

Re: HB 4124

from the desk of
Rep. Sara Gelser
SG

ALBANY Democrat-Herald

Breaking the shroud of silence on suicide

Editorial: Mike McNally

Over the last decade, it has killed more than 40 mid-valley residents between the ages of 10 and 24. In fact, it is the second-leading cause of death for Oregonians that age, trailing only motor vehicle accidents.

By this point, if you've noticed Jennifer Moody's story on today's front page, you know that "it" is suicide – and today, the Democrat-Herald and the Gazette-Times launch a joint project, "Youth Suicide: The Hidden Struggle," to shed some light on a topic we simply don't talk much about.

Our plan is to examine the issue of youth suicide from a variety of different perspectives and to publish a new story in the series on the first Sunday of the next few months. Along the way, we'll include a variety of resources and related information that could be useful if you or someone you know is grappling with the issue.

We start today with a report on a bill introduced by state Rep. Sara Gelser in the legislative session that begins Monday. Gelser's House Bill 4124 calls, in part, for the state to revamp its plan to prevent youth suicide; the plan hasn't been updated since 1997.

In the years since then, dozens of Oregonians between the ages of 10 and 24 have killed themselves: By our count, since 2003, at least 42 of those suicides have claimed mid-valley residents.

As Gelser notes, talking about suicide can be emotionally devastating – and one way that we cope with this devastation is to simply not talk about the subject. In fact, Gelser told Moody that she nearly backed off her plan to introduce the bill in the wake of three youth suicides in the area at the end of last year.

The fact of the matter is that newspapers are part of the silence. We are careful about reporting individual suicides because of well-documented fears that such reporting can trigger copycats who desire the same level of news coverage.

But shrouding the broader issue of youth suicide in silence makes it so much easier to ignore. The time for ignoring this problem has long since passed.

As Gelser did the research work for her bill, she found that good information about the incidence of youth suicide was surprisingly difficult to find – and Moody ran into similar problems as she did the reporting for today's first installment. Gelser's bill calls for improved collection of information about suicide.

Gelser also found that a surprisingly high percentage of the youths who killing themselves had tried to do it at least once before. "We know who they are," she told Moody. "That means we can do better. We can save some of these kids."

And that's the bottom line here: Some of these lives can be saved. But not by continuing to shroud this issue in silence.