

G SPAN REPORT

Information for Legislators, Educators and other Policymakers from California's Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network

This issue is presented in loving memory of Jason Mervel by his mother Rosalinde Mervel

Program Offers Mental Health Check-ups for Teens

Each year in the U.S., more teens complete suicide than die from cancer, AIDS, and heart disease COMBINED. While five percent of youth suffer from major depression, only one in three is actually diagnosed. Left unrecognized and untreated, depression is the most common cause of youth suicide*.



The Columbia Teen Screen® program gives kids “an active chance to get help,” according to Tiffany Haick, program training director. The Teen Screen program is a mental health screening and diagnostic process that helps find kids who are at risk for suicide, but have generally fallen through the cracks.

The program can be implemented at school sites or community health centers, as in the case of Pacific Clinics in Santa Fe Springs, California. “It is a cost-effective method that enables a lay-person or even a volunteer to screen hundreds or thousands of kids, referring those who need help to a professional,” Haick explained. Ideally, screening can become a mental health check-up and performed as commonly as other school health screenings, such as vision, hearing and scoliosis.

Teens respond to a carefully designed series of questions in a non-threatening written questionnaire or a more in-depth computer survey. Those who show elevated levels of suicide risk are referred to a professional to determine if further evaluation or treatment are necessary. *(continued page 4)*

Help for Colleges

A report that outlines essential suicide prevention services for college campuses and lists specific steps college administrators can take to address the problem of student suicide is now available. The report, [Safeguarding Your Students Against Suicide: Expanding the Safety Net](#), was sponsored by the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) and the Jed Foundation. It also includes a checklist of mental health policies, programs and services. To receive a copy, contact James Radick (jradick@nmha.org).

Budget Crisis Forces Strategic Thinking

In response to the news of a state budget crisis, SPAN-California must examine its strategies and aims carefully. In a recent interview SPAN-CAPresident Mark Chaffee had this to say:

Q: How do you respond to the news of the impending state budget crisis?

A: I view this as an opportunity for organizations that provide services to wean themselves from government dependency. We will have to be creative and find new sources for funding. California still has the eighth largest economy in the world, we are a resourceful population that is capable of taking care of people and capable of solving problems. Suicide prevention organizations, caregivers, teachers, gatekeepers, educators, clergy and clinical professionals will need to build new relationships and avenues of cooperation. The mental health safety net had too many holes even before the current state budget problems. Now more than ever, we will need to work together.

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Recommended Reading

Title: Night Falls Fast: Understanding Suicide
By Kay Redfield Jamison

Reviewed by Lois Bloom

Dr. Jamison, an internationally recognized authority on depressive illnesses and their treatments, is also a survivor of a suicide attempt. Her life's work began after years of struggling with bi-polar disorder herself. She was in her late twenties when she first attempted to kill herself. She says, "I nearly died in the attempt, but did not consider it either a selfish or a not-selfish thing. It was simply the end of what I could bear—the final outcome of a bad disease, a disease it seemed to me I would never get the better of."

Jamison notes that while approximately 30,000 Americans die by suicide, at least 500,000 attempt suicide each year. She looks at suicide through literary, historical, anthropological, psychological, biochemical, methods and what type of person dies by suicide. Genetic factors predisposing one to suicide are discussed as is the serotonin level in the brain. Included also, are interesting anecdotal material, personal stories about individuals, some famous, data from scientific literature on suicide, suicide notes and national styles in suicide.

News from Around the State



G DVD For Suicide Prevention in Jails: "On Your Watch"

The California Institute for Mental Health has produced a training tool that will be offered to corrections facilities to help train and educate about inmate suicide.

"The epidemic of suicide in America reaches inside the walls of our jails, prisons and juvenile halls. Despondence, anger and abandonment, compounded by the increasing numbers of people who have mental illness in our criminal justice system, produce unnecessary and preventable deaths," commented Dave Meyer, Forensics Chair, California Mental Health Directors Association. "On Your Watch" is a unique training experience. It tracks the moment-to-moment events leading to the suicides of seven very different individuals in custody facilities. Usable in small segments at roll calls or viewed in its entirety, it challenges the viewer to learn the warning signs of suicide and take action to prevent it. For more information, contact Ed Diksa at (916) 556-3480 x 104.

G Program Helps At-risk Minorities

Recent statistics show that Latina adolescents have the highest number of attempted suicides in Los Angeles County, while the highest rate of suicide among elderly women occurs among Asian Americans. Additionally, the historically lower African American male youth suicide rate has recently risen to equal that of Caucasians. Given these alarming statistics, the Minorities Outreach Program at Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center in Culver City aims to target minority groups and increase awareness of suicide warning signs, risk factors and avenues for help. The Program has reached 6,300 participants to date at schools, religious institutions, health centers, legal centers, shelters, senior citizen centers and substance abuse treatment facilities. Materials have been translated into Spanish, Japanese and Tagalog.

Fact: The national suicide rate was virtually unchanged in 2000, after declines for six consecutive years.

(National Center for Health Statistics)

G "Erasing the Stigma" Award

The Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center in Los Angeles will honor Sam and Lois Bloom as recipients of the 2003 "Erasing the Stigma" award in honor of the years they have spent helping other survivors and raising suicide awareness. Sam and Lois both serve as SPAN-California board members and Sam is Past President. The Blooms receive the award along with actress Patty Duke and author Andrew Solomon.

G Outreach to Spanish Speaking Parents of Teens

Centinela Valley Union High School District, in the City of Lawndale, hosted a parent conference in January entitled "Making the Teenage Years Successful" with a session on suicide prevention, delivered in Spanish by Ester Ybarra-Bryant, a survivor of her son's suicide and a SPAN-California board member. "I presented three workshops, which were all intense and emotional. There was a strong message to the parents to listen to your children and learn to recognize suicide warning signs, but sometimes there are none." The conference, which covered a wide range of topics, featured a keynote speech by actor Edward James Olmos.

State Budget Crisis

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Q: How do you hope to get anything implemented with no state government funding?

A: SPAN-CA will convene a conference in Sacramento in early 2004 that will bring together survivors of suicide, clinicians, educators, clergy, school nurses, counselors, law enforcement professionals, advocacy organizations and others from all across our state for the sole purpose of creating a plan to end death by suicide in California. This plan will then be published and distributed for use and reference to all organizations and professionals that are stakeholders and participants in ending suicide.

The conference will also offer the opportunity for organizations to network and reach across old boundaries to build new bridges of service for those in need. Californians will create and implement a plan to end suicide because it is time to stop this unnecessary and tragic loss of life.

Fact: Suicide is the third leading cause of death for persons 15-24.

(Centers for Disease Control)

California Legislative Update

AB 1421

Sacramento - AB 1421 was written into law late last year, which allows a judge to mandate outpatient treatment for persons who, though not meeting the current standard for involuntary inpatient commitment, are at serious risk for continued decline if treatment is not accepted. In other words, now a judge can make sure someone gets treatment who, because of the severity of his/her untreated mental illness, does not know he/she is sick and declines help voluntarily. Such an order may only be imposed if, after a formal hearing, a list of criteria is met.

Treatment is not guaranteed, however, since assisted outpatient care is only available in those counties that make such treatment available.

The legislation has long been sought by the National Association for Mentally Ill (NAMI)-California and other advocates for the mentally ill.

Ultimately, the law may help reduce suicide, by helping ill people get the help they need.

SPAN-California wishes to thank Rosalinde Mervel of Redondo Beach for her generous gift in memory of her son Jason. Her contribution has enabled us to take this publication from a dream to a reality.

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Columbia Teen Screen

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The non-judgmental format of the computer or written survey is one of the program's strengths. Most young people find it difficult to reveal honest feelings even to the best-trained therapist, but they interface with a computer with ease. Students do not take the survey without first obtaining their parents' permission, and results are shared with parents.

Dr. David Shaffer, Chief of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Columbia University, developed the program in hopes of finding a methodology that would significantly reduce teen suicide. Teen Screen is currently being implemented at 66 sites across the country, and approximately 10,000 teens have been screened to date. The program is fully underwritten and materials and training can be provided at no cost. To learn more, call 866-TEENSCREEN (866-833-6727) or go to www.teenscreen.org.

National News

• The nation's Suicide Prevention Technical Resource Center is closer to reality with the award of a three-year, \$7.5 million contract to Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts, to establish the center. The award is from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Many others will play a role, including SPAN-USA which will manage the Consumer Partnership Council, as well as provide technical assistance relating to the promotion and development of grassroots efforts.

The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) will manage the Speaker's Bureau, the Technical Assistance Bureau, Training Activities and the Professional Partnership.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) will develop Best Practices in collaboration with AAS and manage the Scientific Advisory Council.

• National Suicide Prevention Week, sponsored annually by the American Association of Suicidology (AAS), will occur this year May 4-10. All individuals and organizations involved in the movement to prevent suicide are encouraged to use this week to create further awareness of the risk factors and warning signs of suicide. Contact SPAN-California for free copies of our brochure [Suicide Prevention: Risk Factors and How to Help Someone in Crisis](#), by calling 760/753-4565.

Need More Information?

www.spanusa.org
www.suicidology.org
www.afsp.org

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