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## **The Mental Health Association of Central Florida Partners with Heart of Florida United Way to Save Lives**

**September 4, 2024, ORLANDO, FL** – Every 11 minutes, a life is lost to suicide in the United States. Even more concerning is the fact that this statistic continues to worsen.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate in our country has reached its highest peak since 1941 with 3,446 suicide deaths in Florida in 2022.

In response, the Mental Health Association of Central Florida (MHACF) launched the “You Are A Lifeguard” suicide prevention campaign three years ago, which specifically focused on reaching teens, young adults and their families in Central Florida. The campaign features a [youarelifeguard.org](http://youarelifeguard.org) website which contains public service videos, information on warning signs, resources for help, and a page where people can take the pledge to help prevent suicide.

Last week, Heart of Florida United Way (HFUW) made its own type of pledge. Specifically, it allocated funding for the expansion of the You Are A Lifeguard campaign over the next three years. The move aligns with HFUW’s mission and work the organization does through the operation of a Crisis Services call center, which handles calls to 988, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The local line receives thousands of calls from Central Floridians each year who are in distress and are at risk of harming themselves. “We provide free and

confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Last year, more than 13,500 people reached out for help through 988. However, we did not want to stop there. We believe it is important to connect with people before they reach a state of crisis, educate family members and friends on how to better recognize warning signs, and help everyone understand the resources that are available. That's why we invested in You Are A Lifeguard. It's a proactive approach that focuses on protecting the lives of our youth in Central Florida", stated Jeff Hayward, President & CEO of HFUW.

The funding from HFUW will be used to: produce new Public Service Videos; undertake paid suicide prevention social media campaigns on TikTok and Instagram to better reach local teens, young adults and their families; update and expand the You Are A Lifeguard website, have a presence at major events such as Orlando Pride, Orlando Magic, Orlando Solar Bears, and Osceola Magic games to increase the number of "pledges" completed and expand awareness, and create suicide prevention certification programs for local students, teachers, and parents.

"We are beyond thrilled that Heart of Florida of United Way has partnered with us to expand and amplify the work of You Are A Lifeguard. We have sat with local families and heard their heart wrenching stories of losing a child to suicide. We need to take this epidemic head on both nationally, and most importantly, locally. Our goal is to save as many lives as possible. The work HFUW is doing with 988, combined with their support of You Are A Lifeguard will make a real difference for families across Central Florida. We cannot thank them enough", stated MHACF President and CEO.

MHACF and HFUW officially kicked off the partnership of the You Are A Lifeguard campaign on September 1<sup>st</sup>, corresponding with the start of Suicide Prevention Month which occurs each September.

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### **About The Mental Health Association of Central Florida**

Established in 1946, the Mental Health Association of Central Florida, Inc. (MHACF) strives to empower our community to be inclusive, equitable and aware of mental, emotional and behavioral health needs in ourselves and others. We work to advocate for all to be courageous in their pursuit to be seen, heard and understood on their path to wellness. The Mental Health Association of Central Florida understands that violence, racism, hate, and discrimination undermine mental wellness and are significant contributors to individual and community trauma. Therefore, we are committed to breaking cycles of multi-generational distress for marginalized communities in all that we do by pledging to work against racism, bias, prejudice and discrimination at individual, interpersonal and institutional levels. For more information about MHACF programs and resources, please contact us at (407) 898-0110 or visit [www.MHACF.org](http://www.MHACF.org).

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