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Economic woes can fuel suicidal notions

By Robin Kaminski / The Daily Item

LYNN - Everywhere you turn, people are talking about the sagging economy, loss of jobs and the struggle to stay afloat during the recession.

Those excessive worries have medical professionals concerned with an increasing risk of suicide among the struggling and depressed.

Dr. Gary Gastman, psychologist and clinical director for Bridgewell Counseling Services in Lynn and Lowell, said he has seen a recent spike in referrals for psychiatric care.

"The No. 1 topic right now is about who's lost their job, who's going to lose their job and how to pay for basic needs," he said. "And that way of thinking leads to suicidal thoughts."

Because of the down economy, Gastman said some services and the mental health day program at Bridgewell was among local aid cuts handed down by Gov. Deval Patrick.

The decline in services has since left some clients in the dark and without similar programs in the state to turn to for support.

"We saw an increase in hospitalizations and suicidal thoughts because there weren't any other services like the ones that were cut in the state," he said. "Those clients felt as if they didn't have a floor under them anymore."

In October, Patrick sliced 13 percent of the state's \$4.8 million suicide prevention account to help close a \$1.4 billion budget gap.

In his fiscal 2010 budget proposal, Patrick collapsed the suicide prevention account into a \$53 million "health promotion, violence prevention and workforce expansion" line item and a \$94 million health information technology line item.

Neither of the accounts specify an amount to be used for suicide prevention.

Gastman said the five classic warning signs of depression include: sleep difficulties, excessive weight gain or weight loss, excessive worry and feelings of hopelessness, loss of pleasure from typical activities and suicidal thoughts.

"We want people to avail themselves and be aware of the formal and informal support that is out there," he said. "I'd like people to know that there is help at Bridgewell in Lynn or other types of agencies with social workers and psychologists. If the person doesn't go themselves to get help, sometimes that push will come from a spouse, or a colleague that really cares."

Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in the United States and the third leading cause of death among people between 10 and 24 years old.

The Lynn Police Department was unable to provide figures pertaining to suicides because often times officers don't know if unattended deaths were actually suicides without evidence of a note or if the deceased was on medication.