

# PROVIDENCE Journal

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## Since 2010, there have been more than two dozen suicide deaths on Newport County bridges. What can be done?

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In light of the suicide attempts and suicide deaths on the bridges over the last few years, The Daily News asked RITBA Executive Director Buddy Croft if the agency has considered the installation of barrier or deterrent systems on any of its bridges.

Heavy traffic could be one indicator of a suicide or suicide attempt on a bridge. The wails of emergency vehicle sirens or a tow truck that makes its way to an abandoned car could also tip people off. Locals may notice posts on social media. The Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority, in the past, has tweeted about “incidents” on its bridges, advising people of congestion in the area as emergency personnel work.

Four bridges in the state fall under RITBA’s jurisdiction — the Newport Pell Bridge, the Mount Hope Bridge, the Jamestown Verrazzano Bridge and the Sakonnet River Bridge — and all are located in or connect to Newport County.

From Jan. 1, 2010 through Nov. 20, 2018, there were 12 suicide deaths on the Mount Hope Bridge, nine on the Pell Bridge and six on the Jamestown Bridge, bringing the total to 27 during that near nine-year span (the Rhode Island Department of Health’s office of state medical examiners, which provided the information, stressed that 2018 confirmed deaths were not final and subject to change).

Suicide death information was not readily available for the Sakonnet River Bridge. Also, the RIDOH has a “small numbers policy” in place to protect the privacy of people, and therefore couldn’t provide information year-to-year on suicide deaths for each bridge, Joseph Wendelken, public information officer with RIDOH, wrote in an email to The Daily News.

The most recent suicide attempt reported by The Daily News was in late October of this year. A 53-year-old woman from the Portsmouth area jumped from the Mount Hope Bridge. She suffered serious injuries but survived. A Portsmouth couple — using their inflatable raft — and a Rhode Island state trooper recovered her from the water.

In light of the suicide attempts and suicide deaths on the bridges the past few years, The Daily News asked RITBA Executive Director Buddy Croft if the agency has considered the installation of barrier or deterrent systems on any of its bridges.

“We continue to consider the many factors associated with such [an] initiative of installing netting or fencing on the bridge,” Croft wrote in an email to The Daily News on Nov. 13. “RITBA has been monitoring what other bridge authorities have done in regard to fencing or netting. Before anything can be attached to or constructed on our bridges, we’d have to engage in engineering studies which would include load and wind analysis. Those types of studies have not yet been initiated.”

Croft said there are various forms of suicide barriers for bridges.

“Many suicide barriers are fence-like metal structures,” he wrote. “They often have tops that curve inward to deter people from climbing over them. Suicide barriers can also take the form of nets, extend from the bridge deck structure or hang below it in order to preserve views from the bridge deck.”

The nets aren’t fabric or rope-like, Croft said, but instead made of metal wiring. When asked for cost projections of such deterrent and barrier systems, Croft referenced the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

“In terms of cost, a wire mesh barrier that is currently being constructed on the Golden Gate Bridge is estimated to cost \$211 million,” he wrote in an email.

Aside from physical deterrents, Bianca Costantino, a representative for the RDW Group, the public relations firm used by RITBA, followed up with another “interesting and important deterrent system” — surveillance.

“Advancements in technology [have] provided for ‘smart’ cameras and other surveillance measures that enable authorities to react to events much quicker and potentially prevent events as well. RITBA is exploring combining this technology with service and safety patrols tied into RITBA’s automated control system to provide a safer environment on its bridges,” Costantino wrote in an email.

The Samaritans of Rhode Island, which offers suicide prevention services, has signs with its hotline number on each of the four bridges.

Denise Panichas, the executive director of the Samaritans, acknowledged she’s not an expert on studies of deterrent and barrier systems installed on bridges before asking a rhetorical question during a phone conversation with The Daily News: “Do the barriers remove the hopelessness?”

Panichas said she supports various methods of suicide deterrence, but stressed people who are suicidal are “hopeless, believe no one cares if they live or die and in the end, think they [are doing] everyone a favor.”

“Those are policy decisions that the legislature has to make about barriers,” Panichas said. “In the end, it’s about hopelessness and access to care.”

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, call The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Newport Mental Health at 401-846-1213. The 24-hour crisis hotline/listening line for the Samaritans is 401-272-4044 or 800-365-4044. For emergencies, dial 911.

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