

Irish Independent - Sunday July 18 2010
Rise in suicides as money woes hit:

By MAEVE SHEEHAN and RONALD QUINLAN

Tycoon's charity helps those feeling the strain as recession sees more people taking own lives

A RECENT rise in suicide linked to the recession has prompted fresh calls for the financial authorities to go easy on those in serious financial difficulties.

A charity founded by the business tycoon Noel Smyth has written to the Revenue Commissioners to discuss how it can help those under considerable financial strain as the recession takes its toll.

Mr Smyth, a co-founder of 3Ts (Turn the Tide of Suicide), will launch a campaign in September to establish a "suicide authority". This would be something along the lines of the National Road Safety Authority and would begin by collecting information.

"We have no proper statistics on suicide, but we estimate that at least two people a day are taking their own lives. We need to have an intervention system or more and more people are going to die," Mr Smyth said.

Suicides increased by an alarming 25 per cent last year to 527, according to provisional figures, while 11,966 people presented to hospitals after attempting suicide.

The toll from suicide continued last week with the death of the well-known businessman Martin Blake, who lived near Wilkinstown, near Navan, Co Meath. It is believed Mr Blake telephoned a relative in despair shortly before he took his own life. He then walked through the fields of his home with a legally-held shotgun. He was found dead a short time later.

Mr Blake, 57, played a key role in developing the €300m Tynagh Energy Power Plant in Galway. He was also involved in the successful family meat supply business. He was among the investors who borrowed money from Anglo Irish Bank to invest in an apartment in New York.

Another of those investors was John O'Dolan, a successful property developer from Salthill in Galway, who took his own life last year, days after confiding to a priest that he was under "fierce pressure".

In one day last month, eight business people from Athy, Greystones and Dublin took their own lives, according to informed sources within the property development sector. In another case a developer in his early thirties took his own life after his bank threatened to enforce a personal guarantee his brother had given to support his borrowings. It is understood the family farm had been offered as security.

The Irish Property Council has warned that the number of suicides within the cash-strapped property sector is set to increase.

Last March, the council claimed that 29 people hit by the collapse of the property business had taken their own lives.

Dan Neville, the Fine Gael TD, who is president of the Irish Association of Suicidology, called for more funding for suicide prevention. He contrasted the €40m budget for road safety last year to the €5.1m budget for suicide prevention, even though twice as many people died from suicide as on the roads.

"There are financial difficulties, yes, but there are other difficulties such as the danger of losing the family home, the loss of self-esteem on losing a job," he said. "Financial

difficulties create tension in families, and contribute to marriage breakdowns," he added.

Mr Neville said one of the most shocking cases he has come across occurred in the western region within the past two months, after a married mother hung herself. Her husband found her body. Weeks later her husband took the children to his family home, left them in the care of relatives and then took his own life.

In that case, there was nothing to suggest that the suicides were linked to financial problems. The 3Ts dedicated suicide helpline is receiving up to 4,000 calls a month.

"Of those calls, we estimate that up to 60 per cent of the callers are at high risk of taking their lives. They're at the point of suicide ideation. In other words, they've gotten to the point where they may have decided on a date and even a time when they're going to take their lives. Some of them have collected tablets and some are even driving around with ropes in the boots of their cars with which they intend to hang themselves," said Mr Smyth.

"We often criticise the media, but they are the ones who seem to care right now. Getting the Government or the HSE or any other authority to respond is very difficult.

"Unfortunately, our politicians appear to look at suicide in the same way they look at the poor -- that it will always be with us."

3Ts can be contacted 24/7 on Freephone: 1-800-24-7-100.

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Sunday Independent