Crisis Text Line: Big data helping solve big problems

Nancy Lublin is the CEO of the New York City-based youth empowerment group DoSomething.org. (DoSomething.org)

Melissa Harris

Crisis counseling and big data helping at-risk youth solve life's big challenges.

The text message to a DoSomething.org staffer read: "He won't stop raping me. He told me not to tell anyone."

Those words quickly made their way to Nancy Lublin, the CEO of the New York City-based youth empowerment group, which runs do-good campaigns by text, like initiatives for gender-neutral bathrooms and sharing tips to prevent texting while driving.

Lublin's staff had received a few messages — concerns about bullying and the like — unrelated to their campaigns, but "that one message stopped me in my tracks," Lublin said. "It was like being punched in the stomach. The first rule of marketing and sales is: Go where demand is. People want this by text. We should be supplying crisis counseling by text."

That week, Lublin started building Crisis Text Line, a national 24/7 text number — 741741 — available to everyone but mostly used by teens. It went live two years later in 2013 in Chicago and El Paso, Texas. Chicago was chosen because of the influence of an early funder, the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation. El Paso was a data-driven decision based on its large Latino population.

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The median teen texter sends 60 text messages a day. For whites, it's 50 per day; blacks, 80 per day; and Latinos, 100 per day. If you're an older girl, age 14-17, the median is 100 texts a day. These figures are likely low compared to current habits as they're based on a 2011 Pew Research Center survey.

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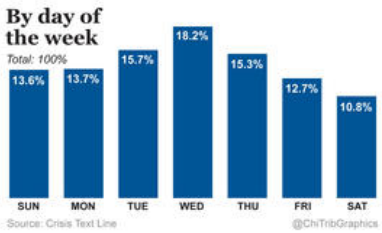
The data on Latinos help explain why text line usage in El Paso exceeded Chicago's by three times, Lublin said.

Within four months, the line had been contacted by cellphones from every area code in America. The organization is expected to surpass 7 million messages by July, and Lublin is now in need of more counselors.



(Tribune Graphics)

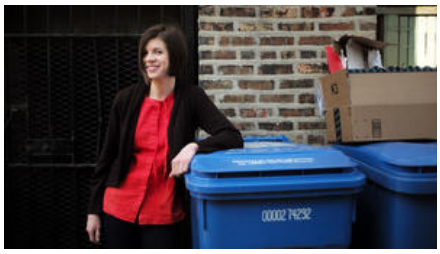
If a texter is in immediate danger, a supervisor, who is a licensed social worker or mental health professional, is involved and police are called. The line handles an average of 2.5 "active rescues" per day. Yes, they have liability insurance.

Algorithms and other software help counselors more quickly identify the root problem and get teens connected with local resources. Given that the line tracks every word exchanged, Lublin is sitting on a growing trove of mental health data accessible at crisistrends.org, which is becoming robust enough that Lublin hopes it will soon be used to influence how schools, hospitals and law enforcement allocate resources.

LGBT issues, for instance, peak on Sundays and Mondays, perhaps due to church and the start of the school week, then taper to a Friday low. Says Lublin: "Fridays are the best days to be gay in America!"

Texts about suicide are most prevalent in rural states like Alaska and Montana.

Eating disorder issues peak on Sundays. Lublin: "It sure looks like a family problem, not a school problem."



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Volume decreases overall during holidays but rises in the spring. "Prom season, testing season, college-acceptance season," Lublin said.

Then there are some patterns even Lublin and Bob Filbin, the line's chief data scientist, can't explain: Chicago experiences peak text volume on Wednesdays. And texts regarding substance abuse peak nationwide — more like skyrocket — at 5 a.m.

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"This one is the weirdest," Lublin said. "A massive spike at 5 a.m. I have no idea why. Is that when a high wears off? We see our role as providing data. But researchers should go nuts with these charts. What should it mean for Chicago schools to know Wednesday is a tough day?"

The next step is prediction, tools the line is testing.

For instance, the line now knows texters who use the words "sex," "oral" and "Mormon" are likely experiencing issues with their sexuality, and the software automatically will pull up appropriate resources in the texters' area code on the counselor's computer.

Filbin also is working on a tool that will, based on historical data, help counselors identify the root issue quicker. The software, for instance, would be able to decipher that a texter who initially reports having trouble with his or her homework might really be grappling with suicidal thoughts, Filbin said.

"Texting is shown to be in the research, the most honest form of digital communication," Filbin said. "It feels more private. You can be more discreet, say, in a school bathroom stall. ... And we're moving to that point where we have enough data, if not the largest corpus, on people in crisis in the country, and that's only going to grow, to be able to identify patterns that aren't visible to the naked eye."

Counselors use a lot of therapeutic techniques, like asking open-ended questions, but it's not a therapy session, Lublin emphasizes. Frequent texters are put on action plans. Whereas 3 percent of texters were once taking up 34 percent of conversation minutes, that has been reduced to 8 percent.

"(We're) not trying to be therapy for people or be their best friend," said Lublin, who will leave DoSomething later this year to focus full time on the text line. "We're trying to get them to a cooler moment and in a place where they can help themselves."

So they ask just one follow-up question of their texters after the conversation has ended: "Are you feeling better?"

That's the most important data point of all.

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