

**June 4, 2019**

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Hearing on Suicide and Suicide Prevention  
Hearing Room A  
Legislative Office Building, Albany, NY

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**Testimony of A. Edward Staehr:**

Thank you Senators Carlucci and Rivera for inviting me to speak about suicide prevention in New York State's agricultural community. I also wish to express my thanks for your financial support of NY FarmNet through the NYS Office of Mental Health, which allows our consultants to provide counseling assistance to farm families on personal well-being issues.

When NY FarmNet started in 1986, farming was in a state of crisis. Escalating interest rates and declining farmland values resulted in severe financial and emotional stress within the farming community. Lenders foreclosed on many farms, and farmer suicides were not uncommon. In response to these uncertain conditions, NY FarmNet was established at Cornell University. We operate an 800 helpline and an online contact form to link farm families who are experiencing personal or financial stress with free, confidential consulting. The program utilizes two types of consultants to work with each farm family. Financial consultants have at least a Bachelor's degree in addition to experience working with farmers. Farm family consultants all have a Master's degree in social work, counseling, or equivalent.

Last year, NY FarmNet responded to 1,800 farmer requests for assistance through its toll-free hotline. Farmers can call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and always reach a person on the other end. An answering service handles calls outside of business hours, and if a farmer is at risk of harming themselves or others, program staff are alerted immediately. It is not uncommon to receive crisis calls during the evening or on weekends. All non-crisis calls receive a response within 24 hours. In 2018, the program worked with over 925 farms and more than 2,800 individuals on a wide variety of issues. Our farm family and financial consultants work as a team and routinely encounter personal challenges exacerbated by farm financial stress. The majority of cases handled by NY FarmNet involve working to resolve personal challenges before the farm business can begin to make progress.

NY FarmNet's 45 consultants are the foundation of the program. All consultants have experience working with farm families and an understanding of farm culture. This cultural understanding is key in building trust within the farming community, as in any community. A former NYS OMH Commissioner once described to me the difficulties encountered in reaching out to the first responders who provided emergency assistance after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Because there was a limited understanding of first responder culture, efforts were ineffective until service providers achieved an improved cultural understanding.

Farm culture is unique, and many factors can lead to increased stress, depression, and anxiety, such as working long hours, weather, and ever-changing government regulations. Unlike other businesses, a farmer's residence is often located on the farmstead. Farmers cannot simply close the door to their business Friday afternoon and return Monday morning. Many farms are multi-generational and the current owners feel an increased sense of responsibility to continue their business so the next generation has the same opportunity that they had. I have often heard farmers say that they would be letting down previous generations if they were unable to continue the business into the future. This creates added pressure to remain in business during challenging economic times and can adversely affect one's physical, mental health and judgement.

A Morning Consult poll (reference below) identified key factors affecting mental health, identified by farmers themselves. They are, in descending order of magnitude: financial issues (91%), farm or business problems (88%), and fear of losing the farm (87%). When a farm is lost, families may be forced to leave the house that a previous generation built and feel such a loss as losing a spouse or family member. Additional factors identified were stress, weather, economic conditions, isolation, and social stigma. Farmers are unlikely to be willing to visit a county office of mental health out of fear of being recognized by someone in the community. Obtaining services from online telemedicine are also challenging, owing to a lack of broadband internet access in many rural areas. Farm families prefer to receive mental health services in the privacy of their homes and at a time that accommodates their work schedule, which makes NY FarmNet's methods ideal. Farmers appreciate that all meetings are confidential, and understand the measures taken to achieve this.

Agriculture is in a constant state of change and is currently experiencing a sustained cycle of dramatically declining prices received by farmers in both dairy and row crop operations. Farmers recently experienced the largest two year drop in income since 1921. We are receiving increased calls at NY FarmNet from distressed farmers who are specifically requesting counseling. Out of New York's 62 counties, 56 fall into a federally designated health professional shortage area for mental health care, and 55 counties fall into a health professional shortage area for primary care. Last week, we assigned ten new farm cases to our consultants. Such financial duress on farms magnifies family issues including conflict, depression, and anxiety. In addition to offering on-farm consulting, our program responds to industry needs by

training agri-service providers, Cooperative Extension Educators, and others working with farm families in Mental Health First Aid. The recent Morning Consult poll found that farmers are less likely than other rural adults to be confident in identifying mental health warning signs - 55 percent compared to 73 percent.

Suicide in the agricultural community has gained national media attention. Included in my testimony packet are articles from The New York Times (“When the Death of a Family Farm Leads to Suicide”) and Rural Health Initiative Hub (“Preventing Farmer Suicides through Helplines and Farm Visits”) on farmer suicide and the factors contributing to above average suicide rates within the farming community when compared to the general population. NY FarmNet is mentioned in both articles. There is much work to be done in helping farm families navigate challenging emotional and financial issues. We look forward to continuing to work with this committee to identify opportunities for collaboration with other agencies to improve the accessibility of mental health services and reduce farmer suicides.

Additional funding to meet the needs of an underserved farming population would help us reach more farm families and offer an increased number of trainings for our consultants and agri-business. We also strive to offer more mental health first aid trainings targeted at the agricultural community and enhance our role in partnering with OMH to provide assistance to more farm families.

Through more direct education and discussion around mental health and suicide, NY FarmNet can help agricultural communities better support each other. Programming such as Youth and Adult Mental Health First Aid, Communicating with Farmers Under Stress, and Weathering the Storm: Cultivating a Productive Mindset enable those in agriculture, community members, farm families, and others to recognize warning signs of toxic stress, suicide, and depression, and empower them to reach out and connect with that person. Additional programming should include working with rural and farming youth, as they are impacted by the stressors on the farm as well, in addition to providing more services to agricultural professionals.

Morning Consult Poll,  
[https://www.fb.org/files/AFBF\\_Rural\\_Stress\\_Polling\\_Presentation\\_04.16.19.pdf](https://www.fb.org/files/AFBF_Rural_Stress_Polling_Presentation_04.16.19.pdf)