

SILENT no more

Postal workers who need help for substance abuse or suicidal thoughts often suffer in silence. Their family members may fear their loved one's condition is a reflection on them. Their friends or co-workers might not want to invade their privacy. So, usually, no one says anything.

The Postal Service's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is urging them all to be "silent no more."

"If you need help, you should speak up," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "If you know someone or love someone who needs help, you should speak up."

The EAP is a free, voluntary and confidential service that helps postal workers, and their immediate family members living in their household, with many different problems they may face in life. (For more information about the EAP, see the April issue of *The Postal Record*.)

"Suicide is preventable and chemical dependency is treatable, but only if someone breaks the silence," NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta Jr. said. Peralta is the NALC's representative on the EAP's national joint committee, a group of postal employee representatives that oversees the program.

EAP launched a new initiative, "Silent No More...Sharing Strength," after Peralta wrote in a column in *The Postal Record* last year about James Byrne, the son of a friend of Peralta's, Lynn, MA Branch 7 President **Patrick Byrne**. James Byrne died in January of 2014 of a heroin overdose.

"Open your arms and your heart to your loved ones and your co-workers," Peralta wrote. "We can help



Patrick Byrne, proud father of his son, Jamie

Jamie, Patrick's son, with one of his nieces. Jamie struggled with addiction, a struggle that eventually took his life.



each other by opening a conversation on chemical dependency and/or depression and in turn guide someone to assistance that is available." (See the September/October 2014 issue of *The Postal Record* for the complete column.)

When his son tragically died, Patrick Byrne already had understood the immense difficulties of dealing with chemical dependency. James had struggled with it for two decades, and since his retirement from the Postal Service in 2006, Patrick Byrne has counseled homeless people in Lynn, many with substance-abuse problems and the mental illness that often comes with them.

The death of his son put the issue in sharp focus, Byrne said, as did the reaction of scores of letter carriers from his own branch and across the

country who contacted him about their own family members with chemical dependency after reading Peralta's column. "They fought this problem while trying to protect their privacy," he said, "a choice that they now regret."

Unlike the homeless people Patrick Byrne helps, his son James lived a fairly normal life. He had a master's degree in computer science and made good money in information technology. But throughout his adult life, James had been hooked on heroin, a drug easily found on Lynn's gritty post-industrial streets. James had periods of sobriety, but circumstances always seemed to steal them from him eventually. His longest drug-free period, five years, ended when he was hospitalized after an accident and was given morphine.

The day he died, James had enjoyed seven months clean. But an old friend and fellow addict called him one day to beg him to find heroin. After first refusing, James gave in and bought some for the friend, and apparently couldn't resist using it himself. The friend called James on his cell phone to get the heroin as James lay dying on the floor of his sister's house just down the street from his father's home. That's where his father found him.

Patrick Byrne knows the details of his son's death from his phone records; desperate for a heroin fix, the friend called James more than 100 times.

James had a good upbringing and strong family ties, even after he and his sister grew up and moved out of their parents' home. James lived at his sister's house, so the whole family, including Patrick's three grandchildren, lived close enough to continue their traditional get-togethers. "We still do Sunday dinner," Patrick Byrne said.

"We felt confident that his upbringing was solid," he said, but James is proof that parents aren't to blame for drug addiction.

"Good parents have kids who have problems," Byrne said. "Parents feel that a child's activity is a reflection on them." But parental shame only makes things worse if it prevents them from seeking help, he said. "You've got to break that."

After Peralta's column was published, Byrne heard from many other letter carriers about their own struggles with addiction, depression or mental illness in their families. "I was shocked at how many people are dealing with similar problems," he

According to the EAP's website, eap4you.com, suicide is a serious and immediate concern if at least five of these symptoms exist:

- Depressed mood
- Change in appetite or weight
- Change in sleeping patterns
- Speaking and/or moving with unusual speed or slowness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Decrease in sexual drive
- Fatigue or loss of energy
- Feelings of worthlessness, self-reproach or guilt
- Diminished ability to think or concentrate, slowed thinking, or indecisiveness
- Thoughts of death, suicide, or wishing to be dead
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol

A family member, co-worker or friend who sees these symptoms in someone else—or a person who needs help with depression or suicidal thoughts—should get help immediately.

EAP's website also explains the issue of chemical dependency. While it appears that an addicted person is behaving entirely by choice, substance abuse can change the brain in ways that diminish impulse control, so dependency should be understood as a disease requiring treatment, not just bad behavior.

"We want people who have, or know someone who is dealing with suicidal thoughts, depression or chemical dependency to start a conversation that can lead to recovery," Peralta said. "And EAP can help."

EAP offers consultations to help a concerned co-worker or family member learn the best way to approach and talk to someone who needs help. Just call the EAP at 800-EAP4YOU (800-377496; TTY: 877-492-7431). For more information about EAP resources and services, you can also visit its website at eap4you.com. EAP's services are available to all postal employees and their immediate family members living in the same household. Services are free and confidential.

said. "Letter carriers across the nation have reached out."

Breaking through the stigma and shame, whether it be to help with suicide, mental illness or chemical dependency, and to share personal stories are the purposes of the "Silent No More" initiative.

Silent No More urges postal employees to share their experiences with a mental health issue—their own or a family member's—in which they were happy they sought help from the EAP. Stories from those who wish they had sought help, or who regret not seeking help sooner, are also welcome.

Peralta is collecting stories from letter carriers to share with the postal community.

"I want to show people that speaking up or seeking help isn't always easy, but it's easier than living in silence," Peralta said.

Peralta stressed that all communication with the EAP remains completely confidential and that sharing stories with him is strictly voluntary and separate from EAP assistance or counseling. He will withhold names of those who submit their stories, and he will accept anonymous submissions as well. "It's easy to send something anonymously through the mail," he said. "Just mail a letter to me with no name and no return address."

The theme of breaking silence applies not just to sharing stories. It is an appeal for family members or co-workers of someone with a serious problem to speak up and offer help—and for those with problems to ask for help.

Though James Byrne struggled with chemical dependency, the problems of suicide and mental illness are intertwined with addiction. "There is a

nexus between the issues,” Patrick Byrne said. His years of helping homeless addicts in Lynn helped him understand this. For many drug abusers, addiction is like a slow suicide, and some may choose a quick suicide when they lose hope. “The phrase ‘getting high’ is the most misplaced statement. For many, the party’s been over for a long time. It’s a miserable existence,” he said. “A lot of the kids somewhere along the line take their own lives.”

Also, many people with dependencies are self-medicating—trying to deal with untreated mental health problems, often undiagnosed, that are masked by the drug use. And an addicted person often isn’t the only one involved who needs support: “When somebody is addicted, one person has the disease of addiction but many people suffer from it.”

Patrick Byrne last saw James the day he died, and the father’s last words to his son were, “I love you.”

“That made it easier to come forward,” he said. Too many people experience bitter words or bad times with their loved ones before they lose them to suicide or overdose, he said, and that makes the burden harder to bear.

Byrne said the experience of sharing his story is done as a service to others, much like the way he serves those struggling in his own community, but it’s not part of dealing with his grief. “It isn’t a healing process,” he said—healing requires far more, if it’s even possible. “But you might as well do what you can to help other people.” **PR**

‘Do not put yourself in danger’ from excessive heat and sun

NALC joins the Postal Service in alerting letter carriers to the dangers of heat in the spring and summer. NALC Director of Safety and Health Manuel Peralta Jr. urges letter carriers to “learn about heat safety and pay close attention to the heat index where you work so that you take all necessary safety precautions when you are out delivering your routes. Don’t let yourself be overcome by hot weather.”

Many offices have failed to give heat-related safety talks, including the May 2015 talk, “Beat the Heat, Stay Cool.” Your national business agents received this stand-up talk and distributed it to their branches in May. If this mandatory stand-up talk has not been given in your station, please reach out to your branch president, who should have received this information.

Here is an excerpt from a statement made by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration on the importance of being prepared:

Whenever there is high heat, outdoor workers are at increased risk for heat-related illnesses and deaths. In fact, every year thousands of workers experience heat-related illnesses, and dozens more are killed by heat, and it happens in every part of the country...

The workers most at risk for heat-related illness...do strenuous work in the open air.

We need your help to get the word out to employers that they are responsible for providing workplaces that are safe from excessive heat. This means regular breaks for workers so they can cool down. It means regular access to water so workers can stay hydrated. It means training for workers on the symptoms of heat illness—and what to do if they see a co-worker showing signs of dehydration or heat stroke.

Here are key pieces of advice from the safety talk:

- Hydrate before, during and after work. Prevention is important, so make sure to maintain good hydration by drinking at least 8 ounces of water every 20 minutes.
- Dress appropriately for the weather. On warm days, make sure to wear light colored, loose fitting, breathable clothing to keep body temperatures down.
- Utilize shade to stay cool. When possible, use shaded areas to stay out of direct sunlight.
- Know the signs of heat stress. You should understand what heat stress is, and how it can affect your health and safety. Here are some things to look out for:
 1. Hot, dry skin or profuse sweating
 2. Headache
 3. Confusion or dizziness
 4. Nausea
 5. Muscle cramps
 6. Weakness or fatigue
 7. Rash

Finally, it’s important to notify your supervisor or call 911 if you’re experiencing signs of heat related illnesses.

For more on how to prepare for extreme heat and sun, go to the Safety and Health page at nalc.org/workplace-issues/safety-and-health.

“Letter carriers need to remember to respond appropriately to the weather and immediately notify their supervisor if you feel that you are experiencing heat-stress symptoms or other weather-related issues,” NALC President Fredric Rolando said.

“Bottom line: Do not put yourself in danger,” Rolando said. **PR**