

# 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*

## State Planning Conference Set for May 6-7, 2004

*-This is THE State Planning Conference to Implement the National Strategy -*

SPAN-California is hosting a two-day, statewide conference to formulate a state plan for suicide prevention May 6-7, 2004, in Sacramento. Attendees will gather with the specific purpose of developing recommendations for the implementation of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention within California to significantly reduce the suicide death rate.

Registration packets will be mailed soon. Additional information and sponsorship opportunities can be obtained by calling 760/753-4565 or emailing markch@adelphia.net.

This is an open meeting for people from a broad range of backgrounds, including state agencies, mental health practitioners, state legislators, educators, suicide survivors, mental health advocates, corrections, county mental health departments, etc.

From this planning meeting will come a strategy to align all present and future efforts and funds, in step with the 11 goals of the national strategy, as published in 2001 by the U.S. Surgeon General.

### ◆ **SPAN-California** Suicide Prevention Planning Conference

May 6-7, 2004,  
Sacramento  
Red Lion Hotel

*Furthering the National  
Strategy in California*

## Older Adults At Greatest Risk for Suicide



The elderly are at greater risk for suicide than other age groups. People age 65 and over comprise 13% of the population, but 20% of all suicides\*. Over 84% of all suicides among the elderly are males\*. White men over the age of 85

have the highest suicide rate of all people of any age, gender or race\*.

Studies say 75% of older adults who completed suicide had visited their primary care physician within the month prior to their death, and 20% of those saw their doctor on the same day as their suicide\*.

Stigma may, in fact, play a greater role with older people when it comes to seeking treatment for mental illnesses.

"The mental health system is underutilized by the elderly and the greatest barrier may be their generational perception that seeking mental health treatment creates a stigma," said Charlie Curie, who heads the nation's Substance

Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Curie, who spoke in July at the SPAN-USA conference, said that, in total, there are 80 people per day who die by suicide in the U.S. To put this cost in real terms, you could say that annually "900,000 years of life are lost."

Although the elderly feel the normal emotional experiences of sadness, grief or loss, major depression, the kind that leads to suicide if untreated, is NOT a normal part of aging.

Major depression is a psychiatric condition that is extreme and persistent and can interfere

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\*National Institute of Mental Health

**SPAN-California**  
Suicide Prevention Advocacy Network - California

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## Message From the President of SPAN-California

By Mark Chaffee

Many thanks to the California Senate and Assembly for their

suicide prevention resolutions and the Governor for his proclamation establishing suicide prevention week. We have received the acknowledgement and support we need for the time being.

The future role of sponsors Senator Ortiz and Assemblymember Lowenthal and other like minded legislators is to support mental health parity laws. Both state and Federal legislators have the opportunity to have tremendous impact upon suicide prevention (and mental health in general) without spending one dime of taxpayer money.

We have already called upon President Bush's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health to take action and support real parity in healthcare insurance. It is time for the insurance industry and healthcare providers to stop treating the brain as if it were separate from the rest of the human body. If legislators simply required mental and physical health insurance to be equal, in fact eliminate all distinctions, this would have the most profound impact on mental health and suicide prevention of any program or treatment to date.

Fact: Only about one in five Americans with major depression are getting effective treatment, although most can be successfully treated.

(Harvard Medical School study in JAMA)

## News from Around the State



### G Contra Costa Crisis Center to Answer Area 211

Contra Costa Crisis Center, in Walnut Creek, California, hopes to be one of the first agencies in the state to provide local 211 services. 211 is a free, three-digit phone number that enables everyone to access vital health and human services in their community. 211 is to social services what 911 is to emergency services.

The California Public Utilities Commission approved the 211 program for our state, and outlined an application process for one agency per county. Counties are projecting annual operating costs averaging \$1 per person per year.

Currently more than 65 million Americans in 23 states have access to 211. People like the service because the number is easy to remember and use and it eliminates the need to struggle with hundreds of individual phone numbers. Studies show that people seeking health and human services call 7 to 8 agencies before they find the right one. Without 211, many give up and never receive the help they need. For more information about 211, check the crisis center's 211 slide show at: [www.crisis-center.org](http://www.crisis-center.org).

### G LA to Begin Assisted Outpatient Treatment to Help Stop Prison Revolving Door

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has adopted the new state law which allows a judge to mandate outpatient treatment for people who, because of the severity of their untreated mental illness, do not know they are sick and decline help voluntarily. Marvin Southard, DSW, the county's mental health director, will initially target the new program at individuals who are exiting the criminal justice system after relatively minor offenses,

with severe psychiatric disorders who meet the eligibility criteria for assisted outpatient treatment. By giving these people the treatment they need, it may stop the revolving door syndrome in jails and prisons for many.

## **G California Selected for CDC Study**

Dr. Keri Lubell, a researcher with the Centers for Disease Control, is conducting a study on suicide prevention plans in individual states. She recently traveled throughout California interviewing a select group of people, including SPAN-California Board Member Sam Bloom and President Mark Chaffee, to gauge the progress of a state plan for suicide prevention.

Her comparative study looks at a sampling of 7 states to try and draw helpful generalizations about structure, the leadership group and legislative support. Her report is due out this fall.

## **G Free Suicide Prevention Brochures Available**

SPAN-California has created a suicide prevention brochure with the generous help of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Region IX, Office of Public Health and Science). The free brochure describes suicide risk factors, protective factors, symptoms of depression and warning signs that up to 75% of suicidal persons display. It also advises how to help someone in crisis.

Contact SPAN-California for free copies of [Suicide Prevention: Risk Factors and How to Help Someone in Crisis](#), by calling 760/753-4565.

## *California Legislative Update*

### **Governor and State Legislators Name Suicide Prevention Week**

Governor Davis declared May 4-10, 2003 Suicide Prevention Week, in recognition of the more than 3,000 Californians who died by suicide in the year 2000 (latest statistics) in an effort to increase awareness of the tragedy and widespread incidence of suicide.

Both the California Senate and Assembly passed resolutions (SR18 and HR30) also recognizing Suicide Prevention Week in 2003 and in future years (during the first full week of May), and going on to state that in the year 2000, in California, 33,000 suicide attempters were treated in emergency rooms or admitted to hospitals for treatment. The hospital charges alone for suicide attempters admitted as inpatients exceeded \$275,000,000.

“Suicide is a serious public health problem and, as the proclamation states, we encourage state and local public and private organizations to cooperate to develop and implement a California Strategy for Suicide Prevention,” stated Senator Deborah Ortiz (D-Sacramento). Senator Ortiz chairs the Health and Human Services Committee and introduced the senate bill.

Likewise, in the California Assembly, Assemblymember Alan Lowenthal (D-Long Beach) introduced the resolution and stated, “It is time to erase the stigma of suicide and begin talking about how best to prevent this tragic loss in our state.”

The Senate and House Resolutions state that suicide is the 11th leading cause of death in California, exceeding deaths by homicide by 144 percent and exceeding deaths by HIV/AIDS by 202 percent. Additionally, suicide is the third leading cause of death in California among youth 15-24.

The Resolutions go on to declare that suicide is a major public health problem and suicide prevention is a state priority. Initiatives dedicated to the prevention of suicide are encouraged as is the development of accessible and affordable mental health treatment. It also declares that not only this year, but in future years, the first full week of May will be known as Suicide Prevention Week.

Fact: Depression strikes about 34 million people in the U.S. at some time in their lives.

(Harvard Medical School study in JAMA)

*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.*

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

## Many Thanks To Our Donors

Sam and Lois Bloom  
Ken and Heidi Chaffee  
Betty Chaffee  
Leann Gouveia  
Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch

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SPAN-CA  
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### Elderly Most at Risk

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significantly with one's ability to function.

Both doctors and patients may have difficulty recognizing the signs of depression and this creates an urgent need to enhance the detection and treatment of depression in this age group.

Fresno County has developed an excellent awareness campaign for the elderly that communicates the message that major depression isn't normal and seeking treatment doesn't create a stigma.

For free brochures on the warning signs and risk factors of suicide, call SPAN-California at: 760/753-4565 or email: [markch@adelphia.net](mailto:markch@adelphia.net)

For copies of the Fresno educational materials for the elderly, contact SPAN-California board member Leann Gouveia at: [leann\\_go@hotmail.com](mailto:leann_go@hotmail.com)

Need More Information?  
[www.spanusa.org](http://www.spanusa.org)  
[www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)  
[www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

### National News

- In July, the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health released a report with goals and recommendations for improving the mental health treatment system in our country.

Suicide prevention is one of its top goals. The report acknowledges the link between mental illness and suicide and recommends the implementation of the Surgeon General's National Strategy for Suicide Prevention.

The report calls for a coordinated, national approach toward improving the mental health system. It underscores the immediate need for a national solution to suicide, the 11th leading cause of death in the U.S.

"Our challenge is to build a mental health care system that is both consumer and family driven and focused on recovery and resilience," stated Tommy G. Thompson, Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Link to the report at  
[www.mentalhealthcommission.gov](http://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov)

- The Paul Wellstone Mental Health Equitable Treatment Act of 2003, a far-reaching mental health bill introduced as a tribute to the late Senator Wellstone who actively fought for improved mental health laws and was a friend to the cause of suicide prevention, has been introduced in the U.S. Congress.

The Senate bill (S. 486) has 66 co-sponsors and the House bill (H.R. 953) has 241 co-sponsors. President Bush has expressed his support of mental health parity legislation. In spite of this strong bipartisan show of support, the measure has not yet been scheduled for vote in the House of Representatives. Contact your congressional Representative to encourage support of the bill (H.R. 953).

A publication of Suicide Prevention  
Advocacy Network - California

P.O. Box 118  
West Covina, CA 91793  
[www.span-california.org](http://www.span-california.org)  
For newsletter questions or contributions,  
email editor at:  
[micchaffee@adelphia.net](mailto:micchaffee@adelphia.net)