



## How the EAP can help and how we can help

**L**ast month was EAP awareness month. I decided to write about the subject today because the hoopla is over and frequently the awareness fades away shortly thereafter.

I took office here in Washington in December. My union world in the NALC for the previous 31 years was primarily dedicated to contract enforcement through training of shop stewards, officers and arbitration advocates. As the years progressed, other responsibilities were assigned to me. I am prompted to write this article mostly because of statistics that have caused me concern, specifically on the subject of suicide. There are more than 30,000 suicides in the United States each year. Over the last six months, a number of these has involved active or retired letter carriers.

I serve you as the NALC's designee on the National Joint Committee (NJC) for the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Our role at this level is to oversee the process and to promote it. In preparing this article, I requested assistance from Deborah J. Atkins, Ph.D. Atkins is the USPS EAP administrator at the headquarters level and I thank her for her help on this important subject.

**We all have been in situations where we have noticed our** brothers and sisters working through personal problems. We can tell when something is different and sometimes we reach out. Sometimes we do not know what to do for them or where to begin. As friends, we are in the ideal place to help them. Your presence, your kindness and your smile might give them hope where they felt none. We are not professionals who can deal with them or treat them, but the fact that we are there and notice something can lead to assistance that they might not know exists.

It can be tough and uncomfortable to talk about mental health conditions. Most people go about their lives dealing with all the challenges and roadblocks by taking the ups and downs and landing on their feet. For others, life challenges are not so easy and are complicated by much bigger issues. Most of these issues are not, however, beyond the help that is available.

You could find yourself in a position where you suspect that an employee is considering ending his or her life, but if he or she is not a family member or close friend, you may not feel comfortable getting involved. You may be unsure of what you can really do to help someone with emotional difficulties, or feel uncertain whether that person is actually in serious trouble. Being wrong could be embarrassing. But being right could save a life.

**If you notice someone who appears to be going through** significant changes in behavior or personality, who withdraws from family and friends or who has lost interest in the things he or she once enjoyed, take note. If you hear an alarming statement like, "People would be better off if I wasn't around" or "Soon you won't have to worry about me," it is time for you to decide how you can help as a friend or co-worker.

Start with a phone call to EAP and ask a professional how to best assist, where to begin and what the best approach might be. Follow that advice if you can. Find out if there are any union officers who might know how to help. If you know a manager that you trust, reach out.

When you are ready, remember you just want to help. Your offer might be embraced. Your offer, however, might be rejected and, if so, don't be disheartened. You reached out to help. Don't force the issue.

If it is possible to connect a co-worker in need with help that is available, then the objective is met. If not, heed the advice you received from the EAP counselor. If you are in fact able to communicate on a comfortable level, give the co-worker or his or her family the EAP contact information.

The EAP is a free, voluntary and confidential program that offers assessment, referral, short-term counseling and work/life consultation to postal employees and their families. You can call 800-327-4968 (800-EAP-4YOU) anytime, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You will always speak to an EAP representative when you call. For the hearing impaired with TTY equipment, call TTY at 877-492-7341. ☒