

EHS hosts third annual Suicide Prevention Awareness Walk

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Episcopal Health Services brought together health care professionals, patients, families and community members in Far Rockaway on Sept. 30 for its third annual Suicide Prevention Awareness Walk & Talk, an event focused on breaking the stigma surrounding mental health and encouraging people to seek help.

The event began at the St. John's Episcopal Hospital Community Garden at 327 Beach 19th Street, where participants gathered for remarks, resources and activities before walking toward the boardwalk and back to the hospital. The event promoted connection, mental health and suicide prevention awareness.

Dr. Tanya Barros, vice president of Behavioral Health Services at EHS, said the event is intended to make mental health and suicide prevention part of everyday conversations.

"Awareness just opens the door," Barros said. "The goal is for people not to suffer in silence."

Barros said stigma, shame and discomfort can prevent people from talking openly about how they are feeling or asking for professional support.

"We really want to spread awareness," she said. "We want to remove the stigma, remove the shame and have conversations without judgment."

Rather than a traditional lecture or



Courtesy Episcopal Health Services

Episcopal Health Services hosted their Third Annual Suicide Prevention Awareness Walk & Talk in Far Rockaway on Sept. 30.

panel, the event allowed participants to walk, talk and make connections outdoors. Barros said that informal environment can help people feel more comfortable approaching behavioral health professionals.

"It's not a lecture, it's not a panel," she said.

The walk also provided an opportunity for people to connect with others who may have personal experience with mental health challenges.

"We're building connection to the community," Barros said. "We're building trust and assets."

EHS provides behavioral health services through a team of social workers, psychiatrists, counselors and peer specialists.

Services are available not only to people experiencing a crisis, but also to those dealing with relationship problems, grief, separation, divorce and other life transitions.

Barros emphasized that people do not have to wait for a crisis before seeking help.

"You don't always have to be in some sort of psychiatric or psychological distress or crisis," she said. "It's always nice to have someone at the other end of the board and just to hear different perspectives."

Dr. Andrew Riggert, an EHS psychiatrist, said starting a conversation can be one of the most important steps in suicide prevention.

"The more we talk about this, the more

comfortable people are with talking about it," Riggert said.

Riggert said warning signs can include withdrawing from activities someone once enjoyed, changes in sleeping or eating habits, neglecting personal care and appearing unusually sad or disconnected.

He encouraged loved ones to focus on emotions rather than confronting someone about their behavior.

"Hey, you seem really off. I'm here to listen," Riggert suggested saying. "Are you upset about something? Are you sad or down? Let's talk."

He also stressed that asking someone directly about suicide does not plant the idea in their head.

"A lot of people have reported that the doctor or my friend or my parents asked me," Riggert said. "That's kind of what I needed was to just say yes."

For people uncomfortable speaking face-to-face, Riggert pointed to the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, which provides call and text support for people experiencing emotional distress or a crisis.

EHS also offers confidential behavioral health services, including virtual sessions, evening hours and interpreting services. Its Community Mental Health Center can be reached at 718-869-8822 to schedule an intake.

Riggert said people struggling should remember they are not alone.

"You will feel less alone, and the less alone you feel, the better you're going to feel," he said.

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