

SPAN-California

Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network-California

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

SANTA BARBARA, JAN 27, 1999 -- Suicide prevention efforts in California took a major step forward on January 23-24 with the inaugural meeting of SPAN-California (Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network), the first-ever, statewide suicide prevention advocacy group. The purpose of the new group is *to build and sustain a statewide partnership to prevent suicide and to support the survivors left behind after a suicide.*

SPAN-California is composed of suicide survivors, providers of suicide prevention services, individuals from resource centers, referral networks and hotline services, state agencies, prevention educators, researchers, survivor support groups and others volunteering their time and energy to form a unified partnership for change. SPAN-California plans to broaden the partnership to include more public and private agencies, key population groups with high suicide rates, additional mental health service providers, and others interested in contributing time and energy to moving this important agenda forward.

The statewide partnership is California's response to U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher's call for a national suicide prevention strategy. Satcher convened a national conference late last year, hosted by the national group SPAN, and cosponsored by three federal health agencies: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). At that meeting key strategies were identified for a national suicide prevention plan, but left to each state to design and implement an appropriate plan for that community.

On average, ten Californians complete suicide each day. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15-24 and the eighth leading cause of death among the general population. Although suicide has long been recognized as a major, national public health problem, federal and state agencies are just beginning to take action to prevent these tragic, unnecessary deaths. SPAN-California identified five core tasks it will initially undertake to create change:

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- Identify effective, school-based suicide prevention programs,
- Implement a strong public awareness campaign for suicide awareness, education and services,
- Advocate for improved access and availability of crisis, long-term treatment and mental health services,
- Establish guidelines for the development of an effective, community-based plan to reduce suicide,
- Identify and review existing/pending legislation and advocate for the creation of new legislation, if needed, to address suicide prevention and the support of suicide survivors.

“This group has formed with a great deal of energy and drive and they are determined to make a difference, leading the way for other states,” stated Jerry Weyrauch, founder of the national SPAN group. “With 11% of all suicides in the nation taking place in California, and with its large geographic area and diverse population, California faces a huge challenge and all eyes will be on the success of this organization.”

It is estimated that each suicide leaves behind at least ten family members and friends who are emotionally devastated and permanently scarred by the death. A major objective of the group will be to reach out to these thousands of survivors, as well as those who have attempted suicide and their families, to provide information about support groups and to increase public awareness that suicide can be prevented. Most suicide results from untreated or undiagnosed clinical depression, and treatment is available in California. The group believes that California can significantly lower its suicide rate if suicide is addressed openly and aggressively, without shame or stigma.

Represented at the two day conference in Santa Barbara were the **Glendon Association** of Santa Barbara, the **Light for Life Foundation of San Diego**, **Fresno Survivors of Suicide Loss**, **Survivors of Suicide** of Orange County, **Friends for Survival** of Sacramento, **Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center/Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center**, **Kristin Brooks Hope Center** of Vallejo, the **Center for Childhood Injury Prevention**, and numerous **SPAN** community organizers from across the state, as well as the founders of **SPAN**, Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch.

In the past year, suicide has been recognized by congress as a major public health problem, with the passage of Senate Resolution #84 and House Resolution #212, that requires immediate attention.