June 5, 2019

I have been very active in suicide prevention since my 21 year old daughter took her life 9 years ago. With the support of my state representative and other stakeholders, I have been successful in getting 4 bills signed into law greatly improving access to mental health care and treatment over that time. I have been honored by the Oregon Psychiatric Physicians Association with their annual Access Award for the person who did the most to increase access to mental health care in 2013 and by the Oregon Council on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry with their Advocate of the Year award in 2016.

Nevertheless, if you asked me the number of Lines for Life, the national hotline for suicide prevention based in Oregon, I could not give that to you. There has been much media coverage this calendar year in Oregon on suicide, and each time the TV or radio will include the number to call. But unless one was already looking for that number and had a pen and paper handy, there is little chance that they will be able to recall the number. On the other hand, if you ask a 4-year-old what number to call in an emergency, she will tell you “911.”

There are more suicides each year in America than deaths from auto wrecks; there are more than all deaths from AIDS and homicides combined. In less than 3 weeks, the same number of veterans take their own lives as persons who died in the 737 Max jetliners which have now been grounded for months. Yet the former gets all the attention. We clearly are not doing enough to stem the tide of suicides. Yet one thing that has been well documented in peer-reviewed studies to deter suicide are the suicide prevention hotlines. How can we not make them even easier to access by designating a 3 digit code in place of the 10 digit number?

I am aware that the NANC recommended against establishing a 3 digit number. They are simply wrong. I suspect they are not aware of the magnitude of the problem and the effectiveness of hotlines in suicide prevention. Both 711 and 811 are little used today. Yes it would be an inconvenience to repurpose them, but if it were your child at risk, would you not be willing to accept any level of inconvenience? With far more than 40,000 deaths a year from suicide (a number that is likely underreported for various reasons), is the answer not clear?

Please approve the establishment of a 3 digit code for suicide prevention hotlines without further delay. Thank you.