

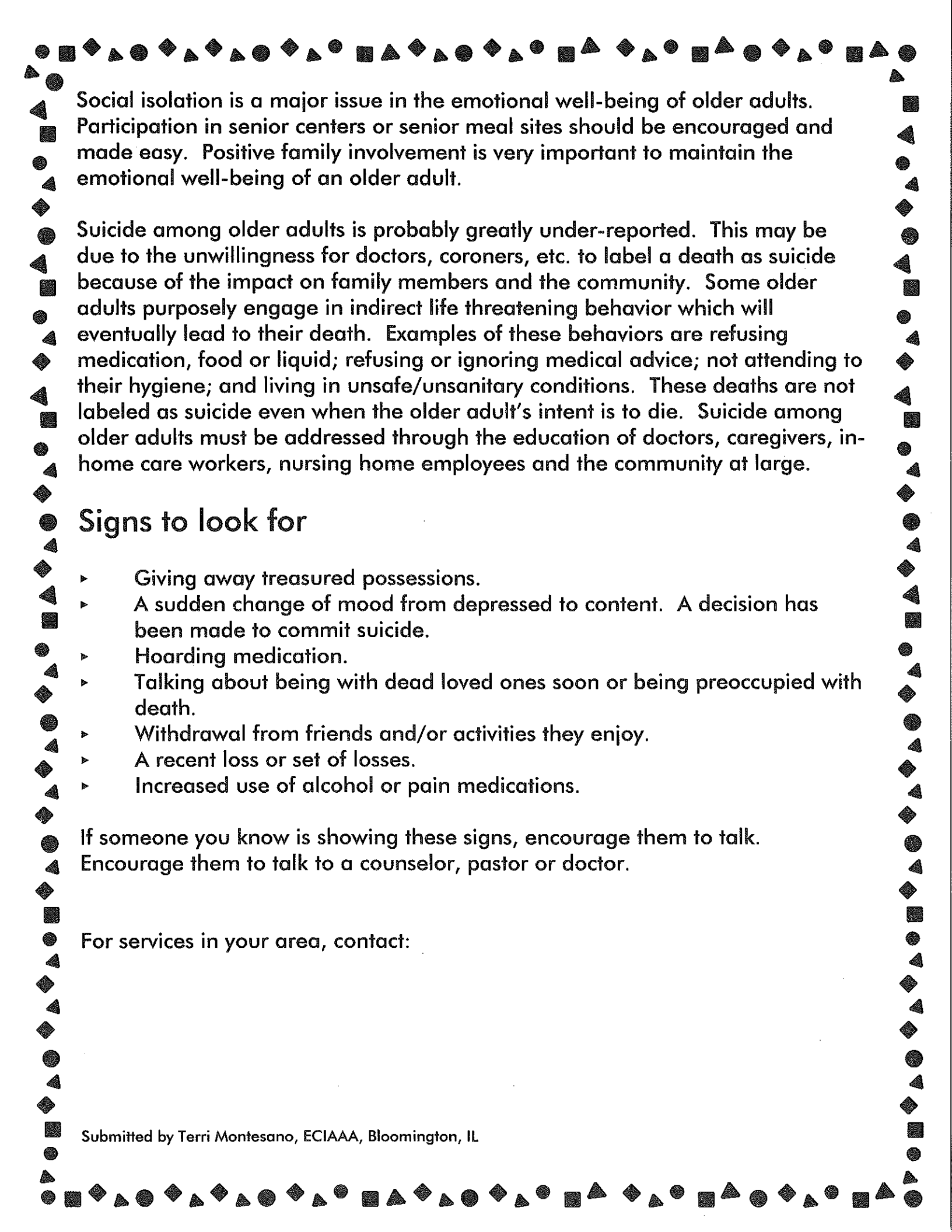
Facts on Suicide among Older Adults

Every ninety-nine minutes, an older adult (someone 60 years of age or better) commits suicide. In Illinois in 2001, 253 older adults committed suicide which was 22.3% of all suicides. The highest rate of suicide in the nation is among white men eighty-five or older especially men who are divorced or widowed and have a chronic illness. Older adults generally have access to firearms particularly when an older man is a veteran. When an older adult attempts suicide, there is a higher rate of completion than any other age group. There is one completed suicide for every four attempts compared to one completed suicide to every 100 to 200 attempts by people between 15 and 24.

Most older adults who commit suicide have seen their doctor recently. Twenty percent have seen their doctor within 24 hours of their suicide. Forty-one percent have seen their doctor within a week of their suicide. Approximately twenty percent of older adults experience undiagnosed depression. Only 12 to 25% of older adults with depression receive treatment for depression. However, when an older adult visits their doctor, they describe physical ailments that are the result of depression, such as poor appetite, changes in sleeping patterns, pain that isn't associated with a physical problem. They receive treatment for diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, Parkinson's Disease, respiratory disease and arthritis. Each of these diseases may be accompanied by depression. Untreated depression delays recovery and can prevent full recovery. The loss of functioning is one of many reasons that older adults experience depression.

Older adults survive many losses. Their spouses die or are ill. Their friends die, go to a nursing home or move away to live with family. Their abilities to perform activities of daily living decrease. They are no longer able to drive. They may have to move because they are unable to get around the house anymore. With these losses, older adults become more and more isolated from the world.

While no one can predict the changes that come with increasing age, steps can be taken to prevent suicide among older adults. Firearms can be removed from the home. Or if the older adult won't allow this, the firearm can be unloaded with the ammunition stored in another part of the house from the weapon. Out-of-date medications can be disposed of and medications monitored by someone who can recognize potentially lethal dosages or combinations of medications.



Social isolation is a major issue in the emotional well-being of older adults. Participation in senior centers or senior meal sites should be encouraged and made easy. Positive family involvement is very important to maintain the emotional well-being of an older adult.

Suicide among older adults is probably greatly under-reported. This may be due to the unwillingness for doctors, coroners, etc. to label a death as suicide because of the impact on family members and the community. Some older adults purposely engage in indirect life threatening behavior which will eventually lead to their death. Examples of these behaviors are refusing medication, food or liquid; refusing or ignoring medical advice; not attending to their hygiene; and living in unsafe/unsanitary conditions. These deaths are not labeled as suicide even when the older adult's intent is to die. Suicide among older adults must be addressed through the education of doctors, caregivers, in-home care workers, nursing home employees and the community at large.

Signs to look for

- ▶ Giving away treasured possessions.
- ▶ A sudden change of mood from depressed to content. A decision has been made to commit suicide.
- ▶ Hoarding medication.
- ▶ Talking about being with dead loved ones soon or being preoccupied with death.
- ▶ Withdrawal from friends and/or activities they enjoy.
- ▶ A recent loss or set of losses.
- ▶ Increased use of alcohol or pain medications.

If someone you know is showing these signs, encourage them to talk. Encourage them to talk to a counselor, pastor or doctor.

For services in your area, contact: