did not want to actually die," she said. "He just didn't want to feel that way anymore."

Matthew's suicide attempt has inspired Adamski to return to college and become a mental health advocate. She and Matthew have also discussed working together to try to use his experience to help others once he's further along in his recovery.

"There are always people out there who care," she said. "Even if you don't feel like you have a support system, there are people out there who will support you. And Matthew's story has really proven that."

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