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New fence at The Gap 'just not high enough'

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A FENCE built to deter jumpers at the infamous suicide spot The Gap could be climbed with ease by "people in a desperate situation", warns the woman who campaigned for it.

Dianne Gaddin lost her daughter Tracy at The Gap 5½ years ago and has since spent years lobbying for new safety measures along the rugged stretch of Sydney coastline.



Controversial ... the fence at The Gap. ANTHONY JOHNSON

But the 1.3-metre-high fence, part of a \$2.2-million package that includes closed-circuit television cameras, emergency telephones, lighting and signs, is marginally higher than the old barrier and replaces it only at the northern and southern tips of The Gap. The two spots are the main viewing areas for sightseers. They also attract the majority of suicides.

"I really support Woollahra Council for taking steps to address this issue," Mrs Gaddin told *The Sun-Herald*. "But looking at that fence, I think it isn't high enough. I told them that - that people in a desperate situation can get over it. They said they didn't want to block the view."

Mrs Gaddin had proposed building a taller perspex barrier, but says she was told by council officers that it would not survive the salty ocean air.

Instead, they chose a concave design that ensured it was impossible for someone to get a foothold on it, a spokeswoman for the council said.

Woollahra Council is overseeing the project with funding from the federal government and advice from the Black Dog Institute and Lifeline. Construction is expected to be complete by July 15.

The most important function of the fence, the spokeswoman said, was to act as a psychological impediment. "We know it is not impossible to climb it, but it's about buying time by making it difficult so that those considering suicide may stop to reconsider," she said. A few extra minutes could be enough for bystanders to reach someone and offer help.

Also important was the need to produce something aesthetically pleasing so that sightseers could still enjoy the spectacular ocean views, the spokeswoman said.

About 50 people kill themselves each year by leaping off the cliff to the rocks or sea about 100 metres below.

The first recorded case, in 1863, was that of Anne Harrison, whose husband was the licensee at The Gap Hotel. She became depressed after her nephew accidentally fell to his death there and threw herself off in the middle of the night.

More recently the Channel Ten newsreader Charmaine Dragnon jumped to her death in 2007.

Last year the federal government agreed to add \$1.5 million to the council's \$700,000 pledge for the new safety measures. The announcement was "an enormous relief" for Mrs Gaddin, whose daughter had schizophrenia and had visited The Gap several times but always called police for help - until her suicide.

Mrs Gaddin told *The Sun-Herald* she had earlier tried to end her own life after giving up hope that the mental health system would ever provide adequate care for her daughter. "I grabbed as many tablets as I could find - some of them pretty lethal - and washed them down with a glass of whisky," she said. "Thankfully my husband came home and found me.

"There is a view that by talking about suicide, you encourage people [to do it]. But talking is what we should be doing. Suicides are preventable and by discussing the issue, we make it easier for people who are in trouble to look for help."

The Liberal member for Wentworth, Malcolm Turnbull, a strong supporter of Mrs Gaddin's campaign, agreed: "While the completion of these measures is important and will save lives, there is much more to be done to improve awareness, prevention and treatment of mental illness."

Some overseas studies have shown that suicide prevention measures, including fences, have helped to reduce and deter suicide attempts. But research published in the British medical journal *BMJ* last year showed that although a barrier erected at Toronto's Bloor Street Viaduct reduced the rate of suicide at the site, it did not affect the overall rate of suicide by jumping for the city. "Barriers on bridges may not alter absolute rates of suicide by jumping when comparable bridges are nearby," the study concluded.

Lifeline: 13 11 14