

Amid coronavirus, a surge in calls to Massachusetts suicide prevention hotline

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 24, 2020, 4:14 p.m.



A volunteer spoke on the phone at the Samaritans call center in Boston, where volunteers answer phone calls from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The far-reaching fallout from the coronavirus pandemic has led to widespread feelings of isolation and anxiety across the nation, and prompted a surge in calls to Massachusetts' largest suicide prevention hotline, officials said.

The virus outbreak has upended daily routines, triggered a host of health concerns, and sparked other worries. Public health officials, as well as Governor Charlie Baker and President Trump, have expressed concern about the growing emotional toll.

"The majority of people [calling lately] are mentioning or talking about fear of contracting the virus, economic impact, increasing loneliness, or isolation," said Kathleen Marchi, executive director of Samaritans, which runs a statewide 24-seven crisis hotline.

"We are anticipating there will be an increased need for services like ours for a time to come," she added.

And even when the state's stay-at-home order ends, Marchi said, it will take time for people to resume routines, get back to their previously available resources, and settle down.

For people with underlying mental health conditions or other challenges, the outbreak can exacerbate their situation.

Ron White, chief program officer at Samaritans, said the organization usually fields between 250 and 275 calls a day. Last week, that jumped to about 350 calls a day. Meanwhile, text message conversations are on pace to top 1,000 this month, which would be a record high.

Anyone in need can call or text their hotline at 877-870-4673, the organization said.

White said the surge in volume is consistent with what the organization has seen following other stressful public events, including the Boston Marathon bombings. But usually such spikes last only for a couple of days. This time, the volume has remained elevated for a significantly longer stretch.

White, a licensed independent clinical social worker, said the virus outbreak has stoked a variety of concerns.

“One caller was feeling particularly trapped in his apartment,” White recalled. Another caller had growing frustration about a feeling she may be infected while going to the grocery store.

White said there has not been an increase in the number of people the organization considers “acutely suicidal.” But the number will likely go up the longer the crisis continues, he said.

Officials at the national Crisis Text Line, which provides support to people experiencing various forms of distress, said they, too, have seen a sustained increase in calls. Last week, the group handled about 6,000 text conversations, roughly double what it usually handles, said spokeswoman Ashley Womble.

Experts [recommend](#) a range of measures people can take to help manage anxiety, including keeping a routine schedule, exercising, eating a healthy diet, meditating, and taking walks. They should also avoid news and information overload, and maintain connections with family and friends through technology.

Suicide is a serious public health problem, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. “While its causes are complex and determined by multiple factors, the goal of suicide prevention is to reduce factors that increase risk and increase factors that promote resilience,” [according to the CDC](#).

The US suicide death rate in 2018 hit its highest level since 1941 — about 14 per 100,000, the [Associated Press reported in January](#), citing CDC data. The AP reported that the rate peaked during the Depression in 1932 then mostly

declined until 2000. It's been rising most years since then.

Massachusetts has one of the lowest per capita suicide rates in the country. In 2018, the state's suicide rate was the country's fourth lowest, [data from the CDC show](#).

On Monday, Baker spoke to the emotional impact of the ongoing crisis.

"As we drastically limit personal contact and force organization and people to stop coming together, I also sense a loss of purpose," Baker said a press conference. "As we all know, purpose is what drives us. Purpose is what fills our souls. Many feel lost, and I can see why."

"But here's the truth," Baker continued. "We all have a role. We all have purpose as we battle this disease. Protecting one another from the spread of COVID-19 by limiting physical and social contact and staying at home is profoundly purposeful."

The Samaritans 24-seven crisis helpline can be reached by calling or texting 877-870-4673. People experiencing a crisis can call also the Disaster Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255, or the Crisis Text Line: Text CRISIS to 741741.

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