Do you believe a mass shooting could take place here in the Tri-Cities?

That was part of the discussion at a Town Hall event presented by Extended Grace on Monday.

A group of panelists – from doctors to educators to law enforcement officers – talked about mass shootings from their professional point of view, and members of the audience gave a wide range of opinions as to why they feel mass shootings are on the rise, and what can be done to limit them.
“We actually had another Town Hall meeting scheduled for September, but then when those most recent shootings happened as we were wrapping up the Coast Guard Festival, I had a couple people approach me from the community and ask, ‘Can’t you have a conversation about this,’” said Barbara Lee VanHorssen, executive director of Extended Grace. “My response was, ‘Of course, we have to do that.’ I brought it back to our task force and everybody agreed that this had to be our next topic of discussion.”

Panelists at the event were Bob VandePol of Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services; Joellen Rhyndress of Healthwest; Sarah Lewakowski of Mosaic Counseling; pediatrician Dr. Gina Ramirez; student Gabby Easterly; Mike Rohwer, assistant superintendent of the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District; Sgt. Chris Koster of the Ottawa County Sheriff’s Office; and Ottawa County Sheriff Steve Kempker.

VanHorssen said she hoped the event brought more awareness about mass shootings and mental illness to the 60-plus people in attendance.

“I hope everyone is better educated about not stigmatizing people who have mental illness, about addressing mental health needs and learning about resources in the community,” she said. “Second, I hope we can continue to decrease that stigma and show that these are conversations that we can have. And third, that we can bring together collective ideas and creativity, and brainstorm ways we can impact our community to make it safer and more secure for everyone.”

After listening to the panel and having small-group conversations about various topics, those in attendance were asked why they think the number of mass shootings is on the rise. Reasons given varied from stress, publicity, isolation, intolerance, bullying, hopelessness and society becoming desensitized to violence.

What should be done to keep people safe? Answers varied from banning assault weapons and requiring licenses for guns to providing more mental health providers and addressing economic disparities.

VanHorssen said all of the ideas generated at Monday’s event will be collected and displayed online at momentumcentergh.org.
Dr. Gina Ramirez serves as an advocate for gun violence prevention. She spoke from a physician’s standpoint, talking about the devastation caused by rounds fired from high-powered rifles.

She also talked about the physiological effects of mass shootings.

“They cause a lot of anxiety, PTSD, fear,” she said. “Communitywide, we see people will have fear of crowded spaces, fear of going to movie theaters or concerts, even going to school.”

Ramirez listed several contributing factors that have pushed people to become mass shooters.

“Adverse childhood events or childhood trauma, child abuse, neglect, the death of a parent, prenatal substance abuse – all lead to poor coping skills,” she said. “People who commit these crimes are almost universally suicidal.”

She urged anyone who encounters a person who could be suicidal to observe the QPR method of suicide prevention: question, persuade, refer.

Gabby Easterly, a junior at Spring Lake High School, talked about the anxiety that lockdown drills cause both students and staff at her school.

“I’m here today to talk about a student perspective on mass shootings and how that impacts our day-to-day lives,” she said. “I want to put you in our shoes. Since I’ve gone to school, we’ve always done active shooter drills. That’s something many of you haven’t had to do. You haven’t gone to school with the fear of not knowing if you’re going to walk back out those doors. I do that every day.”

Bob VandePol pointed out that those with a mental illness are four times more likely to be a victim of violence than they are to be a perpetrator. He maintains that it’s those with suicidal tendencies who tend to be the most dangerous.

“Pinning it on mental health is a frantic effort from people on the outside who don’t understand, and who really want someone to blame,” he said. “One element of truth is, if you think of every mass shooter, they don’t have an escape plan. Every one of them knew they were going to die that day. Reducing suicide risk, I believe, is one of the best ways to prevent mass shootings.
Sarah Lewakowski said the majority of people suffering with mental illnesses are not violent.

“They are far more likely to be the victim of a violent crime,” she said. “A small percentage may be harmful to themselves or others. Many people who have been shooters have experienced childhood trauma and experienced a crisis weeks before the shooting – relationship, financial or something happened at work, maybe a victim of bullying, feelings of hopelessness or harboring grievances.”

Lewakowski said the time following a mass shooting can be dangerous because there’s a demand for quick answers.

“What really leads a person to do something like that is so complex,” she said.

Common mental health outcomes after shootings include PTSD, agitation, irritability, self-destructive behavior, social isolation, flashbacks, fear, severe anxiety, mistrust, a loss of interest in pleasure and activities, guilt, insomnia, nightmares, grief, depression, alcohol and drug use, and panic attacks, Lewakowski said.

“It’s important to have a crisis response team, people to evaluate the psychological needs of the family, the victims and the community, and to have a range of services that meet those needs," she said.

Mike Rohwer said that while the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District works with local schools, each district has its own security plan.

“We try to coordinate and help them, but each school and district has their own context, their own way of doing things,” he said. “Everyone wants to feel safe and, at the same time, what are we doing to promote the educational process?”

Rohwer noted that there’s been a shift in philosophy in regards to who is responsible for what during a shooting situation at a school.

“The shift is to work with the teachers to give them a much smaller set of protocols,” he said. “We
Sheriff Steve Kempker said he’s seen a massive shift in law enforcement in his nearly four decades on the job.

“The fact that we now run church security programs, that’s something we never dreamed would have happened,” he said. “Business has changed for us – the way we do our business and the way we equip ourselves.”

Kempker said each of his officers was recently outfitted with a ballistic helmet and a heavier active shooter vest.

“Our normal vest we wear is a lighter version, and that won’t stop a high-powered round,” he said. “Over the years, we’re dealing with more people with high-powered rifles, and they’ll rip right through our lighter vest.”

Kempker assured everyone that his office takes any threat seriously.

“If there’s a threat made in a school or business, we go in and take them right out of the classroom, out of the hallways, bring them in and start an investigation,” he said.

Sgt. Chris Koster teaches active shooter response drills for the Ottawa County Sheriff’s Office.

“The first half of the class is doom and gloom, then we talk about the positive outcomes,” he said. “At the end, we talk about avoid, deny, defend – what can you do to protect yourself, how thinking outside the box is a great advantage for you.”

Rather than hiding in a dark room, he now encourages people to flee if that’s an option.

“If you can get out, we encourage you to get out,” he said. “We’re doing this not just for schools, but for businesses and churches.”

If fleeing isn’t an advantage, Koster said to look around the room and find a weapon.

“Think about the weapons we have in this room right now,” he said. “Empower yourself for what you have: chairs, ink pens, a cane, a walker, ink pens – all these things can be used as weapons.”
"The initial phase is quite chaotic," she said. "You can’t plan for each way a mass shooting occurs, so chaos is there. ... I can only describe this to you as a sense of horror that’s palpable. You can feel it present everywhere in the community during that initial stage. ... People don’t believe it’s happened here."

The second stage is the homicide investigation. At this time, vigils and memorials often take place.

“People feel guilty about surviving, and wonder if they were in some way responsible,” Rhyndress said.

The final stage is the long-term effects that linger through the community.

“What we know about a mass shooting is that it can trigger people’s prior trauma, people’s perception of the world is altered," she said. "It impacts their trust, and when your sense of trust is impacted, you’re not likely to seek out new social situations."

She added that there’s certain to be a trauma response in the community when another mass shooting occurs elsewhere.

“Basically, it’s having the community adjust to a new normal,” Rhyndress said.

Matt DeYoung