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This North Texas church lost six members to suicide. Here's what it's doing to get families help

Health professionals warn of a second
pandemic related to mental illness

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Six faces are missing from the congregation at Farmers Branch's Mary Immaculate Catholic Church -- all lost to suicide.

A couple discovered their 13-year old daughter took her life when they were at work and she was left home for virtual learning. An aunt spent Mother's Day burying her 21-year-old nephew, who struggled with anxiety and depression.

Such tragic news continued over eight weeks this spring. In the preceding year, community members lost jobs, fought to remain financially afloat and grappled with the pandemic's isolation.

Together, the congregation grieved each life lost. But as grief weighed on the community, the congregation began to discuss how to move forward.

“We need help from professionals,” said Marcela Lara, who lost her nephew. “We can talk to people and try to help them with our prayers. But prayers sometimes are not enough.”

Health professionals warn of a looming second pandemic that will wreak further havoc -- a mental health crisis sparked by difficult life conditions and seclusion of the past two years.

Children in particular are at risk, they fear. During 2020, mental health-rated emergency department visits among 12 to 17 year olds **increased 31% over the previous year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.** That was even higher among young girls.

Mary Immaculate parishioners reflected on the conditions that lead to the losses and took action to prevent further heartache.

Several thousand families attend the church including a large immigrant and Spanish-speaking population. Families often didn't know where to obtain low- or no-cost services or if having insurance is a prerequisite.

Few Mary Immaculate community members even knew what options were available to them, illustrating a clear gap in knowledge.

So the church reached out to local schools, the police department and mental health authorities with the Dallas Area Interfaith, a nonpartisan coalition of religious congregations.

Members of the various groups learned that all had seen an increase in demand for mental health services, and each were working to create new solutions.

“We all realize that we’re not talking to each other because there’s all kinds of different services already out there,” Farmers Branch Police Chief David Hale said. “But we’re all on different pages as to: Who do we need to use? Where do we need to direct people when it is not an acute case?”

Mary Immaculate hosted a Dallas Area Interfaith meeting in late October where school, police and mental health officials committed to working with one another to better residents’ access to resources by placing a community health worker with the church and communicating better.

“We will not bury our loved ones anymore because of lack of access to mental health services,” parishioner Natalia Valenzuela said at the meeting. “By getting the services we need and building unity, we will overcome.”

The rise in mental health needs

Local hospital systems are witnessing the same rise in demand for mental health treatment.

In 2020, emergency rooms in the region saw a 24% increase in mental health-related visits for children ages 5 to 11, according to **Children’s Health’s 2021 Beyond ABC** report that was released this November. It was even higher for older children at 31%.

At Children’s Health alone, more than 2,100 kids came through the Dallas and Plano hospitals because of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. The system’s recent report details quality of life issues for kids in North Texas and outlines a great need to strengthen mental and behavioral health care.

“We don’t think about any other healthcare issue -- about how to provide the best care -- by waiting until the moment of crisis occurs,” said Brent Christopher, the president of Children’s

Medical Center Foundation, during a virtual symposium this month. “We want to deal with those issues as early as possible. But that’s not traditionally how we think of mental and behavioral health issues.”

Hale has worked at the Farmers Branch Police Department for almost three decades and is going into his fifth year as chief. The “significant increase” in mental health calls since the start of the pandemic is noticeably larger than previous years, the chief said.

Since January 2020, Hale’s department has responded to more than 250 calls to detain someone for being a danger to themselves or others.

“Humans were intended to be in fellowship with one another and whenever they get isolated, it becomes very difficult,” Hale said.

“A lot of people lost their jobs, a lot of people lost their homes. These stressors have really contributed to our increase in calls for mental health services.”

Carrollton-Farmers Branch school leaders have seen an influx of kids returning to in-person learning who are struggling emotionally, said Lyn Torres, who serves as the district’s coordinator for mental health and behavior services.

A year-and-a-half of being isolated and not having the world run as children know it has taken its toll, she stressed.

Gap in knowledge

When Carrollton-Farmers Branch schools began to see more students in crisis coming to class, officials brainstormed how to expand on their own resources.

The district invested some of its federal pandemic aid to hire additional counselors, including four dedicated to responding to crises so they can work with students in need of the greatest support.

CFBISD also opened a counseling center about a year-and-a-half ago to serve students, their families and teachers. To date, the center has served more than 320 families with more than 1,750 counseling sessions. A counselor dedicated to staff members has been busy, as well.

Mary Immaculate families were largely unaware of such resources available to them, parishioners said. In talks with the North Texas Behavioral Health Authority, they learned of services -- such as an urgent care center -- available to those in crisis.

The Southern Area Behavioral Healthcare facility is for those in need of immediate attention with no appointment needed, said Matt Roberts, NTBHA's director of provider relations.

There are many other resources in Dallas such as The Living Room, which helps adults in crisis, and crisis hotlines, but few people are aware of them.

"You're not born knowing how to find mental health resources," Roberts said. "In the physical health world, if your knee hurts, you're going to ask your friend about a good doctor. The challenge is -- it has been the case in the past -- people wouldn't necessarily talk to other people about mental health care."

That's why churches can play an important role in informing the community, he said.

NTBHA will place a community health worker at Mary Immaculate twice a week to talk with families about their needs and spread the word about what help is available.

It's the kind of information that could have helped Claudia Castanon's family months ago when her high schooler was struggling with depression and anxiety. Her daughter has faced

such challenges for several years, but the pandemic ratcheted up the teen's internal turmoil.

The Castanon family rushed to connect the girl with a psychiatrist, but the \$100-per-session became expensive quickly after weekly visits.

Finding an extra \$500 each month wasn't easy. Plus, fears about catching COVID-19 made it harder to find viable treatment options. Ultimately, the teen's health worsened.

It wasn't until the mother spoke with other parishioners in recent weeks that she realized low- or no-cost treatments were an option.

At the recent meeting hosted by Mary Immaculate and Dallas Area Interfaith, Castanon delivered grave news to the audience.

Her voice shaking, Castanon said her daughter had been placed in a hospital.

"But that's why I'm here. I want to learn how to help her," she said.