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**Blair County Launches Nation's First C-SSRS App to Help Save Lives**  
*Columbia Protocol App Connects Pennsylvania Residents With Local Support*

HOLLIDAYSBURG, Pa. — Blair County announced today the launch of Columbia Protocol, a free smartphone app that gives residents instant access to a few simple questions that can help save lives. The county is the first in the country to develop an app that uses the Columbia-Suicide Severity Rating Scale (C-SSRS) while also providing local contact information to nearby crisis centers for individuals at risk for suicide.

“Statistics show that our county’s crisis center has over 30,000 contacts every year, which includes mobile crisis, walk-in and phone contacts” said Jim Hudack, director for the Blair County Department of Social Services. “This app is another way to offer help to the members of our community who need it most.”

Users who download the iOS or Android app will gain access to the C-SSRS, a few simple questions that gauge when an individual is at risk for suicide and recommends an appropriate level of mental health support. The list of questions can be answered within a few minutes. App users are also presented with contact information for local and national crisis centers.

“We need to get everyone in our communities asking these questions,” said Dr. Kelly Posner, Director of the Columbia Lighthouse Project, “Just think of how many lives we can save if every parent, police officer, teacher and neighbor downloaded and used this app.”

With over 20 years of research to validate its relevance and effectiveness, the C-SSRS is seen as the gold standard in assessing suicide risk and is used by governments, schools, and communities across the globe. For people who have thought about suicide, simply being asked these questions can come as a relief. One study found that asking the questions reduced distress in depressed respondents.

“This is a technology that can be in the hands of every citizen of Blair County,” said Jacque Harpster, chairperson for the Blair County Suicide Prevention Task Force. “We hope to enable co-workers, managers, friends, caregivers, first responders, and family members to start this important conversation with a loved one who may be struggling.”

Blair County operates one of the busiest crisis centers in the state of Pennsylvania, despite having a population of 124,000. In Blair County, 23 residents took their own lives in 2018, a 64% increase from the 2016 total and above the national average of 14.5 deaths per 100,000.

According to a March 2019 study conducted for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the increase in the national suicide rate from 2016 to 2017 was the largest annual increase in nearly 20 years. Suicides rose by 4% from 2016 to 2017 and 22% from 2008 to 2017. Worldwide, almost 1 million people die by suicide each year — equal to one life lost every 40 seconds.

“If this app can save one person’s life, this app would be worth everything,” said Blair County Commissioner Bruce Erb, who recently used the Columbia Protocol app to talk with a friend with anxiety and signs of depression. “Anyone who has ever had a friend or a family member die by suicide knows how painful it is. You often ask yourself if you could have done more, and I believe this can help.”

Blair County developed the app alongside PS Solutions, a software development firm headquartered in Altoona, Pennsylvania. The app can be easily customized to meet the demands of other counties, cities, and states across the country and to provide local contact information to crisis centers based on a user’s phone location.

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People in Blair County and surrounding areas who are having thoughts of suicide can get immediate, confidential support by calling the Blair County Lifeline at 814-889-2141 or by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.

**The Columbia Lighthouse Project’s** mission is to light the way to ending suicide. Our message, like the Columbia Protocol itself, is simple: “Just ask. You can save a life.” The Project was formed under the auspices of Columbia University to disseminate the C-SSRS, to optimize the protocol’s impact through support for its users, and to continue building the science behind the protocol. The Columbia Protocol is a key to ending suicide, a devastating but preventable worldwide public health crisis.

**PS Solutions** is a software development firm headquartered in Altoona, Pennsylvania, with offices in Pittsburgh and Wilmington, North Carolina. PS Solutions takes a creative approach to solving companies’ technology problems, employing a diverse group of software and project management professionals to develop software in the U.S.