A woman knocked on Station 29’s door and the crew welcomed her in. She says this prevented her from attempting suicide.

While June 11, 2018 was just a normal day for the crew of Station 29, it was anything but for a woman we’ll call Susan, who was having one of the worst days of her life. The night before, Susan had tried to drive her car into a semi-truck on Highway 99 in Oregon City and at the last minute, both she and the semi swerved off. She knew she wasn’t thinking clearly and was having horrible thoughts about killing herself.

Life had become complicated for Susan. She is married with three children, one of whom has medical issues that require many appointments and much medicine. She had to quit her job as a pharmacy tech to take care of this daughter. With only her husband’s income to support the family, they could no longer afford Susan’s prescriptions (diabetes and blood pressure medication, plus an antidepressant), which is why she had been off of these prescriptions for over two weeks.

That Monday morning, she took one of her daughters to school and the suicidal thoughts started creeping in again. She immediately parked her car (leaving her purse, ID, and phone) and started walking. She didn’t know where she was going, but she wanted the thoughts to stop. By early afternoon, she was in front of Station 29. It was here that she decided that she would just walk in front of traffic on this busy street and that would end her pain and all the dark thoughts.

She turned and saw the a-frame sign that says “Welcome” and is designed to sit in front of Portland fire stations. She decided to ring the doorbell and ask for help. She later said that she had made a deal with herself: if the firefighters answered and were nice to her, she would know that she shouldn’t try to kill herself by walking into traffic. However, if they didn’t answer the door or didn’t have time for her, she was going to follow through and walk onto Foster Road.

Fortunately, the C shift crew at Station 29 answered the door and they did have time for her. They invited Susan in and talked to her. They told her that she was safe and that they wouldn’t leave her unless they received a high priority call.

"You could tell that she was having some type of a mental health crisis," recalls Lieutenant Pete Valentine, weeks later. "And we just continued to listen to her as she told her story. We knew that it was getting beyond our mental health training. So we just sat there and talked through it with her and then I went outside and called TIP."

At that point, the crew got an emergency call and discussed with Susan about whether she would be ok waiting alone for June Vining from TIP. Susan said yes, and the crew left her outside knowing that June would be there momentarily.

When June arrived, Susan was waiting for her. Ultimately, June took her to the hospital. June contacted a suicide prevention specialist to connect with Susan so she wouldn’t get lost in the system. Susan is now healing. She is on her meds again and getting mental health treatment. Susan and her family firmly believe that June and the crew at Station 29 saved her life.

Cogglevation sat down with the crew: Pete Valentine, Matt Smith, and Tim Wagner (the fourth crew member, Casey Jones, was on vacation) to discuss the incident. To this crew, it was just another day, but the lessons learned from it are as helpful as any post incident report.

As we move forward with the Coggle’s larger plans for each station to create a community health blueprint for its FDA, the station house might be a place where more and more people visit for help. And how C shift at Station 29 handled this knock on their door was textbook correct.

How did Pete and his crew assess the situation so quickly and completely? “I think it just comes down to the sheer volume of people we’ve dealt with in our careers, so that we’ve become pretty good at quickly and completely. “I think that Chief Myers is working hard to get rid of some of the calls that we’re always getting sent on where it doesn’t make sense,” he says. “We understand it doesn’t happen overnight. But to see a small light at the end of a dark tunnel is helpful.”

Pete also calls out another Coggle item as being important for keeping crews fresh and focused. "What’s helping is that Chief Myers is working hard to get rid of some of the calls that we’re always getting sent on where it doesn’t make sense," he says. "We understand it doesn’t happen overnight. But to see a small light at the end of a dark tunnel is helpful.”

Handling low-acuity calls has its own section on the Coggle that fits under the heading: “Create innovative programs to address low-acuity health needs.” And while the focus of these items might be seen as fiscally motivated and a strategic reallocation of our emergency response personnel, according to this crew, there is an additional benefit: fewer low-acuity calls help keep alive the compassion that is the cornerstone of the job. So that when someone rings their doorbell, they’re ready to save a life.