

# **Lending an Ear: During Suicide Prevention Month, the Samaritans of Rhode Island continue to help**

There is no shame in feeling the need to reach out for help or needing to talk through personal issues, regardless of how big or small they may seem to others. There are always people willing to help, whether they be a friend or an anonymous stranger.

The Samaritans of Rhode Island have been providing an ear for citizens in need since 1977. Originally founded in 1953 in London by a vicar named Chad Varah, the concept was brought to the United States (Boston, MA) in 1974 by author Monica Dickens, a prolific author and social worker. Rhode Island was home to the third Samaritans to open in the country. Since that time, the Samaritans of Rhode Island have received nearly a million calls, been assisted by 1,672 volunteers and built up a strong internet base.

“We know we are reaching people and there will always be a need,” said executive director Denise Panichas.

The Samaritans of Rhode Island are volunteer based, with the largest percentage of volunteers being students at Brown University. They currently have more than 75 volunteers. Though they are not recruiting volunteers at this time due to the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteers are an important piece to the services they provide and don't have to pay for.

“Because we are volunteer based, we are recognized by the public as having no agenda relating to market share,” Panichas says. “We can provide support and education without regard to health/mental health status, third party reimbursements or ability to pay.”

Programs the Samaritans of Rhode Island offer include a Safe Place Grief Support Group, Youth and Teen Education, Lifeline Prison Program (a weekly newsletter at this time with possible plans of opening a Lifeline at the ACI), community education programs and their crisis hotline/listening line, which is available 24/7 (based on volunteer availability). They strive to be a beacon of support for the community and has become the state's most trusted name in suicide prevention education.

The number to the Listen Line is 401-272-4044 (or 1-800-365-4044). Manned by “befrienders,” it is

there to give those struggling an avenue to vent without having to worry about being judged. Befrienders go through approximately 24 hours of training and commit to volunteer for at least 200 hours.

Each call is different, all centered on what the caller wants to discuss. Experts have said that a suicidal person doesn't want to die, per say, but they want the pain they're going through, whether it be physical, emotional or both, to end. Befrienders are there to listen and offer support as best they can, though the hotline is not a substitute for professional medical help.

Panichas has noticed that access to professional services has been a challenge for struggling individuals, more so than the stigma of being judged.

"The largest barrier to care is the huge medical and behavioral health bureaucracy, which is terribly difficult to navigate and unaffordable," she opines. "In my experience, one of the most difficult challenges is convincing people to give professional care another chance."

Not spared from the pandemic, The Samaritans of Rhode Island have worked hard to continue to provide their important public service. They have relied on social media to continue to educate the public and have expanded the training for Befrienders to include knowledge of COVID-19 and how that could impact callers. They have upped the technology for the Listen Line to include call forwarding so Befrienders can work from home. The Listen Line is also being used currently for their grief support services and there is a "Teen Talk Thursdays."

The interior renovations to their home, the historic Baker-Hanley House in Pawtucket, has been temporarily halted due to social distancing requirements, as has their Forget-Me-Not gallery and gift shop. They purchased the home as a way for people to support them without becoming Befrienders. Their use of small business contractors and vendors has been important both to their sustainability as well as the current economic climate. They plan to apply for additional funding to renovate and restore the outside of the building, as they plan to continue the great work they have done for Rhode Island.

"What is significant, not only for the past 43 years, but most especially during the COVID-19 crisis, is that while SAMSRI trained, nonjudgmental befrienders provide crisis and daily support when family, friends and professionals are not available, one of the most important services we do is offer emotional support for the disenfranchised — those for whom care is not adequate, not responsive, no longer available or will never be available."

Education is key for suicide prevention. September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month, and Panichas urges people to read their website to learn about what to do in a suicide emergency.

“The more people know, learn and share the more we can all make a difference in suicide prevention.”

***The Samaritans of Rhode Island Forget-Me-Not Gallery is located at 67 Park Place in Pawtucket. The Listen Line number is 401-272-4044 or 1-800-365-4044. Visit their website at [samaritansri.org](http://samaritansri.org) and like them on Facebook: [facebook.com/The-Samaritans-of-Rhode-Island-135146746614916](https://facebook.com/The-Samaritans-of-Rhode-Island-135146746614916)***