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# Northeastern to make 'structural' changes to garage that was site of Christmas Day deaths

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) and [Jeremy C. Fox](#) Globe Staff and Globe Correspondent, December 27, 2019, 7:59 p.m.



The Renaissance Park Garage at Northeastern University. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

Northeastern University on Friday said it will install signs to deter suicide attempts and make other unspecified “structural modifications” to the top levels of its parking garage where three suspected suicides have occurred in recent

months, including the deaths of a mother and her two young children in what authorities believe was a double-murder suicide on Christmas Day.

The university declined to say what those structural changes would entail or when they would be added. For now, the top two floors of the nine-story Renaissance Park garage near the Ruggles MBTA Station will remain closed, said spokeswoman Renata Nyul. Northeastern is also adding more security cameras to the top floor and will have 24-hour security staff at the garage.

But Ron White, chief program officer for Samaritans Inc., the suicide prevention nonprofit, said installing fencing on the top floor of the garage “should be a priority.”

The deaths Wednesday of Erin Pascal, 40, of West Roxbury; her daughter, Allison, 4; and her son, Andrew, 15 months, followed two other suicides at the garage: Alexander Urtula, whose girlfriend is accused of manipulating Urtula into taking his life in May; and an unidentified person on Dec. 9, whom officials have not named because the death was not believed to be the result of a criminal act.

Suffolk District Attorney Rachael Rollins said she had contacted state officials after the Dec. 9 incident in the hopes they would encourage Northeastern to make the garage safer. Her office said she has since reached out to Northeastern directly.

“Three separate incidents, resulting in five deaths, over a seven-month period, at the same location is unconscionable,” said her spokesman, Matthew Brelis.

Nyul, the Northeastern spokeswoman, said that in “early December” the school put “additional security staffing in place to patrol” three garages at the campus, including the Renaissance Park garage.

Experts say that large parking structures present a suicide risk, and are different from tall buildings, because they are easily accessible to the general public. In that way, they are more like bridges, where officials often install fencing or barriers to prevent people from jumping, said White, of the Samaritans.

“Some people mistakenly think, if you put a fence up, they’re just going to go find another spot. But that’s not true,” White said. “If you do something to interrupt their thought process or pattern, they may be able to withstand that immediate crisis.”

Falling is a rare form of suicide in the US and Massachusetts, accounting for fewer than 3 percent of total suicides in the state in 2017, according to state data.

But parking facility operators are generally not proactive about addressing suicide prevention, said Dan Reidenberg, executive director of Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, a Minnesota-based nonprofit.

“I wish there were more of those facilities that would reach out and look for more opportunities. The more we can find ways to restrict access to lethal means, the better off we are going to be,” Reidenberg said. “Typically I don’t see parking facilities reaching out unless there’s multiple tragedies in one location in a shorter period of time. . . . I don’t see the kind of engagement with suicide prevention that I wish there was.”

Reidenberg added that the Renaissance Park garage may be the site of more suicides because of the public attention given to Urtula’s death, which was reported widely by media organizations after Urtula’s girlfriend was charged with involuntary manslaughter. But, he added, it is difficult to know without additional information about each of the subsequent cases.

According to a recent report by the International Parking & Mobility Institute, some garage operators install fencing similar to that on bridges, ranging from 6 to 8 feet in height, that curves inward to make climbing more difficult.

The report mentioned several other best practices to prevent suicide. They include using signs similar to those found at train platforms and on bridges, directing people to call hot line numbers, such as 1-800-273-TALK (8255); adding landscaping at the base of garages to block an open landing area; installing closed-circuit cameras to better monitor top levels; and training garage staff in suicide prevention.

Municipal officials in Lancaster, Pa., instituted many of these measures several years ago at a central parking garage after it was the site of four suicides in a short period. The garage had become what suicide experts call an “iconic site,” prompting officials to make changes, including a policy banning anybody from walking on the top floors unless they were going directly to or from a vehicle and using staff patrols to enforce the rule.

Larry Cohen, the director of Lancaster’s parking authority, said the most hotly debated addition was fencing on the top two levels, largely because of cost. Eventually, officials opted to add the fencing for about \$40,000. There has not been a suicide at the location since, though garage workers who have been trained in intervention techniques have prevented several attempts, he said.

Cohen said garage operators may be hesitant to add fencing unless there is already a rash of suicides because of cost and aesthetic considerations. But he suggested operators could be more proactive about adding signs with hot line numbers.

“Signage is a low-cost way of impacting things,” said Cohen, who also now works as a suicide-prevention consultant for the parking industry. “To put a sign even without fencing on the roof of a garage — and that’s what I recommend to anybody I work with — that’s a very low-cost, potentially impactful thing.”

But until recently, suicides in parking garages have rarely been discussed within the industry, Cohen said. He recalled being at a conference earlier this decade where thousands of parking executives were asked whether they had dealt with a suicide or attempted suicide at their facility.

“The question was asked to 3,000 peers. Half the hands went up,” he said. Yet “there weren’t a lot of resources available that were very specific to parking garages and suicides.”

*For more information about recognizing the signs of suicide and seeking help, visit [www.mass.gov/dph/suicideprevention](http://www.mass.gov/dph/suicideprevention) or [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org). Additionally, the Samaritans will talk at any time, by phone or by text, at 1-877-870-HOPE (4673). The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-TALK (8255).*

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Matt Rocheleau of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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