

Teen suicide clusters a mandate to confront topic

By Jessica Calefat, CalMatters

In California and across the country, suicide is the second leading cause of death among teens—a grim reminder that many high school students' primary barrier to adulthood is themselves.

More young people take their own lives than the number killed by cancer, heart disease, birth defects, stroke, flu, pneumonia and chronic lung disease combined. And under legislation set to take effect in January, school systems up and down the state will be forced to confront the taboo topic head-on.

Assembly Bill 2246, authored by Assemblyman Patrick O'Donnell, D-Long Beach, requires districts to adopt suicide prevention policies that target high-risk groups, such as students bereaved by a classmate's death and LGBTQ youth. It was inspired by teen suicide clusters that have traumatized Palo Alto and San Diego in recent years.

A string of suicides this school year among boys who attend the same Central Valley high school in Clovis is the latest example underscoring the urgent need to tackle this problem. The new law asks districts to attack it from all sides by promoting students' emotional well-being, intervening when they're in crisis and responding appropriately when tragedy strikes.

"This is not a policy to write up and put on a shelf. It's a lifesaving policy," said Abbe Land, executive director of The Trevor Project, a nonprofit serving LGBTQ youth that sponsored the legislation. "One teacher reaching out at the right time because they were trained to see the warning signs can save a

student's life."

After declining steadily in the 1980s and 90s, the prevalence of suicide in this country began to rise once again around the turn of the century, increasing 24 percent between 1999 and 2014, according to a report published earlier this year by the Centers for Disease Control.

That analysis also revealed that the suicide rate among tween girls ages 10 to 14 had tripled over 15 years, alarming researchers.

Surveys of California high school students have shown that one in five had seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year and that thoughts of suicide were most prevalent among female students and among students from multiracial, Native American and Pacific Islander backgrounds. Males, however, account for three out of every four deaths.

O'Donnell knows this is an "uncomfortable topic" but said he felt an obligation as chair of the Assembly Education Committee to take it on.

Earlier this year, the measure cleared the state Senate with unanimous support, but in the lower house, almost a dozen GOP members voted no, including Assembly Republican leader Chad Mayes, R-Yucca Valley.

Asked about the recent group of suicides at Clovis West High School, including two in the last few weeks, O'Donnell called the cluster "beyond tragic" and said it's proof of the new law's relevance.

"Not talking about this problem won't make it go away," said O'Donnell, who taught middle and high school before joining the Legislature. "These are our kids. This is a problem. This is a big deal. And we have a duty to act."

Palo Alto Superintendent Glenn "Max" McGee had only been on

the job a few months in 2014 when a series of student suicides swept through the leafy Silicon Valley enclave like a deadly storm. It was the second cluster to hit the district in fewer than five years, a statistical aberration, leaving McGee almost paralyzed with emotion.

“I felt such terrible sadness,” McGee said. “All I could think was, ‘What could have been done?’”

The district responded to this latest cluster—defined as a succession of deaths in close proximity to one another—by refining the prevention plan it had adopted after the first one and striking a better balance between the district’s storied academic rigor and students’ social and emotional wellbeing.

McGee finally started enforcing a 15 hour-per-week cap on homework that had been on the books for years and began promoting the value of sleep by moving the start of the school day back almost an hour to 8:25 a.m. The district also switched to block scheduling, opened wellness centers staffed by licensed therapists and taught students how to seek help for their friends.

Commuter trains that roll past his office on the hour remind McGee of the work’s importance.

“I still grimace when I hear the train whistle,” McGee said, referencing the preponderance of area students who killed themselves by stepping in front of an oncoming Caltrain.

Legislative analysts predict it will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars for districts to develop these plans but noted that costs would be defrayed if they adopt a model policy the California Department of Education is drafting now. Palo Alto has also made its prevention policy available to other districts for free.

“We know now that student wellness is a critical component to

learning and that you can't have one without the other," McGee said. "We're eager to share this work with any and everyone."

Six other states have already adopted similar legislation, and research published earlier this year in *The Lancet* found that schools have an important role to play in reducing the number of teen suicide attempts. But another study published in a different journal found that schools' role in tackling the vexing problem has limits.

A meta analysis of schools' impact on teen suicide revealed that many treat self-harm as bad behavior, which discourages students who are depressed or suicidal from confiding in their teachers. It also found that bullying and stress over school performance can contribute to the problem.

Palo Alto's prevention plan doesn't target LGBTQ teens, homeless youth or students with disabilities, but it will need to once the new state law takes effect. Surveys cited by the CDC show LGBTQ youth are bullied more than their straight peers and that they're more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide.

Last year, San Diego County endured a string of suicides by transgender youth. Max Disposti had worked with several of them at the LGBTQ resource center he runs in Oceanside and understands how much they struggled.

"For these kids, it's not about doing well on exams, it's about survival," Disposti said. "They leave the house each morning knowing their body doesn't match who they are and that they'll need to explain themselves over and over again. It's a heavy load."

Taylor Alesana was one of them.

Some of the videos posted to the 16-year-old transgender girl's YouTube channel were bubbly makeup tutorials with tips on foundation application and contouring. Others were painful

revelations about the hateful bullying she endured after posting a bikini selfie on Snapchat and watching it go viral.

In a December 2014 video, she told her followers she no longer felt safe at school.

“Words kill. They do. I know people can say words are words, but words kill,” Alesana said. “It sucks that we live in a society where people use words like they’re nothing.”

Four months later, the Fallbrook teen was gone. She took her life on April 2.

Calmatters.org is a nonprofit news venture devoted to covering California state policy and politics.

Fire destroys day lodge at Homewood resort



Crews work to suppress the fire at Homewood on Dec. 28. Photo/Provided

An early morning fire ripped through the South Lodge at Homewood Mountain Resort.

The West Shore ski resort is closed today as crews mop up the fire and resort officials assess the damage. The South Lodge was primarily used as a restaurant and administration offices.

The fire was reported just after 3am Dec. 28.

No injuries have been reported, and no individuals were at the lodge when the fire started.

North Tahoe Fire Protection District is investigating the cause of the fire.

Tahoe Ski Bowl Way was still closed as of 9am Wednesday.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Hawthorne-area quakes shake Tahoe residents

Lake Tahoe residents were jolted by two powerful earthquakes today that were centered near Hawthorne.

The first one was recorded at 12:18am Dec. 28. It was 5.8, according the Nevada Seismological Laboratory. Four minutes later a 5.7 temblor hit.

Both were felt by residents of South Lake Tahoe.

A third quake, this one slightly closer to Bridgeport, hit at 12:29am. It measured 3.6. And fourth – 3.5 – struck at 12:48am in the same region. At 12:57am, a 3.9 quake hit.

The 1:08am 3.0 quake was mild in Tahoe compared to the first two.

Dispatch at Mineral County Sheriff's Department told *Lake Tahoe News* there have been no reports of damage as of 12:44am. The movement triggered alarms to go off and a boulder to fall onto the shoulder of Highway 95 at mile marker 64.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

EDC company ratchets way onto Inc. 500

By Cathie Anderson, Sacramento Bee

SlideBelts co-founders Brig and Michelle Taylor ship their ratchet belts around the world from El Dorado Hills, and they have celebrated that fact by surrendering about 20 feet of wall in their company headquarters to a world map.

That wall provides a portal for viewing the company's rapid growth.

SlideBelts' annual revenue in 2015, \$2.7 million, was 24 times what the company earned in 2012.

That feat landed the company at No. 151 on the Inc. 500 list of the nation's fastest-growing private companies. Among retail companies on that list, they ranked 10th for their growth. This year, the Taylors project that revenue will easily surpass \$5 million.

Calif. gun sales up ahead of new gun control limits

By Associated Press

With six new gun control bills signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in July, sales of semi-automatic rifles have more than doubled in California over last year.

The *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* reports that the California Department of Justice shows 364,643 semi-automatic rifles had been sold by Dec. 9 whereas 153,931 rifles were sold last year.

Rifles with bullet buttons for the quick swap of ammunition magazines and other soon-to-be banned features have also skyrocketed. Statewide sales are up 40 percent by early December.

The new gun controls reclassified semi-automatic rifles that have certain features as assault weapons. The features added to the prohibited list include a protruding or forward pistol grip, a thumbhole stock, a folding stock or a flash suppressor. Assault weapons have been banned in California since 1989.

Nearly 1 million firearms were purchased in California as of Dec. 9, the most recent state data available, compared to more than 700,000 guns sold in all of 2015. Sales have likely soared beyond 1 million guns since then, the newspaper reported.

Steven Serna came into Pacific Outfitters sporting goods store in Ukiah last week to buy a semi-automatic rifle before new gun control legislation limits the gun's features in California.

He wanted to purchase an AK-47 rifle but there were none to be found at the store. The deer hunter lamented that he should have purchased one earlier this year.

Todd Lyly also visited the store last week to talk with his friends behind the gun sales counter about the new laws.

Lyly said he will convert his weapons so they are complaint with the new regulations, most likely by installing a fixed stock. But he said it's a superficial change that he expects will mostly impact law-abiding people and not violent criminals already disinclined to follow the law.

"It's frustrating," Lyly said.

California lawmakers pushed for the new gun controls after a mass shooting in San Bernardino last year. A married couple who were armed with AR15 rifles and 9mm pistols shot and killed 14 people and wounded 22 others at a county health department holiday party. Authorities said they were inspired by foreign terrorist groups.

Women lawmakers make Nev. a national leader



Catherine Cortez Masto in November won a hotly contested Senate race in Nevada. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

By Sean Whaley, Las Vegas Review-Journal

CARSON CITY – Women made impressive gains in capturing public offices in Nevada this year, and now represent 40 percent of the 63-member state Legislature heading into the 2017 session.

That ties Nevada with Colorado and Vermont as the states with the highest percentage of women legislators, according to Emerge Nevada, which encourages and trains Democratic women to run for office.

Women also will soon make up 50 percent of Nevada's six-member congressional delegation, following the historic election of Catherine Cortez Masto to the U.S. Senate and the victory by Jacky Rosen in the 3rd Congressional District in Las Vegas. They will join returning incumbent Dina Titus in Washington, D.C.

Read the whole story

Vandal smashes DHS classroom windows



This person is believed to be responsible for smashing windows at Douglas High School. Photo/Provided

Multiple windows in multiple classrooms were broken at Douglas High School.

"The means to how the windows were broken are being withheld at this time for investigation purposes. The classrooms are still useable," Douglas County sheriff's Investigator Jon Storke told *Lake Tahoe News*.

A dollar value for the damage has not been given.

The incident occurred in the early morning hours of Dec. 21.

Secret Witness is offering \$1,000 reward for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of the suspects responsible for the damage to the high school. Anyone with

information is asked to call 775.782.9905.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Chevys closes in SLT without warning to workers

Updated Dec. 27, 5:40pm:

By Kathryn Reed

More than 30 people in South Lake Tahoe were abruptly without jobs when Chevys didn't open today.

Sara Barker, spokeswoman for the chain, told *Lake Tahoe News* no advance notice was given to the workers. Dec. 24 was the last day the restaurant on Highway 50 served food.

A few people were in the restaurant Dec. 26 cleaning and getting ready to vacate. The smell of old grease and cleaning supplies permeated the dark interior. A regional rep was sent up from Sacramento to oversee the closure.



Chevys in South Lake Tahoe is closed. Photo/LTN

A sign on the door says the restaurant is closed. Scattered about the parking lot on Monday night were rack card size notices saying: "We have closed this location and apologize for any inconvenience." Attached was a coupon for a free appetizer that expires in mid-January.

This was one of several underperforming locations that was closed by parent company Real Mex, which is based in Southern California.

"The Real Mex core business continues to improve and we're preparing to integrate an acquisition into our existing business," CEO Bryan Lockwood told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Although closing restaurants is never easy, the plan we have put in place strengthens the overall health of the company moving forward."

Further details about the acquisition are not being disclosed.

Even though it was only a couple years ago that Chevys signed

a 20-year lease, Barker said, "We have an amicable exit plan with the landlord."

Before it was a Chevys for years it was a Carlos Murphy's restaurant. Prior to that it was Lawrence's Economy Store.

The future of the local employees remains to be seen.

"They were all offered positions elsewhere in our organization and a number of them have chosen to relocate," Barker said.

The nearest Chevys is in Sacramento. Barker said they would not be entitled to relocation compensation. Most Chevys employ between 50 and 70 people; a mix of full- and part-timers, however, the South Lake Tahoe restaurant had closer to 30 workers.

CalPERS moves to slash investment forecast

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

The cost of that government pension is about to go up again, for California taxpayers as well as some public employees.

CalPERS moved to slash its official investment forecast Tuesday, a dramatic step that will translate into billions of dollars in higher annual pension contributions from the state, local governments and school districts.

Employees hired after January 2013, when a statewide pension reform law took effect, will also have to kick in more money. Older employees could see higher contributions, too, although that would be subject to contract bargaining.

Read the whole story

Calif. energy needs could boost Nev.

By Daniel Rothberg, Las Vegas Sun

As part of a final push for clean energy in the remaining weeks of the Obama administration, the Department of the Interior approved a 728-mile power line Dec. 13 that will move wind energy from Wyoming to Southern Nevada. That wind power, which the federal agency says is enough to supply 1.8 million homes, could then be sold to Western states, especially California.

California is a key market for many clean-energy projects – even beyond its borders – because of its high renewables portfolio standard. Last year, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law requiring power providers to acquire 50 percent of their energy from renewable sources by 2030.

“California needs a lot of renewable energy and cost-effective renewable energy,” said Kara Choquette, a spokesperson for the wind-energy transmission project, known as TransWest Express. She explained that delivery of thousands of megawatts from a wind farm in Southern Wyoming to existing energy infrastructure in Nevada will optimally position sales of electricity to a variety of Western customers, similar to the Hoover Dam. Even if TransWest Express does not deliver its power to Nevada households, the state could benefit from an economic standpoint. The \$3 billion project, crossing 140

miles of Nevada land in Lincoln and Clark counties, is projected to bring 250 construction jobs and generate \$24 million in tax revenue.

Read the whole story