

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Teen Peer Leadership Program the Next Phase in Howard County Youth Suicide Prevention Efforts

Columbia, MD – The Howard County Health Department enters the next step in its Youth Suicide Prevention Plan with the launch of the Sources of Strength (SOS) Program on November 1. As the Health Department begins to shift more of its focus to proactive suicide prevention efforts, the SOS program will be utilized to train teenage volunteers to serve as peer leaders who can use their social influence to help prevent suicide.

After a recruitment process that began at the start of the school year, 56 students representing nearly every County public high school will participate in this inaugural training session led by adults from various sectors of the community. Howard County’s approach to this program is unique because it brings together diverse groups from multiple schools across the community to work together, rather than hosting separate sessions for each school. Facilitating this training will be SOS Director of Training, Dan Adams. Adams will travel from corporate offices in Colorado to initiate the SOS program in Howard County.

This SOS training session is a dynamic, interactive day where adult advisors and peer leaders will engage in discussion, debate, games and brainstorming activities. The training sets the foundation for the monthly meetings that will occur through June 2020. Peer leaders are trained to help make a difference for other teens who may be struggling emotionally and/or having a tough time with anger, anxiety, depression or suicidal thoughts. Youth are trained to use the connections, social networks and strengths they possess to help keep other teens safe and have a positive impact in their community.

“Our evidence-based Youth Suicide Prevention Plan was designed with five pillars,” said Health Officer Dr. Maura Rossman. “Since launching this campaign in 2018, our priority has been to increase awareness and reduce stigma surrounding youth mental health and suicide. We now advance to the next phase in this plan where we will focus more resources on the suicide prevention goals of promoting connectedness, creating protective environments and strengthening coping & problem-solving skills.”



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“As we take on the public health challenge and tragic crisis of youth suicide, we must come together as a community united by our shared responsibility to look out for one another,” said Howard County Executive Calvin Ball. “Unfortunately, one in seven of our high school students have made a plan about how they would attempt suicide. We launched the ‘It’s OK to Ask’ outreach campaign in February to end the stigma around seeking help and to encourage both youth and adults to talk openly about suicide prevention. Now, we are expanding our campaign with the Sources of Strength (SOS) Program to empower peer leaders and help save lives. Together, we can spread light in the darkness and provide support to our children who need it most.”

The SOS Program, which is part of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) evidence-based registry of programs and practices, was chosen for implementation in Howard County because of its peer leadership component. While addressing the Health Department’s suicide prevention goals, this program works to connect in-need teens to trusted adults by using peer leaders to encourage help seeking behaviors.

To learn more about how you can get involved in Howard County youth suicide prevention, visit www.teenhealthmatters.org. To learn more about the Sources of Strength program, visit www.sourcesofstrength.org.

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