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Suicide Prevention Must Be Everyone's Focus Every Day
*DHS Commissioner, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health Experts,
Passionate Advocates Reinforce Need for Education and Services*

MERCERVILLE (September 10, 2013) – “The statistics are so scary, the impact is so real. As much as we do, we need to continue to do more. It really matters to keep doing this every day,” said Jennifer Velez, Esq, Commissioner, New Jersey Department of Human Services (DHS), speaking about suicide earlier today during *Back to School: Take a Breath – and Pack a Good Mental Health Tool Kit*. This event was held by the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA) and Attitudes in Reverse® (AIR) in recognition of National Suicide Prevention Day. Behavioral health and education professionals, staff from DHS and the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and other mental health stakeholders attended the event.

“I hope you will continue to build on today so National Suicide Prevention Day is not a once-a-year event, but something we all do every day in our professional and personal lives, so we can help save lives,” said Debra L. Wentz, PhD, Chief Executive Officer of NJAMHAA, a statewide trade association representing 180 providers of mental healthcare, addiction treatment and various support services, such as supported education and skill-development programs. “It is my hope that all of you will leave here today with an even more positive outlook on mental health education and share the resources you are discovering today to help people at every stage of their lives so they can fulfill their hopes and dreams. After all, being healthy – physically, mentally and emotionally – is a critical foundation for achieving our goals.”

“Suicide is everyone’s business. Everybody must work together,” stressed Michelle Scott, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor, Monmouth University School of Social Work, and Chair of the New Jersey Youth Suicide Prevention Advisory Council. “We each have our role and we have to complement each other,” she said.

Dr. Scott illustrated the vital concept of the “competent prevention community,” in which all members of a community are concerned about suicide prevention, can recognize signs of risk; integrate activities into established community services; and know how and where to get help and are consistently inclined to do so.

AIR is playing an important role in helping to build competent prevention communities: the co-founders, Tricia and Kurt Baker, and volunteers deliver their *Coming Up for AIR™* presentation to students in middle and high schools and colleges: a target population since the majority of mental health disorders develop between the ages of 14 and 25 years. “We want people to know it’s okay to talk about mental illness and to seek help,” said Tricia Baker.

Another part of AIR’s mission is to build understanding and empathy. They have been doing this during their school presentations: they give an AIR wristband to each student and explain that wearing a wristband sends the message

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that the person is approachable and understanding and will help others to access the treatment and other support they need. To build on this mission, AIR launched an *In Their Shoes*[™] campaign during the *Back to School* event. They recently collected more than 120 pairs of shoes and tied to them tags with thoughts and emotions that high school students with mental illnesses commonly have. The shoes represent the 234 New Jersey youth who completed suicide between 2009 and 2011, as reported by DCF in its *Updated 2012 Adolescent Suicide Report*.

“While New Jersey has historically maintained one of the lowest youth suicide rates in the nation, the reality is one person under the age of 25 loses their life to suicide about every four-and-a-half days in our state. Although I am extremely proud of the work we have done to raise awareness of suicide prevention, even one life lost is too many. That is why DCF, along with our sister agency, DHS, and our many community partners have worked diligently together to make suicide prevention a top priority. Together, we are making a difference, and I am thankful for the continuous commitment shown by so many individuals to help prevent youth suicide and save precious lives,” said Allison Blake, PhD, LSW, Commissioner of DCF.

Since delivering their first presentation at Piscataway High School in 2010, AIR has spoken to more than 11,000 students in middle and high schools throughout New Jersey, as well as colleges in New York, and they have invitations to schools in Vermont and Georgia. Based on the sign-up sheet in the registration area of today's event, AIR will soon receive many more invitations to present to students.

In addition, AIR promotes the mental health benefits that dogs offer, trains dogs to serve as Emotional Support Animals and matches them with individuals who have mental illnesses or other types of disabilities. This is called the AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds[™] program

“Soon after losing Kenny, we didn't know what we could do, but we knew something had to change,” said Kurt Baker, referring to his son who completed suicide in 2009 after a long battle against severe depression and anxiety, which led them to establishing AIR. “We went out in public with Miki, Tricia's service dog and a certified therapy dog. People came to talk to us about Miki and that would start a conversation. About 90 percent of those people had a story about themselves or others having mental health issues, and many mentioned that they either have dogs or wish they had dogs to help them manage difficult emotions. This inspired us to create our AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds program,” Kurt Baker said.

During today's event, educators, mental healthcare providers and young recipients of behavioral health services shared their perspectives on the importance and effectiveness of mental health education and treatment.

“I feel so inspired by the invaluable contributions that NJAMHAA members and AIR make to the lives of so many individuals, and I am honored to be a part of both organizations,” said Shauna Moses, NJAMHAA's Associate Executive Director and member of AIR's Board of Directors. “I experienced first hand a NJAMHAA member's expert and compassionate services, as I had severe, frequent depressive episodes early last year and was fortunate that the thought of getting help broke through the depression before I could become one of the suicide statistics. I am grateful for the opportunity through NJAMHAA to help save lives by advocating to government leaders and educating the general public. I place an equally, very high value on opportunities to educate many others through my writing for AIR and participation in *Coming Up for AIR* presentations whenever my schedule allows.”

In addition to NJAMHAA and AIR, DHS also provides vital resources: funding for behavioral healthcare programs; proactive efforts to secure federal funding for programs, as well as to train providers; and, most recently, its new suicide prevention hotline - NJHOPELINE – 855-654-6735 – where, 24 hours a day, callers can reach live counselors, who are trained and credentialed.

Based in the Greater Trenton, New Jersey area, the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies, Inc. (NJAMHAA) is a statewide trade association representing nonprofit behavioral health agencies. Founded in 1951, NJAMHAA represents 180 hospital-based and freestanding providers of mental health and substance use treatment services throughout New Jersey. In aggregate, NJAMHAA members help more than 500,000 children and adults with mental health and substance use issues annually and employ approximately 98,000 members of New Jersey's workforce. NJAMHAA's mission is to champion opportunities that advance its members' ability to deliver accessible, quality, efficient and effective integrated behavioral healthcare services to individuals who have mental illnesses and/or addictions, and their families. NJAMHAA is committed to recovery and wellness for all individuals. For more information about NJAMHAA, please visit www.njamhaa.org.

Attitudes In Reverse® (AIR) was established by Tricia, Kurt and Katelyn Baker of Plainsboro, NJ, in 2010, soon after their son/brother Kenny completed suicide following a long battle against severe depression and anxiety. Their mission is to save lives by educating students about mental health, related disorders and suicide prevention. In the first two years, they have presented to more than 11,000 students in middle and high schools and colleges in New Jersey and New York, and they have been invited to present at other schools in New Jersey, as well as Georgia and Vermont. AIR also promotes the mental health benefits of dogs and includes dogs in their advocacy and educational program. The organization also has an AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds™ program, through which displaced dogs with the ability to serve as Emotional Support Dogs, which are more than pets, are matched with individuals who have mental illnesses or developmental disabilities, thereby saving two lives with each match. For more information about AIR, please visit www.attitudesinreverse.org.