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HUDSON VALLEY // NEWS

Spate of deaths sparks renewed calls for suicide-prevention measures on Hudson Valley bridges

By **Maria M. Silva**, Staff Writer

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Town supervisors for Rhinebeck and Ulster are calling on the state Bridge Authority to implement safety measures on the Kingston-Rhinecliff bridge after two people took their own lives there recently.

Maria M. Silva/Times Union

Editor's note: This story is about suicide. If you or someone you know needs help, contact the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988, or at 988lifeline.org/chat.

The deaths by suicide of two people on the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge three days apart have shocked the



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The first death occurred Aug. 18, when a woman died of injuries after falling from the bridge. Evidence supported a suicide, Ulster Police Chief Kyle Berardi said. Authorities said they found the female victim near the shore of Charles Rider Park, where she was pronounced dead.

Three days later, first responders recovered the body of a man several hours after he reportedly jumped off the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge.

“One death is one too many,” Ulster Town Supervisor James Quigley said. “There weren’t enough opportunities for somebody to intercede and the physical arrangements along the bridge don’t give the first responders time. It doesn’t present a big enough impediment to slow people down. This small effort will not stop suicide because there are too many other ways to do it, (but) it is an attempt by the two towns to introduce a delay into an individual’s plans so that assistance can show up.”

Quigley, a Republican, initiated conversations with Rhinebeck Town Supervisor Elizabeth Spinzia to approach the Bridge Authority.

“Of course, I was all for it,” said Spinzia, a Democrat, on Monday. “We’re incredibly concerned about the mental health crisis.”

Because a meeting had yet to happen, Spinzia didn’t have details about what proposals she and Quigley would support. But she suggested installing netting, protective barriers and signage. The plan will require a significant capital expenditure, Spinzia said, adding that she will ask Gov. Kathy Hochul’s office to fund it. The Ulster and Rhinebeck supervisors will meet with the Bridge Authority on Sept. 11 to discuss possible solutions, Quigley confirmed Thursday.

The local officials are the latest voices joining [a chorus of lawmakers and suicide prevention advocates](#) who have been pressing the state Bridge Authority to take action to prevent deaths on its Hudson Valley bridges: Bear Mountain, Newburgh-Beacon, Mid-Hudson, Kingston-Rhinecliff and Rip Van Winkle. The Bridge Authority also maintains the structure of the Walkway Over the Hudson, though the overall park is overseen by New York State Parks. Another man died after leaping from that bridge on Wednesday night, according to Poughkeepsie police.

State Sen. Pete Harckham, a Westchester Democrat, introduced a bill to require the Bridge Authority to install “climb-deterrent” fencing in 2021 along with Sen. James Skoufis, his Democratic counterpart across the river in Orange County. Last year, the bill passed in the Senate but never came to a vote in the Assembly. It was [reintroduced in this most recent legislative session](#) but stalled in the Assembly committee,

another blow to advocates and families affected by suicide who seek a legislative solution to what they call a longstanding safety issue.

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Suicide prevention advocates and family members point to research that has found that, on average, [barriers led to an 86% reduction in jumping suicides per year](#). These barriers act as a delay and deterrent and provide more time to a person at risk during a moment of suicide crisis. Research has also found that [unplanned suicide attempts are much more likely to be jumps](#), increasing the urgency for preventative action.

“These heartbreaking losses confirm what we have long known: climb-deterrent barriers save lives,” said Maria Idoni, the [Hudson Valley/Westchester area director for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#). “Our Hudson Valley/Westchester chapter strongly supports legislation to make these barriers a reality. We encourage everyone to contact their state legislators and share why they support this critical measure to prevent future tragedies.”

Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger echoed the two supervisors’ sentiments in an emailed statement: “The Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge has been the site of far too many tragedies over the years and more must be done to prevent this needless loss of life.”

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She said she would work with elected officials on both sides of the river to press the state Bridge Authority and Department of Transportation “to make meaningful safety improvements that will put an end to this recurring tragedy on the bridge.”

Measures currently in place

According to Bridge Authority data, 34 people have taken their own lives on the five Hudson Valley bridges since 2022 — 10 of those on the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge.

“The New York State Bridge Authority is committed to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of all who travel across our facilities,” agency spokesman Chris Steber said in a statement. “Suicide prevention is an issue we take extremely seriously, and as part of our ongoing efforts, NYSBA continues to evaluate and implement a comprehensive range of prevention measures. At the same time, we remain committed to fiscal responsibility and the long-term stewardship of public resources.”

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The Bridge Authority provides 24/7 remote security monitoring of its bridges supported by a Security Technician Department, which has an on-the-ground presence to complement work at the Command Center, Steber said. Security staff also receive training in physical monitoring, de-escalation and suicide prevention techniques, and conduct regular drills and incident debriefs to ensure preparedness and improvement. Since 2021, staff who are trained on how to identify signs of emotional distress and are prepared to intervene have conducted regular pedestrian patrols. The agency also provides mental health

training for security and operations personnel and trauma support and counseling for staff impacted by incidents, Steber said.

The Bridge Authority is also considering deterrent fencing options and related safety improvements for the Bear Mountain Bridge as part of the bridge's [ongoing deck replacement project](#). Public outreach for the project began in March and the design phase is expected to be completed later this year, Steber said.

The estimated costs of retrofitting all six vehicular bridge spans with climb deterrent fencing range from \$75 million to \$120 million, a 2022-2024 study by engineering consultants Modjeski and Masters found. For context, Steber said the Bridge Authority's largest capital project to date was the [\\$95 million Newburgh-Beacon Bridge north span deck replacement](#), which required a toll increase.

"The authority receives no state or federal funding, relying almost exclusively on toll revenues," he added.

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Currently, Hudson Valley bridges have signs and helpline phones to support people experiencing a mental health crisis. If cameras detect a motionless vehicle or a person, that will trigger a 911 call and police will respond to assess if a car simply broke down or if a person is experiencing a mental health crisis, Berardi said.

If a person is confirmed to have jumped, emergency services and marine units are dispatched for rescue or recovery efforts, Berardi said. If it's a recovery effort, the body is brought to shore and an investigation ensues to determine the next of kin and notify family members. It is a multiagency effort that includes state and local police from both sides of the river, fire departments and marine units, Berardi said.

Emotional impacts on first responders

But the effects of responding to a suicide are long-lasting.

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“It is taxing on all emergency services because of the mental health of them from these continuous efforts,” Berardi said. “They try to stay strong, and honestly, they don’t blink to perform their duties, but unfortunately, it does affect them.”

Berardi said many responders show signs of depression or become more reserved and quiet. He said he has heard from several law enforcement agencies that responding to traumatic events has taken a toll on membership in already short-handed departments, many of which are volunteer-based.

“We’re talking about thousands of dollars in man-hours and equipment,” Berardi said. “And then the long-lasting effects of a first responder going out on PTSD or something like that from handling one of these incidents time after time again.

“I understand the costs (of implementing safety measures), obviously,” he added. “I think it’s something that they have to take a hard look at.”

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Quigley said the town of Ulster has employee assistance programs that work with professionals to talk to staff anonymously, “but not a lot take advantage of it.”

The town supervisor said the two deaths that occurred earlier this month are incidents he can't let go.

“You get hit twice in a short period of time — it's somebody sending you a message,” Quigley said. “This is hitting us, and it's hitting the other side of the river. Let's start at the level of government where we are closest to the people and we have the ability to get things done.”

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How to get help, what to look out for

Warning signs of suicide

- Talking about wanting to die
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no purpose
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious, agitated, or recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Giving away meaningful possessions
- Making final arrangements

What to do

- Listen and acknowledge the person's emotions
- Ask about suicidal thoughts: “Some people in your situation have thought about suicide. Have you? Are you now?”
- Do not leave the person alone

- Remove any firearms, alcohol, drugs, or sharp objects that could be used in a suicide attempt
- Call the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988
- Take the person to an emergency room, or seek help from a medical or mental health professional

Free resources

- **National Suicide Prevention Hotline:** 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- **Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** 988
- **Crisis Chat**, a national suicide prevention organization that offers online support and crisis intervention: 988lifeline.org/chat
- **Greene County:** Contact Mobile Crisis at 518-943-5555 or the mental health on-call service during non-business hours at 518-622-3344
- **Columbia County:** Contact [Emergency Mental Health Services](#) at 518-828-9446
- **Ulster County:** Call or text the Family of Woodstock Crisis Line at 845-338-2370 or 845-679-2485
- **Dutchess County:** Call or text HELPLINE at 845-485-9700
- **Orange County:** Contact the [Orange County Crisis Call Center's Helpline](#) at 800-832-1200
- **Putnam County:** Contact the [Putnam County Crisis Intervention Hotline](#) at 845-225-1222
- **Rockland County:** Text "HOME" to 741741 to start a conversation or call the Behavioral Health Response Team at 845-517-0400
- **Westchester County:** Contact the Crisis Prevention and Response Team at 914-925-5959

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Maria M. Silva covers labor, food and hospitality, poverty, New Americans, and how those intersect in the Hudson Valley. She joined the Times Union in 2023 after reporting on food and culture for the Observer-Dispatch in Utica. Born and raised in Spain, she moved to the U.S. in 2017 to complete her undergraduate degree at Utica University, where she was a proud student journalist. Find Maria once a month on Radio Kingston's ["La Voz con Mariel Fiori"](#) sharing Times Union stories in Spanish. You can reach her at maria.silva@timesunion.com.

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