

Suicides on the rise amid stay-at-home order, Bay Area medical professionals say

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By [Amy Hollyfield](#)

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WALNUT CREEK, Calif. (KGO) -- Doctors at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek say they have seen more deaths by suicide during this quarantine period than deaths from the COVID-19 virus.

The head of the trauma in the department believes mental health is suffering so much, it is time to end the shelter-in-place order.

"Personally I think it's time," said Dr. Mike deBoisblanc. "I think, originally, this (the shelter-in-place order) was put in place to flatten the curve and to make sure hospitals have the resources to take care of COVID patients. We have the current resources to do that and our other community health is suffering."

The numbers are unprecedented, he said.

"We've never seen numbers like this, in such a short period of time," he said. "I mean we've seen a year's worth of suicide attempts in the last four weeks."

Kacey Hansen has worked as a trauma nurse at John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek for almost 33 years. She is worried because not only are they seeing more suicide attempts, she says they are not able to save as many patients as usual.

"What I have seen recently, I have never seen before," Hansen said. "I have never seen so much intentional injury."

The trauma team is speaking out because they want the community to be aware, for people to reach out and support each other and for those who are suffering to know they can get help.

John Muir Health provided a statement to ABC7 late Thursday, saying the organization as a whole is supportive of the shelter-in-place order in the Bay Area.

"John Muir Health has been, and continues to be, supportive of the Shelter-in-Place order put in

place by Contra Costa County Health Services to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We realize there are a number of opinions on this topic, including within our medical staff, and John Muir Health encourages our physicians and staff to participate constructively in these discussions. We all share a concern for the health of our community whether that is COVID-19, mental health, intentional violence or other issues. We continue to actively work with our Behavioral Health Center, County Health and community organizations to increase awareness of mental health issues and provide resources to anyone in need. If you are in a crisis and need help immediately, please call 211 or 800-833-2900 or text 'HOPE' to 20121 now. We are all in this together, and ask the community to please reach out to anyone who you think might be in need during this challenging time. Thank you."

The Contra Costa County Crisis Center has counselors available to answer their hotline 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The call is free and confidential.

The executive director says a call to the 1-800-273-TALK can make a huge difference.

"Generally speaking the vast majority of people say they feel better after they call and get the resources they need," said Executive Director Tom Tamura. "With help comes hope. I think that there are people and organizations out there that you can contact that can get you the information you need and resources you need to get you through this tough time."

He said calls to their hotline are up, but not dramatically.

He thinks that could be because people aren't seeing their usual network of support. That is where the encouragement to make a phone call can come from.

"I think people have found themselves disconnected from the normal supportive networks that they have, churches and schools and book clubs, you name it," Tamura said. "And that, coupled with the closure of some counseling services, people were maybe in a little bit of shock. They were trying to weather the storm a bit but as that isolation has grown people have come to realize this isn't a sprint it is marathon."

He says it's important for all of us to be reaching out to people and making connections.

Hansen says in-person meetings are even OK if it will help mental health.

"Six feet away, wear a mask, wash your hands going in, don't touch, you can see people socially distancing safely," she said.

Hansen says a focus on mental health is very important right

"They intend to die," Hansen said. "Sometimes, people will make what we call a 'gesture'. It's a cry for help. We're just seeing something a little different than that right now. It's upsetting."

Hansen and deBoisblanc say they are seeing mostly young adults die by suicide. They are worried about the stress that isolation and job loss can bring as this quarantine continues.

If you or someone you know needs help, call 1-800-273-TALK. Or if you can't remember that number, 211 can get you to the resource you need.

The shelter-in-place order is currently set to expire at 11:59 p.m. on May 31.

Contra Costa Health Services released a statement in response to the trauma team at John Muir Medical Center.

"We strongly encourage everyone in distress to seek help from mental health professionals and local resources such as 211 (the Crisis Center)," the statement read. "We understand that this is a very difficult time for many people and it can feel very isolating to practice social distancing. We want to stress that the shelter-in-place order is saving lives at the same time. It's not uncommon for medical professionals can have differing opinions on courses of treatment for many health issues. The Shelter-in-Place order is no different. We will continue to look to the science of our identified indicators as we determine how best to move forward."

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