



## HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES DEPARTMENT

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### Washington and Ozaukee Counties to Implement Fatality Review Teams *Addressing rising rates of suicide and overdoses in our communities*

**West Bend, WI** – Suicide is a serious public health issue with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and communities. Loneliness and isolation can be profound threats to well-being. From 2021 to 2024, there were **96 suicides** and **129 fatal overdoses** across Washington and Ozaukee Counties. This is particularly relevant during **National Suicide Prevention Week**, observed annually in the United States to educate and inform the public about suicide prevention and its warning signs.

This year's **National Suicide Prevention Week** held **September 7–13, 2025**, emphasizes the importance of connectedness and support for individuals struggling with thoughts of suicide.

Research shows that feeling connected to family, friends, community, and available resources significantly reduces the risk of suicide. According to the **National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention**, 91% of U.S. adults believe that suicide can be prevented at least some of the time, and 95% say they would act if someone close to them were considering suicide.

*"Every life lost to suicide or overdose leaves a lasting impact on families, friends, and first responders," said Martin Schulteis, Sheriff of Washington County. "Our community has experienced too many of these tragedies. The data represents real people—our neighbors, our loved ones. We must do everything we can to prevent further loss."*

*Washington County Executive Josh Schoemann said, "in an ever-increasing isolated society, county government is still uniquely positioned to support individuals and organizations in building community to combat loneliness, isolation and depths of despair. As we look to create a Family First agenda, we plan to incorporate best practices we find nationwide in combating loneliness and isolation."*

To address these alarming trends, the **Washington Ozaukee Public Health Department**, in partnership with each county's **Human Services Department**, **Medical Examiner's Office**, and **Sheriff's Office**, is launching a **bi-county Fatality Review Team (FRT)**.

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### What is a Fatality Review Team?

A **Fatality Review Team (FRT)** is a **multidisciplinary team** that convenes to review selected fatal cases of **overdose and suicide** among individuals aged 19 and over in Washington and Ozaukee Counties.

The team's goals are to:

1. Recognize and address **gaps or barriers** in services
2. Identify **underlying causes and trends** in suicide and substance use
3. Develop **prevention strategies** targeting mental health and substance use
4. Recommend **policy or program changes** at local and state levels

*"A Fatality Review Team allows us to learn from each tragedy," said Christy Knowles, Sheriff of Ozaukee County. "By reviewing cases in-depth, we can identify missed opportunities, improve our systems, and take proactive steps toward saving lives."*

### How the Community Can Help

Washington and Ozaukee Counties urge residents to be part of the solution:

- **Learn the Warning Signs:** Understand the signs of suicidal thinking at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-someone-else/>
- **Reach Out and Connect:** Ask someone directly if they're struggling. Listen without judgment and show you care.
- **Promote Help-Seeking:** Encourage those in need to reach out to professionals or crisis lines.
- **Use Available Resources:**
  - **Call or text 988:** 24/7, confidential mental health crisis support
  - **Call 211:** For help finding local services and treatment options
  - **Text "HELLO" to 741741:** Connects you with the **Crisis Text Line**
  - **Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255):** National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
  - **Visit:** <https://afsp.org/keepgoing> for state-specific suicide prevention resources

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