

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Erie County sees 21% increase in suicide deaths, driven by men over age 40

Beginning at 6 a.m. on March 31, Jason Lape cut hair for 24 hours in his Village of Hamburg barbershop.

Three years before he embarked on the all-day “hairathon” in Jay’s Barber Shop, Lape had cut the locks of one of his regular clients for the last time. The next day, a family member of the man came in and told Lape that his customer, a father in his late 30s, had died by suicide.

Lape organized the fundraiser to honor his life on the third anniversary of his death and to raise money for suicide prevention in Western New York. Lape and the three other barbers that work with him – Brad Gottorf, Cosmo Keller and Alex Genz – did around 110 haircuts over 24 hours.

The event netted \$11,681 for the [Suicide Prevention Coalition of Erie County](#) at a time when the county is seeing a spike in the number of suicide deaths.

In 2024, 94 people in Erie County died by suicide, a nearly 21% increase from the previous year, according to data from the Erie County Department of Health.

While the number of suicide deaths in the county has trended downward overall during the last decade, this recent increase is concerning, said Dr. Celia Spacone, former executive director at the Buffalo Psychiatric Center who now works as the coordinator of the Suicide Prevention Coalition.

“Over the years, there’s been a bit of an up and down type of a pattern,” Spacone said. “But in general, we’ve gone in the right direction. So that’s the positive spin on it. However, we’re certainly going to grapple with the recent increase. We don’t want to see this.”

“Our goal, of course, is to reduce suicides to zero,” Spacone added.

Suicide deaths trend toward men

Men account for 79% of all suicide deaths in Erie County, which matches national trends, Spacone said.

In 2024, 74 men and 20 women died by suicide in Erie County, up from 62 men and 16 women in 2023.

According to health department data from 2020 through 2024, about half of all deaths by suicide in Erie County occurred in people ages 50 and older. In that same time frame, around two-thirds of suicide deaths were seen in those 40 or older.

From 2020 through 2024, men in Erie County account for nearly four times as many deaths by suicide than women.

One major reason, according to Spacone, is stigma.

“Men tend to be ... much less likely to even get physical health care, but certainly mental health care to talk about having a problem and reaching out and getting help,” Spacone said. “It’s the [stigma for men](#). ‘You have to be a man. You have to be strong.’ And some people see that as a sign of weakness.”

The Suicide Prevention Coalition hosts workshops with community groups and schools to help train people to spot warning signs for suicide and how to have conversations with people who may be at risk. Recently, the coalition did a training for a barber shop.

“People talk to their hair care professional,” Spacone said. “They might notice that there’s something wrong or something different about the person.”

Lape saw his customer every three weeks for a haircut for nearly a year. Over that time, the two men became close. They often talked about the man’s struggle with chronic migraines, which he dealt with as a result of multiple concussions he sustained playing sports as a child, Lape said.



Jason Lape, owner of Jay’s Barber Shop in the Village of Hamburg, cuts a client’s hair in 2018. Last month, Lape raised more than \$11,600 for the Suicide Prevention Coalition of Erie County in memory of a former customer.

Learning that his customer killed himself hours after Lape cut his hair “was a tough pill to swallow,” he said.

“I don’t know if I could have changed the outcome, but I definitely think that we have the opportunity to maybe identify those things,” Lape said. “And I’d say maybe I’m a little more diligent on what my job can mean to certain people. I don’t take any interaction too lightly.”

Lape said it is important to him that his barber shop is a safe, nonjudgmental place for everyone.

He and the barbers he works with often form close relationships with their regular clients. Over time, stopping in to get a haircut can become less of a business transaction and more so catching up with a pal, Lape said.

“Some men don’t have anyone they can talk to about anything,” Lape said. “So we end up being that first point of contact sort of a thing where people that don’t have anyone, they tend to open up to their barbers.”

A focus on firearms safety

Men tend to use more lethal methods to take their own lives than women do, Spacone said.

In Erie County, firearms are the most common method of death by suicide, closely followed by hanging and intentional overdoses, according to the health department.

In 2024, 41% of men who died by suicide used a firearm and half of women who took their own lives overdosed, according to health department data.

Knowing that firearms are the leading method used in suicide deaths, the Suicide Prevention Coalition and Crisis Services focus prevention efforts at gun owners to encourage safe firearms storage. The organizations frequently have tables at gun shows to give out free gun locks. Spacone estimates they have given out around 1,000 gun locks to firearms owners.

The organizations also partnered with Cabela's and Bass Pro Shops to give out gun locks and packets with information on suicide prevention resources for hunters.

"We're not talking about anybody having their firearm taken away," Spacone said. "We're talking about keeping your firearm safe. Responsible gun owners keep their firearm safely locked at all times, and maybe during a time of family strife or difficulty, maybe going through a personal challenge, maybe a divorce or an economic one, to get the firearms out of the home temporarily and voluntarily."

Keeping guns **[safely stored and locked away](#)** is important because about half the time, a person will decide to take their life and then take lethal action within 10 minutes, Spacone said. The **[more time](#)** a person can put between choosing to take their life and attempting suicide, the more time there is for the person to rethink that decision, Spacone said.

For women, suicide risks increases after giving birth, Spacone said. Death by suicide is a leading cause of maternal mortality and accounts for about **[20% of postpartum deaths](#)**. Perinatal mood disorders can cause depression and anxiety, which can lead to a new mother taking her own life, Spacone said.

Warning signs

A major warning sign for suicide is a "dramatic change in someone's attitude or behavior," Spacone said. For example, if someone who is typically very active and social suddenly becomes withdrawn. Other signs to look for include:

- Talking about wanting to die or wanting to kill themselves
- Talking about feeling empty, hopeless or having no reason to live
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits
- Talking about being a burden on others or feeling great guilt or shame
- Extreme mood changes, such as suddenly changing from very sad to very calm or happy.

To learn more about warning signs, visit **suicidepreventionecny.org/warning-signs**.