**For Release Wednesday, June 22, 2022**

**Capitol View**

**Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**Something We Can Do, Mental Health Awareness**

Kudos to the lame duck Ricketts’ administration for embracing another mental health initiative aimed at solidifying the state’s position, according to one publication, as having the fourth-best mental health in the nation.

Earlier this month, Gov. Pete Ricketts launched the Governor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families. It’s part of a national effort to make mental health services more readily available to all Nebraskans. He said the Nebraska Department of Veterans’ Affairs and the Department of Health and Human Services Behavior Health Division will lead the cooperative effort of strategic planning, setting action steps and measuring progress in improving care.

Ricketts said *U.S. News and World Report* now ranks Nebraska as having the fourth-best mental health in the nation.  However, we still have room for improvement.  That’s why we’re giving special attention to the mental health of military members, veterans and youth.

He said *SmartAsset* just ranked Nebraska as the fourth-best state in America for veterans. The Department of Veterans’ Affairs provides excellent service but is constantly looking to do more.

The problem is that many see it as a sign of weakness to ask for mental health help. We’re supposed to have it all together. I’m OK, you’re OK. Half of all lifetime mental health illness starts by age 14 and suicide is the second leading cause of death for Americans ages 10-14 and the third leading cause of death for those 15-24 years old.

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The Covid pandemic has been challenging for all, especially in terms of mental health. School and business closings led to unprecedented isolation. Children’s hospitals in America report the number of self-harm and suicide cases increased 45% from 2019 to 2021 among 5–17-year-olds.

The Governor said major strides during the recent legislative session expanded access to pediatric mental healthcare. The State allocated $10 million of federal pandemic relief funds to the construction of a behavioral health center for children ages 5-18 at CHI Immanuel; $10 million to expand a youth mental health development day school at Boys Town; and $10 million to Children’s Hospital as it develops urgent care centers to address pediatric mental health.  DHHS is also providing an additional $1.8 million to Children’s Hospital for telehealth technology to support pediatric mental health services.

Additionally, the State continues to partner with nonprofits, behavioral healthcare providers, and schools to help prevent suicides.

As one of 30,000 Nebraskans who have been trained in QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer), a suicide prevention program, I want to tell you that it’s both necessary and easy to learn. In a world of problems where people are clamoring to help others and stem the all-too-prevalent tide of divisiveness, QPR has plenty of merit. You don’t have to be a trained counselor to look for the warning signs and ask the correct questions, persuade the person to seek help and refer them to one of many resources. It’s as easy as a phone app to make a difference.

Nearly 70,000 educators and school personnel have received Kognito suicide prevention training and more than 20,000 have been trained in Suicide Safe Schools. Mental Health First Aid training has been given to more than 900 Nebraskans who can respond to signs of mental illness and substance abuse.

Ricketts said the state is fully invested in preventing and treating mental illness.  But the State cannot do this alone.  It takes involvement from everyone – nonprofits, educators, medical professionals, family members and peers – to identify signs of mental illness and to encourage those dealing with it to get help.

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If newspaper columnists can do it, so can you.

Here’s a chance to make sure we are taking care of our own. Join me in doing this!

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