

# New crisis line taps youths' social media leanings to text troubles

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Bigalke



Strittmater



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A new Wisconsin crisis line that encourages youths to text their troubles could be a boon to help increasing numbers of stressed adolescents cope, according to a La Crosse County health official.

The HOPELINE, an anonymous service with the texting number of 839863 and open to all ages, “targets the generation that is more in tune to texting than talking,” said Barb Bigalke, founder and executive director of the nonprofit Center for Suicide in Kaukauna in mideastern Wisconsin.

“I am really excited about it,” said Matt Strittmater, a La Crosse County Human Services manager, adding that the agency had helped 177 youths either on the phone or in person through June, compared with 230 during all of last year.

The youths’ mental health crises ranged from anxiety and depression to suicidal thoughts, Strittmater said.

Although figures weren’t available, he said he is sure this year’s tally passed last year’s total by August.

“The need has gone up so much,” and the texting option as “one more tool that we didn’t have to develop,” he said.

“I have four kids of my own,” Strittmater said. “They are all in their teens. They don’t use the phone to talk to people — they use them for social media. They are not probably going to call somebody, but they will text.”

Bigalke echoed that assessment, saying, “Hey, kids are having bad days, breakups, not getting on the team. ... Sometimes, talking can be overwhelming. But they think nobody will question if I’m here texting, and nobody can overhear me. It’s a safety zone.

“Even in support groups, kids are always on their phones. We say, ‘Hey, you’re here to talk about your problems,’ and they say, ‘That’s what I’m doing.’”

Bigalke and Strittmater said texting may head off problems early.

“You take the pre-crisis events like a bad day, or a flunked test and de-escalate them. Tell them ‘We know this breakup is important to you,’” she said. “If they need intervention, we can notify the right people.”

Strittmater said, "It isn't to replace other things but to make contact earlier. It really fills a gap."

The other two crisis numbers of 211 and 608-784-HELP continue to serve vital needs, he said.

Wisconsin became the 13th state in the nation to have a text crisis line when Bigalke's center launched HOPELINE a month ago after two years of planning. California had the first such system 13 years ago, she said.

Counselors and therapists have told her it will be useful in communicating to their young clients, and it "opens a whole new area for the hard of hearing or deaf, because they don't need special equipment," she said.

Texts are routed through an emergency messaging system with speedier service than regular text, and the HOPELINE sends a supportive response even if the text comes in outside of its initial operating hours of 3:30 to 9 p.m. Monday-Friday, Bigalke said.

The center is seeking volunteers throughout the state, including the Coulee Region, to be able to expand the line's hours, she said. The text line can be staffed from anywhere with computer access, she said.

"We're using 3:30 to 9 now because after school, a lot come home to empty homes and don't have people to talk to," she said.

Volunteers don't have to be counselors and will be trained, Bigalke said. They need to be empathetic and understand how to help someone in dire straits, and will be working with backups, she said.

The new service comes at a convenient time for the new Western Region Integrated Care Consortium, which aligned La Crosse, Jackson and Monroe counties human services departments to work on mental health and substance issues, said Strittmater, who chairs the group.

The consortium received a grant of \$200,000 a year for up to five years to enhance such services and collaboration with schools and law enforcement, he said.

The program will add a new youth crisis counselor soon and a parent peer specialist is in the planning as well as telehealth for child psychiatry, he said.