

**Interview with Beaver County Suicide Prevention Task Force
November 2021**

❖ **When did the suicide prevention task force start and what was the impetus for starting?**

In 2007 Beaver County established a countywide Steering Committee to oversee the System of Care, with meetings occurring quarterly. In 2018 Heritage Valley Health System completed a system-wide needs assessment and identified mental health, including suicide awareness as an area of focus. In response to this, the Steering Committee identified suicide awareness and prevention as a priority, which aligned with the county, state and managed care organizations priorities. To better understand the strengths and needs of our existing system, a survey was conducted with current committee members. The committee and county leadership reviewed the results and decided that systematic change was needed here in the county. The committee researched different models and public health approaches to suicide prevention and decided the Zero Suicide Model provided us with the best roadmap to create systematic change. We formally adopt the Zero Suicide model to guide our efforts and support us as we worked towards system improvements. In August of 2019, the Beaver County Zero Suicide task force was created and charged with overseeing the Beaver County Zero Suicide Initiative.

❖ **Who was involved (initial “champions”)?**

In the beginning, all of our system of care partners were asked to identify a representative from their organization to join the Beaver County Zero Suicide task force. Initially, we focused on expanding our task force and making sure we had cross system representation from all key groups. As gaps were identified, members of our task force conducted outreach to the various organizations and business in Beaver County that could assist us in filling gaps. We are happy to report our task force is now comprised of over 40 cross system partners and organizations.

❖ **Who was instrumental in growing the task force into what it is today?**

Buy in from county partners and cross system county collaboration has been instrumental in the growth and success of our task force. Beaver County is not the largest or wealthiest county, but we are very “rich” in resources and collaboration.

❖ **What are the structure of your meetings? How often do you meet, for how long, etc.?**

In August 2019, we started meeting the fourth Friday of the month for an hour and a half. In the beginning our meetings were held in person, but quickly adapted to virtual meetings with the onset of the pandemic. We successfully maintained monthly meetings with regular attendance from various cross system partners. During our

meetings, community partners come together to exchange ideas and support one another with Zero Suicide implementation and other suicide awareness and prevention activities.

We also have subcommittees that meet at least quarterly. We currently have 3 subcommittees: Training, Marketing, and Community Outreach and Education. The subcommittees have been charged with scheduling and conducting trainings, developing educational materials, and distributing the educational and resource materials throughout the county.

❖ **How did the work groups develop? Who are involved and how do you keep folks engaged in these groups?**

To build momentum, we kicked off the initiative by holding a countywide event on September 11, 2019. The Beaver County System of Care, Beaver County Zero Suicide Team Leaders task force, and Penn State Beaver collaborated to plan and organize the event. The event included a viewing of *Suicide: The Ripple Effect* followed by a presentation from Kevin Hines, who shared his story of hope, healing, and recovery. We had 250 community members in attendance (i.e. behavioral health providers, schools, youth, family members, peers and first responders). To say it was an impactful evening is an understatement. The audience was surveyed before and after the event. Survey results indicated two important findings: 1.) 40% of the surveyed audience had never attended a suicide awareness and prevention training prior to that night and 2.) Individuals reported an increased comfort level with discussing and helping someone who is experiencing a mental health emergency following the event. We used the data and feedback collected from the surveys to develop future trainings throughout the county. We used the momentum from the kickoff event to build our initiative and community buy in. We continue to elicit community involvement in our awareness and prevention activities by holding yard sign competitions, poster campaigns, and various community events. We also continue to reach and engage new members by using social media platforms to share resources, wellness information, and trainings opportunities.

❖ **What do you see as the task force's biggest challenges and how have you worked through them?**

Since our task force's inception, our biggest challenge has been the pandemic and the various roadblocks it presented. We had to shift our monthly meetings to a virtual platform. Many of the trainings and traditional community outreach efforts had to be revamped. Our taskforce did not let that stop us, we got creative and found other ways to distribute crucial resource materials. We started passing out "It's Ok to No Be Ok" resource cards with the warning signs of suicide and crisis resources at restaurants, take out shops, food pantries, holiday meal and toy distribution events, vaccination clinics, etc... Since September of 2020, Beaver County distributed over 25,000 of these cards to our community. We also hosted a yard sign competition for May Mental Health

Awareness Month and received 23 amazing submissions from Beaver County residents and youth. We narrowed it down to 11 final designs and distributed over 800 signs across the Beaver County landscape at county offices, schools, churches, busy intersections, private residences, and more. In September 2021, our taskforce partnered with the Beaver County Drug Abuse Coalition to develop “Posters and Coasters” to educate people on the warning signs of a mental health emergency, substance use issues and available resources. The posters and coasters were distributed widely across Beaver County at hair salons, barber shops, restaurants, churches, schools, gun ranges, feed stores, parks, and several other places. In addition to the community outreach activities, we held 12 suicide awareness and prevention trainings over the past year. This resulted in 491 community members being trained in QPR, Mental Health First Aid, Safety Planning, and Suicide Prevention in the WorkPlace. We also worked hard to increase collaboration with law enforcement. We have accomplished this by training our Emergency Services Unit and adding Mental Health First Aid to the Beaver County Police Academy curriculum. So as you can see, we might have been slightly derailed in the beginning on the pandemic, but we quickly adapted and continued our mission to spread awareness throughout our county!

❖ **What would your advice be to a county looking to start, grow, or expand their task force?**

Find a group of likeminded individuals who share your passion and get started! Remember it does not matter how big or how small, every action taken to spread awareness and prevent suicide is important. Make sure you have all the key players needed around the table and get buy in and support from your administration.