

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

2024 Issue 2

What's Inside

- Page 2
Commemorating
Memorial Day:
An Interview with
Bob Burke
- Page 3
Stories of Impact:
988 Crisis Counselor
Testimonies
- Page 4
Staff Spotlight:
Starting Over Strong
with Melissa Bemis
- Page 5
You(th) Matter:
Increasing Community
Connections to Reduce
Mental Health Concerns
- Page 6
The Crisis System
of Care Overview
Part Two:
Somewhere to Go

Dear Readers,

Greetings and a warm welcome to the second edition of the 2024 DMH Mental Health Awareness Month Newsletters! We're so glad you're here. In this edition, we've got an array of fantastic content for you, so let's dive in together.

Join us as we commemorate Memorial Day with an exclusive interview featuring the Executive Director of the Office of Veterans Affairs. Then, we'll hear powerful testimonies from 988 crisis counselors. We'll also dive into Vermont's peer support services and the Vermont Crisis System of Care. Plus, we'll shine a spotlight on a Starting Over Strong Vermont Outreach Worker, Melissa Bemis. We'll also talk about why it's important for Vermont youth to feel like they belong and matter to their communities.



Samantha Sweet,

We hope that these newsletters have helped you learn something new and have been a fun way for you to celebrate Mental Health Awareness Month.

Thank you for joining us!

Samantha Sweet,
Director of Mental Health Services,
The Vermont Department
of Mental Health

Commemorating Memorial Day: An Interview with Bob Burke



Bob Burke

Bob Burke, a Navy veteran with a 28-year military career, currently serves as the Director of the Office of Veterans Affairs (OVA). We were fortunate to sit down with Bob to hear insights into his military journey, discuss veterans' mental health, and learn about the crucial work conducted by the OVA. Bob's service spans 13 years in the naval reserves and an additional 15 on active duty. During his career, he held diverse roles, including diving and salvage, explosive ordnance management, and teaching at the Naval War College. Despite retiring from the military in 2012, Bob continues to share his wealth of knowledge as an adjunct professor specializing in joint maritime operations while fulfilling his role as the Director of the OVA.

Bob expressed his passion for problem-solving at the OVA, "Helping veterans navigate and connect to resources is really important to me." The OVA actively assists veterans in filing assistance claims, moving through complex federal and legal processes, and accessing benefits and programs. Beyond these services, the OVA oversees the veteran's cemetery in Randolph Center, which Bob described as, "a beautiful, special place." He added, "we recently invested in expanding it; there is plenty of space for all veterans to gather and remember."

Bob talked openly about how hard it can be for veterans to deal with mental health issues when they return to civilian life after military service. He highlighted

the anxiety, depression, and stress that often comes with this transition. He said, "Imagine being away from 'regular' life for 20 years or more, and then coming back to it. A lot changes in that time. And if you've been through combat, it adds even more challenges." He explained that it can be difficult for veterans to ask for help because of the stigma around mental health. He admitted that it took him a while to realize he needed support saying, "In the military, admitting you're struggling mentally wasn't really encouraged. It could even hurt your career. Even though there are resources available, it can still be tough to reach out for help."

"Imagine being away from 'regular' life for 20 years or more, and then coming back to it. A lot changes in that time. And if you've been through combat, it adds even more challenges."

Bob shared some things that help support his mental health, like spending time outdoors, breathing in the fresh air, and getting exercise. He said, "it's important to focus on doing small, positive things each day." He believes that just making an effort is sometimes the best thing you can do.

Bob's message to fellow veterans is an important one: it's okay to ask for help, even though it can be tough to start. His story serves as a reminder of the challenges veterans face and the importance of seeking help when needed. Above all, Bob wants veterans to know support is available, and that there's hope for the future.

For more information on resources for veterans, visit the [Office of Veterans Affairs web-page](#)



Mental Health Myth Busting!

Myth: You only need to take care of your mental health if you have a diagnosed mental health condition.

Fact: Everyone can benefit from taking steps to promote their wellbeing and improve their mental health.



Stories of Impact: 988 Crisis Counselor Testimonies

Every day, the Crisis Counselors at the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline are ready to answer calls from our community. In this part of the newsletter, we get to hear stories from the other end of a call to the Lifeline.

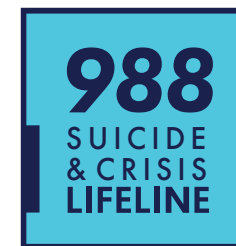
- I was connected with a young help-seeker, who I'll refer to as "J." At the beginning of the conversation, J was upset and expressed suicidal thoughts. Through rapport building and de-escalation, J and I worked together to achieve safety. By the end of our conversation, J's demeanor had shifted; they were laughing and reflecting on their experience with me.
- I recently spoke to a new college student who was experiencing mental health difficulties and feeling unsettled. Following a 988 Lifeline safety assessment, I worked with the help-seeker to devise a personalized safety plan. During our follow-up call, they shared that they had met with their psychiatrist and care team, and were feeling supported, calm, and on the path to stability.
- I spoke to a young person who was struggling with generalized anxiety. After speaking for at length with them and identifying coping skills together, the help-seeker reported that speaking with 988 was a huge relief – and that they now wanted to access long term support such as a therapist.
- I spoke to a young person, who I'll refer to as "M" who was struggling with anxiety related

to school and relationships. I tried to make as many connections with M as I could; talking about what music M likes and their hobbies. M shared that they were nervous to go somewhere to seek help, and I let M know that if they wanted, a mobile crisis team could come out to see them at their location. M asked me to connect them with Mobile Crisis and stay on the line until the team arrived. The more we talked, the calmer M became. At the end of our call, M thanked me for treating them kindly and understanding their situation. It's moments like these that make my job special and meaningful.



A few 988 Call Responders from the Northeast Kingdom Human Services Team

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is available to you, no matter what problems you're dealing with. People call the Lifeline to talk about lots of things such as: relationships, loneliness, economic worries, substance use, and mental and physical illness. If you need someone to lean on for support, call the Lifeline.



To learn more about the Lifeline and its services visit the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline webpage](#)

What part of the brain processes emotions like fear and anxiety?



- A. The amygdala
- B. The cerebellum
- C. The hippocampus
- D. The thalamus

The Answer is A) the Amygdala. The amygdala is a small, almond-shaped structure inside of your brain. It helps detect potential threats and triggers the body's "fight or flight" response. Additionally, the amygdala plays a role in forming emotional memories, behavior and learning.

Staff Spotlight: Starting Over Strong with Melissa Bemis

In response to devastating flooding in July 2023, the Vermont Department of Mental Health created the recovery program, Starting Over Strong Vermont. The program is funded by a FEMA disaster relief grant and aims to strengthen existing community supports. Outreach is a key component of SOSVT. An Outreach Worker in Orange County named Melissa wrote the following about her work with SOSVT:



Melissa Bemis

As a Starting Over Strong Vermont Outreach Worker, my job is to help individuals who have been through disasters find hope in the recovery process. Many of the people we help are going through the most difficult times of their lives. We offer strategies to lower stress, teach coping skills and link them to resources. Most importantly, we're here to listen, understand, and bring

awareness and education to our communities. Our motto is "We are here to listen. We are here to help." We want everyone to know they're not facing hard times alone.

Every morning, I start by checking if anyone has contacted 2-1-1 for flood recovery help in Orange County. Throughout the week, I keep an eye out for anyone who might need follow-up support. Covering all 17 towns

in the county, I've been out speaking face-to-face with community members, business owners, school staff, and residents making sure they know disaster recovery supports are available to them.

When I don't have any immediate follow-ups to address, I think of different ways to let more people know about SOSVT services. I'm always looking for ways to connect to more people. For instance, recently, my colleague and I went to a town meeting in Williamstown where we had the opportunity to talk about the SOSVT program and connect with our community in a meaningful way.

The best parts of my job are the face-to-face interactions I have with people in my community. After the floods, I spent time handing out flyers for SOSVT. I met many people who hadn't heard of the program or needed more information about it. Being able to offer support and hope to them was really rewarding. I see a lot of similarities between my work with SOSVT and my job providing Peer Support. Both involve meeting people where they're at; understanding everyone has unique needs. As SOSVT Outreach Workers, we work hard across Vermont to be a resource people can count on.

Visit the Department of Mental Health website to learn about Starting Over Strong Vermont

Starting Over Strong
VERMONT



You(th) Matter: Increasing Community Connections to Reduce Mental Health Concerns

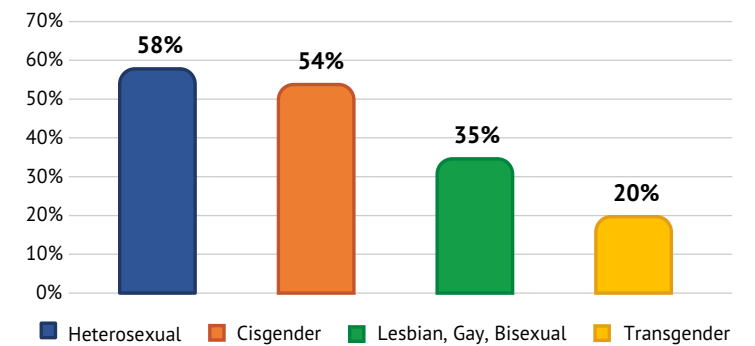
Do Vermont youth feel like they matter? Every two years, Vermont assesses the health risk behaviors of middle and high school students using the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS is a national, classroom-based survey, that helps us understand Vermont's young people, their identities, and the challenges they face.¹



The YRBS asks this question: "Do you agree or disagree that in your community you feel like you matter to people?" In Vermont, most high school students who are heterosexual or cisgender feel connected to their community. But for students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, the numbers are much lower. Only 35% of lesbian, gay, or bisexual high school students feel like they matter to their community, while just 20% of transgender students feel they matter.

According to the [2021 YRBS](#), Vermont youth who identify as LGBTQIA+ have more mental health concerns than their heterosexual or cisgender peers. They report higher rates of feeling sad, anxious, and think about suicide more often. For high school students who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, those who did NOT feel like they mattered to their community were much more likely to feel sad or hopeless (29% more), anxious (28% more), and to have plans (21% more) or attempts (13% more) to hurt themselves compared to those who did feel important. For transgender students, the differences were even bigger, especially when it came to planning and attempting suicide.

So, what does all of this tell us about how important a sense of community is during the adolescent years? Mental health concerns can be reduced by making sure Vermont's young people feel they matter. These findings from the Vermont YRBS show that when young people feel like they have connections to their community, particularly those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, they might have improved mental health outcomes, reduced feelings of isolation and suicidality, and have healthier social emotional growth. Whether it's through clubs, civic engagement, joining religious or cultural groups, or just being part of school activities, it's important for Vermont's high school students to hear loud and clear: "You matter."



Percentage of high school students reporting on community connection (feeling like they matter in their community) by sexual orientation and gender identity

To access resources and support for LGBTQ+ youth, visit the Outright Vermont webpage

If you or someone you know is struggling mentally, call text or chat the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/pdf/YRBS_Data-Summary-Trends_Report2023_508.pdf

What statement(s) are true about mental health and moving our bodies?

- A. Regular exercise or movement can reduce anxiety by making your brain's "fight or flight" system less reactive.
- B. Meditative movement has been shown to alleviate depressive symptoms. This is a type of movement in which you pay close attention to your bodily sensations, position in space, and gut feelings (such as subtle changes in heart rate or breathing) as you move.
- C. A recent study found that when you try to move in synchrony with someone else, it improves your self-esteem. When subjects intentionally synchronized their movement with a recording or another person in the room with them, they had higher self-esteem than when they did not.

The Answer is) All of the above are true.



Mental Health Myth Busting!

Myth: Mental illness is caused by personal weakness.

Fact: Like any major illness, mental illness is not the fault of the individual. It stems from environmental and biological factors, not weakness.



The Crisis System of Care Overview Part Two: Somewhere to Go

In the first edition of the Mental Health Awareness Month Newsletter, we learned about the first two pieces of a successful crisis system of care: someone to call—the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline—and someone to respond—Statewide Mobile Crisis. This edition will explore the third component: Somewhere to go.

Alternatives to Emergency Departments

Alternatives to Emergency Department (Alt to EDs) programs give someone facing a mental health crisis a safe, comfortable place to go to receive support during a crisis. They're intended to provide crisis services outside of Emergency Departments whenever possible and minimize police involvement to prevent long-term consequences within the criminal justice system. Vermont has three types of Alt to ED programs:

1 The Living Room Model: designed to be a warm, welcoming space where guests feel safe and not overwhelmed, this model uses multidisciplinary teams, including peer support workers. In Vermont, The Counseling Service of Addison County (CSAC), and Washington County Mental Health Services (WCMHS). Northeast Kingdom Human Services (NKHS) is also in the process of developing a living room model program expected to be fully open by October, 2024.

CSAC's program, Interlude, is located in Middlebury and service to individuals 18 and older. The program is open from Monday – Friday from 10:00am – 6:00pm. Individuals can access services via self-referral as well as referrals from other providers, local agencies, hospitals, or law enforcement.

WCMHS's program, the Access Hub, is located in Montpelier and provides to individuals 18 and older. It is open on Monday – Thursday from 7:00am – 7:00pm and on Friday from 7:00am – 4:00pm.

NKHS's Front Porch Crisis Care+ program is located in Newport and is actively working on program development and hiring in preparation for beginning services over the next few months.



Front Porch is both a physical space and a package of crisis services across the continuum of care. When fully operational, the program will be open 24/7/265 and have a Living Room model of mental health urgent care as well as four crisis beds on-site to allow for overnight crisis respite based on clinical need. People can access services at Front Porch through self-referral as well as referrals from other providers or local agencies.

2 Burlington CARES: based on the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) model. Two-person response teams with one mental health provider and one medical professional meet with people who call for services so that their full needs can be safely and effectively triaged where they are located in the community.

The Burlington Police Department (BPD) is finalizing its CAHOOTS-model Crisis, Assessment, Response, and Engagement Services (CARES) program, which will serve individuals aged six and older. When people call the Burlington Police Department, they'll be connected to the CARES team based on gathered information. BPD will dispatch the CARES team to meet individuals where they are, without involving law enforcement unless it is necessary for safety.



3 Psychiatric Urgent Care for Kids (PUCK): a space for children experiencing a mental health crisis that needs an urgent response. PUCK provides intensive day-treatment programs where children and their families can meet with clinical staff, undergo assessments, and learn coping skills. Children generally attend the program for 1-3 days before transitioning into other services. In Vermont, United Counseling Services,

Health Care and Rehabilitation Services (HCRS), and Lamoille County Mental Health (LCMH) have operating PUCK programs

UCS's PUCK program is located in Bennington. They serve youth ages 0 – 18 years old, and are open Monday – Friday, 9:00am – 5:00pm.



HCRS's Youth Stabilization program (YSP) is located in Brattleboro. YSP is designed as a "High Intensity Outpatient Program" that provides a brief period of intensive support and stabilization to help children/youth remain in their natural environment and out



of the hospital setting. Although it is not a full-day treatment program, it provides greater longevity of service by working with youth and families for an average of six weeks to three months.

LCMH's Emergent Psychiatric Intervention for Children (EPIC) Program is located in Johnson. EPIC, like PUCK, provides an intensive day-treatment program for youth to participate in a thorough clinical assessment, therapeutic skills work focused on identifying patterns of dysregulation and building coping skills. EPIC serves children/youth, ages 6-18 years old and is open Monday – Friday, 9:00am – 4:00pm.



Tips for Talking About Your Mental Health

Still Stumped About How To Get Started? Use the letter below and fill in the blanks. Pick from the options we've listed or use your own words.



Dear _____,

For the past (day/week/month/year/_____), **I have been feeling** (unlike myself/sad/angry/anxious/moody/agitated/lonely/hopeless/fearful/overwhelmed/ distracted/confused/stressed/empty/restless/unable to function or get out of bed/).

I have struggled with (changes in appetite/changes in weight/loss of interest in things I used to enjoy/ hearing things that were not there/seeing things that were not there/ feeling unsure if things are real or not real/ my brain playing tricks on me/ lack of energy/increased energy/ inability to concentrate/alcohol or drug use or abuse/self-harm/ skipping meals/overeating/overwhelming focus on weight or appearance/feeling worthless/ uncontrollable thoughts/ guilt/paranoia/nightmares/ bullying/not sleeping enough/ sleeping too much/risky sexual behavior/overwhelming sadness/losing friends/unhealthy friendships/unexplained anger or rage/isolation/ feeling detached from my body/ feeling out of control/ thoughts of self-harm/cutting/thoughts of suicide/plans of suicide/abuse/sexual assault/death of a loved one/_____).

Telling you this makes me feel (nervous/anxious/hopeful/embarrassed/ empowered/pro-active/mature/self-conscious/guilty/_____), **but I'm telling you this because** (I'm worried about myself/it is impacting my schoolwork/it is impacting my friendships/I am afraid/I don't want to feel like this/I don't know what to do/I don't have anyone else to talk to about this/I trust you/_____).

I would like to (talk to a doctor or therapist/talk to a guidance counselor/talk to my teachers/talk about this later/ create a plan to get better/talk about this more/find a support group/_____) and I need your help.

Sincerely,

(Your name _____)

(Template provided by MentalHealthAmerica.org)

Mark Your Calendars!

DATE: Saturday, July 13, 2024

TIME: Noon March; 1-3 PM Program

LOCATION: Battery Park, Burlington, Vermont

DETAILS: The March will begin at noon at Church and Main Street.

Before noon, assemble at the Hood Plant Parking Lot on King Street between South Winooski Avenue and Church Street.

The March will proceed up Church Street to Pearl Street and into Battery Park. The program will begin at 1 PM and run until 3 PM, giving time for folks to shop and enjoy Burlington before heading home.

ASL interpretation will be provided.

ABOUT: Vermont Mad Pride is a march and celebration organized by psychiatric survivors, consumers, mad people, and folks the world has labeled “mentally ill.” Mad Pride is about shedding shame, challenging discrimination, advocating for rights, affirming mad identities, remembering and participating in mad history, and having fun. Our lives and contributions are valuable and need celebration!

PROGRAM: Spoken word, music, speeches, and more. Food and commemorative T-shirts provided



Questions to Ask a Loved One Experiencing Mental Health Challenges

When a loved one is experiencing mental health challenges, your support can be key to getting them the treatment they need. Starting the conversation is the first step to getting help! Here are some questions you can ask to get started:



“I’ve been worried about you. Can we Talk? If not, who are you comfortable talking to?”

“I see you’re going through something. How can I best support you?”

“I care about you and am here to listen. Do you want to talk about what’s been going on?”

“I’ve noticed you haven’t seemed like yourself lately. How can I help?”

Remember to listen actively and openly and keep in mind that change doesn’t happen overnight! Continue reaching out with offers to listen and help.