



Long Island
BusinessNEWS

COMMUNITY OUTREACH *Winner*



Larry Weiss: Helping families through the worst times.

**2010
HCH
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FAMILY SERVICE LEAGUE

By **CLAUDE SOLNIK**

When the adult son of a social worker at the Family Service League committed suicide four years ago, the father found himself faced with the most difficult time of his life.

He soon found many groups working hard to prevent suicide, but few if any specializing in helping people after someone they loved took their life. The Huntington-based non-profit has since launched "Joe's Project" to help family, friends, co-workers and others following a suicide.

"We have prevention programs," said Larry Weiss, a senior vice president at FSL, noting that someone contemplating suicide won't go begging if they look for help. But very few organizations, Weiss added, are equipped to work with

individuals or families in the aftermath of a suicide by someone close to them.

The extent of the outreach is illustrated by the fact that first responders to suicides on Long Island these days are armed not just with sympathy, but with laminated cards, putting people in touch with the program. After FSL is contacted through an around-the-clock hotline, it calls and sends counselors, sometimes to the scene of the suicide.

Suicides can't be stereotyped, Weiss said. The majority of people who take their own lives are not young people but average in age from 35 to 45. And economic factors don't play a significant part in leading people to the final act, Weiss said, but suicides come from all walks of life and all income levels.

But FSL is not just about giving comfort and aid to people through Joe's

Project. It's an essential organization on Long Island helping its neighbors face a wide range of crises.

Founded in 1926, FSL has grown into one of the Island's largest non-profits with a \$24 million budget, 500 employees and 1,000 volunteers. FSL operates 47 programs at 15 locations, serving nearly 50,000 people annually struggling with depression, drug use, homelessness and other troubles.

FSL operates on the highest professional level. An example is the way Joe's Project was launched. FSL created teams of responders certified in counseling after suicides, including peers whose loved ones or close friends took their own life. The program is run as part of FSL's "Community Crisis Action Team," an umbrella for the group's trauma response programs.

"We'll help do whatever the family needs to get re-established," Weiss said. "It's typically professional counseling service."

The suicide "postvention" – intervention after a suicide – program responded to nearly 50 in 2009 and is on track for roughly the same number this year.

"The intent is to deal with it as a traumatic situation and help alleviate the possibility that this can become post traumatic stress disorder," said Weiss.

"It's horrible," he added, speaking of the loss people feel. "You're going into a situation where somebody has taken their life. And it's usually not very long ago."

Through the program, FSL also works with schools after children or faculty members commit suicide, as well as doing suicide prevention presentations.

"We've been called in when people attempted suicide," Weiss said.

Although the program is funded by Suffolk County, FSL has sent counselors farther afield. "We've gone into the city, into Nassau," he said. "We tend not to turn people down when they call."

Weiss said it's difficult for many people to discuss suicide, but that conversation and counseling are cornerstones of prevention.

"When people discuss it, they bring it out," he said of feelings that can lead to suicide. "It's more likely to become less toxic."