

COASTAL PATROLS PLAY QUAY ROLE IN SUICIDE PREVENTION

NOT SURPRISINGLY, EVERY COMMUNITY IN IRELAND HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY SUICIDE, AND SOME COASTAL INITIATIVES SUCH AS WEXFORD MARINEWATCH ARE NOW TACKLING THE PHENOMENON HEAD ON. DEIRDRE O'FLYNN PROFILES THE AGENCY, WHICH WAS SET UP TO REDUCE THE RATE OF SUICIDE IN THE HARBOUR TOWN, AND SHE ALSO LOOKS AT SOME OTHER COASTAL TEAMS IN OPERATION.

Over 500 people died by suicide in Ireland in 2011, the highest since records began, according to the Central Statistics Office. And provisional data from other sources suggest that those numbers did not dip significantly in the years since.

Wexford MarineWatch was set up in December 2012 mainly to try to reduce the high level of deaths and suicides in the Wexford Harbour and Bridge area – every year since records began, someone has died in Wexford Harbour.

The MarineWatch involves volunteers patrolling the harbour several nights a week – it now has 80 volunteers and has dealt with over 72 incidents to date. “Thirty one people have been prevented from entering the water – not all of these people were suicidal – but 12 were,” according to Wexford MarineWatch founder Frank Flanagan. Today, the suicide rate off Wexford Harbour and Bridge is zero.

The voluntary service – entirely dependent on fundraising and donations – was set up in the wake of deaths in the harbour in October and November 2012. “Around the same time, I was contacted by Waterford Search & Rescue to see if we could set up something similar in Wexford,” says Flanagan.

A meeting of the local heads of the emergency services led to the setting up of a committee in December 2012 which, today, comprises key individuals from An Garda Síochána, the Fire Service, the Ambulance Service, the local authorities, the RNLI Civil Defence, HSE, Irish Coast Guard, and the Order of Malta.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

“We go out in crews of two and patrol



Volunteers with Wexford MarineWatch on night patrol along the harbour.



Pictured on the Wexford quay front (l-r): Sgt Mick Hanton (Order of Malta), John Maher (Fire Service), Philip Creane (Civil Defence), Frank Flanagan (Founder/Chairman), Sgt Denis Whelan (An Garda Síochána), Mayor Cllr George Lawlor (Wexford County Council), Ger Carthy (Ambulance Service), Nick Bowie (Wexford RNLI), Conor Barry (Civil Defence). Missing from pic is Garda Neil Murphy (Community Support Officer).

Grand News 2012

four nights a week – those four nights are different each week,” Flanagan points out, adding that they don’t have sufficient volunteers to patrol the harbour and quayside seven nights a week. “We pick key nights – the weekend, Leaving Cert results, St Stephen’s Night, New Year’s Eve, New Year’s Day.”

Wexford MarineWatch is not a counselling service – its function is to identify and intercept people who may be distressed or in difficulty and prone to self-harm and alert the relevant emergency service.

“We don’t enter the water, we don’t touch the distressed person, we sit or stand beside them and wait for the emergency services,” says Flanagan. “Nor are we harbour police – if there’s vandalism of the trawlers in the harbour, we’re not interested unless the people involved go into the water. Then we call the RNLI, the Gardaí, or the Coastguard.”

Four volunteers go out in pairs during the week, six are on ‘duty’ on weekend nights. Two are in the MarineWatch vehicle and are in constant contact with the Gardaí and the Coastguard. “They keep an eye out for someone on their own, someone withdrawn,” says Flanagan.

HSE SAFETALK COURSE

The ability to identify someone in distress comes with mandatory training each volunteer must undertake. “All the volunteers do the HSE SafeTALK course and, as well as understanding how to identify a person who may be feeling suicidal, it helps them to have the confidence to approach that person and know what to say and how to calm the person down,” he says.

Volunteers also participate in training exercises with the local RNLI crew, where they learn about the tides and currents in the harbour and are prepared for various scenarios of people entering the water. Training in throwing life buoys and throw bags properly is also undertaken.

“We run the service like a business – we have health and safety procedures which we implement, we have public liability, we undertake certified training,” notes Flanagan. One of those procedures is the critical incident stress management plan for volunteers. This allows for talking to and monitoring of volunteers who are affected when they encounter distressed people intent on dying by suicide.

WATERFORD MARINE SEARCH & RESCUE

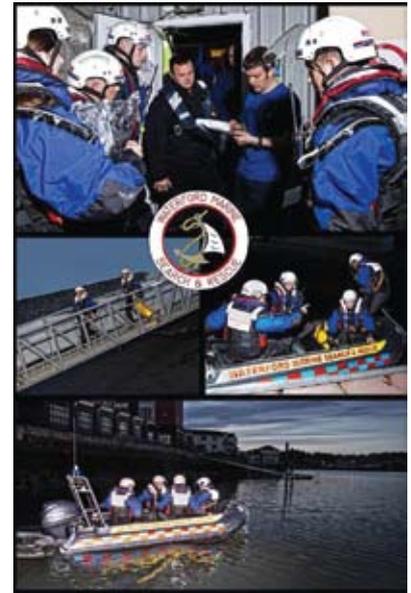
Set up in January 2010 by brothers Declan and Darryl Barry, it provides the city and county with a 24/7 search and rescue service.

Since January 2010, the service has grown to 45 volunteers who patrol the city’s quays at the weekend.

“Since 2010, 18 people have been taken out of the water alive and we’ve saved over 70 people,” said Darryl. “On patrol nights alone, we clock up 400 hours a year.”

The service has four boats that cover the River Suir and the county’s inland lakes and rivers. No lives were lost to the river in 2013; unfortunately, two lives have been lost already this year.

Fully reliant on fundraising, donations, and sponsorship from Electric Ireland, the service wants to raise €100,000 to build a state-of-the-art base. The brothers were named ‘Volunteers of the Year’ by Volunteer Ireland in 2013 and also received €10,000 from the Spar Helping Hand Community Fund in 2013.



For further info www.waterfordmarinesearchandrescue.ie
www.facebook.com/waterfordmarinesearchandrescue

“The safety and welfare of the volunteers is our priority. One of our volunteers is trained in peer support and we also have access to counsellors locally who have volunteered their services to Wexford MarineWatch.”

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

That community support is vital to the service. The 80 volunteers comprise everyone from those who are unemployed, to those on CE schemes, businessmen, housewives, civil servants, and college



Some volunteers pictured with Wexford RNLI’s Frank O’Brien during a training session.

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students, "aged from 21-70".

In turn, the community financially supports the service through everything from sponsorship and attendance at gigs to putting change into collection boxes in local shops.

That support then pays for the volunteers' high-visibility jackets, radios, life jackets, wet gear, throw bags, first aid kits, diesel, and other ongoing expenses.

Key to the success of the initiative is the relationships built up between the emergency services and local authority. "Every night we're out, we contact the Gardaí and the Coastguard so they know how many of us are out. If someone goes into the water, we alert the Coastguard within 15 seconds.

"The lifeboat has a launch time of four minutes from the time the pager goes off, so it's five minutes to action time." That quick response means the emergency services have a greater opportunity to rescue someone before they are swept out of the harbour area."

LOCAL AUTHORITY FUNDING

Flanagan says that Wexford County Council has been instrumental in helping Wexford MarineWatch. The local authority gave them a free vehicle to get them started and also provides ongoing funding.

"If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have got started at all. We also maintain the 40 ring buoys on the quayside for the local authority. If a buoy is missing or tampered with, we have it fixed or replaced within minutes at night. But, again, they have been very good to us."

In the meantime, this weekend and next weekend and the one after that, volunteers will give up their evening to try to ensure that no life is lost in the water of Wexford Harbour.

"On one occasion, two people came up to a supervisor on patrol and one of them said, 'If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here now. I'm still going through treatment – thanks.' To know that someone is grateful is very heartening – there are a lot of grateful families out there and a lot of families who may never have known of our involvement at all."

For further info www.wexfordmarinewatch.com or www.facebook.com/wexfordmarinewatch

LIMERICK'S CORBETT SUICIDE PREVENTION PATROL

In Limerick City, there were 15 recorded suicides during 2012, according to the Central Statistics Office. It was in this context that the voluntary Corbett Suicide Prevention Patrol (CSPP) was set up in November 2012.

"We have made 150 interventions since then – and 40-45 of those people were fully intent on going into the water," said CSPP chairman Mike Mulholland, adding that the volunteers patrol the four bridges spanning the River Shannon in Limerick's city centre. "You can't go from one side of the city to the other without crossing the river and a lot of incidents are drinks and drugs-related."

Drawing from a pool of 27 volunteers, the service deploys two bicycles and a foot patrol three nights a week. "The bicycles can cover the bridges every 15 minutes and the foot patrols every 45 minutes," said Mulholland, adding that eight volunteers (10 during the Christmas) are out each night.

An addition to the crew on one occasion recently was Cllr Joe Crowley, Leas Cathaoirleach of the new Limerick Joint Authority, a move they hope will raise the CSPP's profile with state agencies. "We're going to do a massive drive for volunteers over Christmas and hope to have volunteers out seven nights a week in 2015," said Mulholland.

For further info www.csplimerick.org/ or www.facebook.com/CsrSuicidePreventionLimerick



DERRY'S FOYLE SEARCH & RESCUE

In Derry, Foyle Search & Rescue operates a voluntary suicide prevention and rescue service on and around the River Foyle, one of Europe's coldest and fastest-flowing rivers. It was set up by local people in 1993 in response to the high number of drownings in the river – 30 within 18 months.

Since 1993, volunteers have prevented over 2400 potential suicides, rescued over 298 people directly from the water and recovered 122 bodies. As a result, the average number of drownings per year in the Foyle has fallen from 25 to four. Eighty one volunteers are involved, with patrols on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights, from 9.30pm to 3am, engaging with people in distress, maintaining lifebelts, and saving lives. An emergency pager crew is on call 24/7 and a body recovery team will search for any person missing in the river.

This registered charity also has two bases, four boats, a jeep, a minibus, and a jetty. The initiative was awarded the Irish Lifesaving Foundation's 'Ireland Medal' and was cited as a good practice model at the World Drowning Conference in Vietnam in 2011.

As ever, funding is a concern and whilst the organisation receives a small amount of funding from the Public Health Agency and its local council, it is fully reliant on the generosity of the public through donations and fundraising events.

For further info www.foylesearchandrescue.org or www.facebook.com/foylesearchandrescue

