

4-4-05

**Alexandria City Budget Hearing on FY 06 Budget Priorities**  
**April 4, 2005**

Good afternoon.

I am Carol Loftur-Thun, Executive Director of CrisisLink.

I am here this evening to respectfully urge the Alexandria City Council to increase funding next year for the Community Partnership Fund and increase funding for comprehensive crisis prevention and early intervention rather than waiting until mental health and other crises become much more costly tragedies.

As CrisisLink's new Executive Director, I've been very impressed by your increased support this year and continued support of our programs, which has allowed CrisisLink to keep our Hotline and other programs going 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the past 36 years.

I've also been very impressed with the high quality of services CrisisLink provides, and I'm happy to report we are building on our tradition of excellence:

- CrisisLink won the first ever national Award for Crisis Center Excellence in 2003,
- the first ever national Staff Excellence Award,
- And the ABBIE Award for Best Nonprofit Business in 2003

**But this is a time of increased need in our community, and CrisisLink has risen to the challenge:**

- Overall, call volume is up over **36%** this year so far,
- Youth calls were up **49%** last year, and another **64%** this year to date,
- And suicide calls were up **15%** last year, and another **108%** this year so far.
- Last year alone, CrisisLink answered almost **162** calls from Alexandria residents that were suicide-related.
- ***Alexandrians face the highest suicide rate in Northern Virginia and the Commonwealth of Virginia overall.*** The suicide death rate per 100,000 was 13.2 for the City of Alexandria versus a statewide rate of only 10.8 and a rate of only 7.4 in Northern Virginia as a whole.
- In 2003, Conservatively, CrisisLink saved the City of Alexandria at least **\$296,000** last year, because for every call de-escalated by a crisis line, ***jurisdictions typically save at least \$18,500*** in ambulance, police, and emergency services.

**Despite this dramatic increase in call volume, CrisisLink has also increased the percentage of calls we answer, and we are working to improve our programs by:**

- Doubling the number of volunteer listeners on the Hotline in the past year, and staggering shifts to ensure better coverage
- Expanding call-backs in response to all kinds of trauma calls, not just suicide calls
- Taking 3<sup>rd</sup> party suicide calls where someone calls who is concerned that someone they know might be suicidal

- Expanding our CareRing phone “check-in” program for seniors, disabled and homebound adults
- Expanding our free trainings for schools and local agencies, including Alexandria Public Schools and Arlandria Neighborhood Health Services—the value of these trainings over the past five years we estimate at \$62,450

**CrisisLink continues to cover the “gap” in Alexandria Emergency Mental Health:**

- CrisisLink provides coverage after-hours *when Alexandria Emergency Mental Health staff does not answer calls*
- CrisisLink provides coverage at a *much lower cost* than the County could by leveraging community resources
- Last year, we leveraged over *\$315,000* of in-kind donations of time from volunteers and space donated by *Virginia Hospital Center*

**BUT, Calls between midnight and 8 a.m. have increased 38% in the past three years and another 37% so far this year alone.**

**To meet this increasing need, CrisisLink must employ paid crisis line staff:**

- With currently funding, we can only afford *1* crisis line worker for the “graveyard” shift to take *all* calls to this regional hotline
- and only can pay these “first responders” *90 ¢ less than the starting wage for an Alexandria street cleaner*, despite the responsibility they shoulder on each shift

**We need staff capacity to recruit and train volunteers and staff so we can handle this increased call volume to save even more lives and prevent more tragedies:**

- Our 1/2 time Training Coordinator position continues to be an unfilled vacancy because of a lack of funding,
- and our Director of Training is working one-and-a half jobs--*I won't be unable to retain my outstanding staff* if I can't fund the Training Coordinator position.

**CrisisLink requested \$68,000 for FY 06, and less funding, will mean that CrisisLink will be unable to continue to provide a reliable 24/7 crisis line to prevent costly tragedies.**

**On behalf of CrisisLink's Board of Directors and Alexandria citizens, I urge you to fully fund CrisisLink's request for 2006 so we can continue to provide our outstanding, cost effective, preventative services to Alexandria residents.**