

Fairfax County schools make resources more available to teens who are at risk of suicide

By **Judith Nadine Russell and Skyler Sales**

Walking through halls and classes, crammed between strangers and friends, it is difficult to understand what everybody is thinking, imagining, or worrying about. That is why it is so particularly difficult to detect the signs of suicide.

The number of teen suicides is increasing every year. It is the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24, surpassed only by homicide and accidents, according to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

"I have multiple friends who've faced suicide and depression," senior **Haley Walton** said. "It's really sad, and the numbers are ridiculous. There should be more done about the suicide rates, and more help should be offered."

There are some procedures established in every Fairfax

County school for suicide prevention.

"If I find out that someone is suicidal or thinking about suicide usually Mr. O'Neill or I will meet with them and do what's called a clinical interview to better understand if that person is feeling suicidal," social worker Lea Gaffen said. "If they have a plan, we counterpoint their thinking. If they are just feeling depressed, or if they need a therapist we provide that. We determine whether they need to be seen by somebody who can do a better assessment about their risk of suicide."

Consistently rated Virginia's healthiest jurisdiction in the annual County Health Ranking, Fairfax County has much lower mortality rates for all the major causes of death than the Commonwealth as a whole.

Suicide is no exception; in 2011, Fairfax's suicide rate was 7.0 per 100,000 persons, compared to Virginia's 12.5 per 100,000. Even these relatively low rates translate to dozens of lives lost per year, an average of 82 per year between 2003 and 2011.

According to Gaffen, causes of suicidal distress can be from psychological, environmental, and social factors. Examples of stressors are disciplinary problems, interpersonal losses, family violence, sexual confusion, physical and sexual abuse, and being the victim of bullying. The risk for suicide frequently occurs in combination with external circumstances that seem to overwhelm at-risk teens, who are unable to cope with the challenges of adolescence because of predisposing vulnerabilities such as mental disorders.

"There are so many different causes and it's individual for everybody, but

I think a lot of them are a result of kids putting a lot of pressure on themselves to get straight A's or to do perfectly in everything," Gaffen said. "It's tough having high expectations, and when people fall short of that I think they think that they are just not good enough."

Hayfield recently started the Signs of Suicide (SOS) program for sophomores, a suicide prevention program that screens students for depression or for suicidal feelings. Screening programs have proven to be helpful in observing

signs of depression in time, so referrals are made for effective treatment. Intervention efforts for at-risk youth can put them in contact with mental health services that can save their lives.

Recently, Virginia has passed legislation improving and stabilizing Virginia's stance on mental illness. The bill assures that all mental patients will be provided with room and board or otherwise directed to another mental health hospital. Additionally, the bill prolongs emergency custody order detentions.

In addition to the bill, the state has added millions to its budget for mental illness. Unfortunately, the foundation of the bill was built upon the tragedy of Senator Deeds' son's suicide.

"I think people see [suicide] as a way out, but suicide doesn't eliminate bad things," junior **Amber Ackerman** said. "It also eliminates the possibility for things to ever get better."

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Senior **Hamima-Nasrin Halim** was presented with a Student Peace Award of Fairfax County on March 2 by the Herndon Friends Meeting.

Senior receives Peace Award

By **Kate Motsko**

Senior **Hamima-Nasrin Halim** was selected to receive a Student Peace Award of Fairfax County. Halim is one of 22 juniors and seniors who received Peace Awards. The Peace Award recipients were all nominated for their dedication to peace and conflict resolution, and each recipient was awarded \$150 and were also able to donate \$100 to a charity of their choice (*Springfield Connection*).

Two years ago, Halim worked to revive the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at Hayfield, where the club had lost its members, structure, and leaders.

"Under Hamima's leadership, membership has grown, and she has helped build relationships with students and faculty to help spread the club's message of tolerance and diversity," Career Center Specialist Amy Ferguson said.

The GSA is currently led by senior **Danielle LaPalme** as president, sophomore **Gil Trinidad** as vice president, and senior **Ashley Bolanos** as secretary. Halim said the GSA meetings now have a turnout of approximately 20 students, and over half of the members are very active. She is confident the GSA will continue to prosper after she graduates.

"The GSA offers the opportunity for people to share problems and get support," Halim said. "The most important thing you can do is talk about your life, and the GSA offers a safe forum for doing so."

Gay high school students often face extreme discrimination, intolerance, and bullying, and Halim recognizes that there can be no peace for those students without equality, acceptance, and respect for one another.

"Hamima is a leader among her peers," Ferguson said. "She consistently goes out of her way to actively set the example for peace among students of all orientations."

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