



NETWORK NEWS

SUICIDE PREVENTION ACTION NETWORK USA

Opening Minds. Changing Policy. Saving Lives

Benefit from the Media Spotlight (and Avoid the Burn)

It seems you can't pick up a newspaper or turn on the television these days without seeing a story about suicide. Reports about the suicide death of a well-known journalist. News about a foiled suicide pact planned over the Internet. A homicide-suicide tragedy at a school. Although these national stories have kept the issue of suicide in the headlines, have they helped raise public awareness about suicide? Do they communicate the message that help is available?

Given the power of the media to educate and reduce stigma, many advocates seek increased media coverage of suicide and suicide prevention efforts. Yet, in an age of information overload and short attention spans, media reports about suicide can end up sensationalized and reduced to catchy sound bites. Not only is such coverage painful for families and friends touched by suicide but research has shown that inappropriate coverage can fuel suicidal thoughts and behaviors among already vulnerable individuals, particularly adolescents and young adults.

To minimize this potential risk and maximize the benefit of increased public awareness, a number of organizations worked together to develop media guidelines (see "Media Resources"). The guidelines recommend the media pay

careful attention to tone, content and language when covering stories about suicide.

Tone. Overly dramatic tones that romanticize suicide or depict the person as heroic are both unseemly and irresponsible. Inappropriate stories also can blame suicide on a single negative event or scapegoat others as the "trigger" for a person's suicidal actions. These reports carry an accusatory tone that oversimplifies the complex reasons for suicide. The media also can sensationalize a person's suicide and invite imitation with prolonged or repetitive coverage, particularly when a celebrity dies by suicide. Responsible coverage, in contrast, uses factual, nonjudgmental tones to communicate the full story and to educate the audience about the link between suicide and mental illness, as well as other risk factors.

Content. According to the media guidelines, coverage should not reveal explicit or technical details about the

suicide method to avoid possible duplication. In addition, coverage that continues to focus on the grieving community may encourage some to view suicide as a viable method for gaining attention. However, it is helpful when stories mention whether someone who died by suicide had a history of depression, mental illness and/or substance use, all of which frequently play a role in suicide and can serve as warning signs to friends and family. The story should include contact information for hotlines and other available resources for those thinking about suicide or seeking treatment.

Language. Even the placement and phrasing of language can have an impact. Research indicates that referring to suicide in the headlines can contribute to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Instead, the cause of death should be reported in the body of the story. Another recommendation is to describe the person who died as having "died by suicide" rather than "committed suicide," so as to not imply the death was criminal or sinful.

Ensuring responsible and sensitive media coverage is an ongoing struggle for many SPAN USA organizers. One organization laments she can't even get many in the media to read the guidelines on reporting on suicide. "They say they

GO TO PAGE 5

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SPAN USA's 10th Annual
National Awareness Event**

Sept. 8-10, 2005
Washington, D.C.

3 Friend for Life
Fundraiser

4 Awareness Event
Resource Kit

6 2006 Public Policy
Priorities

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SPAN USA's Network News is funded by a grant from the Eli Lilly and Company Foundation.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

SPAN USA, working closely with the Suicide Prevention Resource Center and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, recently participated in the third of the five regional suicide prevention conferences. From Feb. 28 to March 2, the state teams in Public Health Regions IX and X gathered in Portland, Ore., to advance their state planning initiatives. It was great to see so many advocates and survivors gathered in support of the suicide prevention mission. We had state team representatives from Hawaii, Nevada, Arizona, Washington, Oregon, Alaska, California and Idaho present, including many SPAN USA community organizers and members.

Now our attention turns to Pittsburgh, Pa., where Public Health Regions III and V will convene May 18–20, 2005, followed by the conference for Regions I and II in Meriden, Conn., on June 6–8, 2005. With each conference, the goal of developing, implementing, advancing and evaluating state suicide prevention plans that build upon the national strategy becomes more of a reality.



In Portland at the state suicide planning conference, Lidia Bernik, SPAN USA program coordinator; Linda Flatt, SPAN USA community organizer, Nevada; and Jo Pesaresi, a member of SPAN USA's National Advisory Council.

vital force and voice in the effort to prevent suicide. Thanks to each of you for your important work to address this preventable public health problem. You continue to make the difference. ■

With state plans firmly in place, the task of the day is now to energize advocates for even more aggressive funding, leadership and evaluation. I ask each of you to visit the legislative action center on SPAN USA's Web site, www.spanusa.org, and make sure your voice is heard in calling for continued activities for suicide prevention.

SPAN USA has been front and center since the beginning of this movement and, with your support, will remain a

COORDINATOR'S CORNER

Ideas, strategies, and resources from SPAN USA program coordinator Lidia Bernik

Many of you may have heard that Golden Gate Bridge officials are considering whether to add a suicide barrier to the bridge. On March 11, 2005, the board voted 15-1 to proceed with a two-year, \$2 million study of possible barriers. Over the years, the issue of whether to build a barrier on the bridge has been debated numerous times. A few weeks ago, I received a compelling letter from Pat Hines, the father of John Hines, a young man who attempted suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge in 2000. Thankfully, John survived and now both John and Pat are working to ensure a barrier is built. John asked that I help spread the word about this effort. If you support the installment of a barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge, please e-mail your thoughts to bridgecomments@goldengate.org. It will only take a minute and it might make a difference. I know it would mean a lot to Pat and John. ■





Maury Lieberman, SPAN USA board chair; Sen. Gordon Smith; and Sean Gerow, chairman-elect, at the Friend for Life fundraiser.



Sen. Harry Reid addresses the group of SPAN USA friends gathered in Washington, D.C.

Friend for Life: An evening of thanks for SPAN USA friends

The 2005 SPAN USA Friend for Life fundraiser took place Feb. 15, 2005 at the Sewall-Belmont House in Washington, D.C. SPAN USA hosted the second annual event to thank donors for their contributions and ongoing support. Board members, business leaders and others involved in suicide prevention came together for a night of friendship and heard remarks by Sen. Harry Reid, Sen. and Mrs. Gordon Smith and Jerry Reed, SPAN USA executive director. Lifekeeper quilts from Nevada and Oregon were on display at the reception, serving as a reminder that preventing suicide means saving lives. The SPAN USA board and staff extended their heartfelt appreciation to SPAN USA donors for their generosity and commitment. ■



Sharon Smith and fellow board member Jeff Connaughton, who chaired the fundraiser event.

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SPAN USA PARTNERS WITH NEW NATIONAL MAGAZINE

SPAN USA recently formed a strategic alliance with *Advancing Suicide Prevention*, a new health policy magazine. Launching in May 2005, the bimonthly magazine will feature suicide prevention information and best practices designed for a core circulation of 20,000 professionals from the public health, youth, corrections, educational, pastoral, geriatric, social work and other relevant fields. Working with SPAN USA, the magazine will help educate professionals who often work with at-risk individuals, but may not have much exposure to current information about suicide prevention. To download the premier issue or obtain subscription information, see www.advancingsp.com.

SUICIDE AWARENESS EVENT RESOURCE KIT

SPAN USA and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center collaborated to produce the Suicide Awareness Event Resource kit, a compilation of the best tools used

by SPAN USA advocates to organize successful awareness events in many state capitols and in Washington, D.C. The kit includes a logistics planning guide, sample publicity materials, state and national suicide data sheets, and state legislative contact and session information. To download, see http://www.sprc.org/library/event_kit/index.asp.

STATE ROUNDUP

Suicide prevention advocates continue to gain ground at the state level. (See www.spanusa.org, SPAN USA Action Updates in the right column and click "View Update.") Recent legislative developments include:

FLORIDA

Members of the Florida Suicide Prevention Coalition (FSPC) have rallied support for the creation of a statewide office dedicated to suicide prevention. Both the Florida House of Representatives and Senate have introduced legislation (H. 0447/S. 210) that would establish the Office for Suicide Prevention within the Governor's Office of Drug Control. A full-time coordinator would develop a network of community-based programs, implement the statewide suicide prevention plan, coordinate

education and training curricula and direct an interagency workgroup within the Suicide Prevention Coordinating Council. In addition, at a recent press conference during the third Annual FSPC Day in Tallahassee, several coalition members each received checks for \$60,000 to conduct public service awareness campaigns directed at youth, elderly and law enforcement populations. SPAN USA organizer Teresa Tate received one of these awards to run the campaign on law enforcement suicide prevention.

MARYLAND

Maryland advocates have been enthusiastic in their support of Maryland House Bill 930, legislation authorizing school-based suicide screening programs and peer-to-peer mental health awareness programs as part of the Youth Suicide Prevention School Program. At press time, the state House of Representatives passed H.B. 930 by a unanimous vote, and passage by the Maryland Senate looked likely.

MICHIGAN

SPAN USA member Larry Lewis and others have been working with Michigan state legislators on important youth suicide prevention legislation. Michigan House Bill 4375 and Senate Bill 0094 would revise the state's school code and require instruction on the warning signs and risk factors for suicide and depression for both students and school personnel.

NEVADA

After years of tireless advocacy, SPAN USA community organizer Linda Flatt and her fellow Nevada advocates are poised to celebrate an important win. In his 2005-2007 budget, Gov. Kenny Guinn (R) included full funding for a statewide suicide prevention program. Although the legislature approved the program in 2003, it was never funded. The initiative would first hire a state suicide prevention coordinator to start an awareness and prevention program and eventually a suicide prevention trainer and network facilitator to serve the Las Vegas/Clark County area. If the Nevada legislature approves the governor's budget, these new positions will begin as of July 1, 2005. Said Flatt, "At last we're going to see some practical results from all of our efforts. This has been a lesson in patience and perseverance, but it's been well worth the ride."

NEW MEXICO

On March 17, 2005, Gov. Bill Richardson (D) signed into law an initiative that authorizes \$520,000 for the state department of health to begin youth suicide prevention programs throughout the state. According to SPAN community organizer Michelle Linn-Gust, this increased funding level represents a banner year; suicide prevention funding was only \$25,000 two years ago. ■

Membership Opportunity Send a contribution today or become a SPAN USA Member to help America's most effective grassroots suicide prevention organization continue its important work. For more information about SPAN USA membership, see www.spanusa.org/join.html. Mail to: SPAN USA, 1025 Vermont Ave. NW, Suite 1066, Washington, DC 20005

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I would like a S M L XL SPAN USA Tshirt

JEFF CONNAUGHTON

Washington, D.C

Soon after his lifelong friend died by suicide in 2002, Jeff Connaughton was looking for an outlet to help him work through the devastating loss. He came across SPAN USA's Web site and reached out to SPAN USA founders Jerry and Elsie Weyrauch. His early work was "involvement therapy," a term often used by Jerry Weyrauch. Jeff's contribution grew steadily, and he joined the SPAN USA board in summer 2004.



In the years ahead, Connaughton sees SPAN USA expanding its role as an effective advocate for policy changes at the federal and state levels – policies that ultimately will prevent suicide. As a principal with the bipartisan public affairs firm Quinn Gillespie & Associates, Connaughton uses his professional knowledge about fundraising and organizations to solidify SPAN USA's base in Washington and build a stronger platform for its public policy agenda. Connaughton serves as chair of SPAN USA's annual Friend for Life fundraisers, small receptions that maintain the heart and grassroots spirit that make SPAN USA special, while raising critical funds.

Connaughton recognizes that suicide affects people from both sides of the political aisle. Among his network of colleagues and friends, republicans and democrats alike have come out to support SPAN USA and its efforts. Connaughton's goal is to reach out to more people on Capitol Hill and within the administration who are personally affected by suicide, get them talking and hopefully get them involved.

PUA KANINAU

Honolulu, Hawai'i

Advocate Pua Kaninau states, "Don't mess with a grieving relative. We don't comprehend 'no.'" Kaninau's determination grows out of her experience as a survivor of a teenage son, Kaniela Kaninau, who died by suicide in 2003. She credits her passionate advocacy to her son, calling it "the Gift of Kani."

In addition to her full-time job for a social service non-profit organization, Kaninau has worked hard to help Hawaiians break the silence and talk about suicide and suicide prevention.

She created the Hawaii SPEAR (Suicide Prevention Education, Awareness, Research)

Foundation to provide a grassroots forum for increasing awareness about suicide in her state. Kaninau also sits on Hawaii's suicide prevention task force, which formed in January 2005.

Kaninau is committed to bringing suicide awareness and prevention into the schools. For the last two years, she has visited a private school in Honolulu and talked with middle school classes about suicide's warning signs and resources for help. Building on this successful experience, Kaninau is working with a health food company to sponsor a suicide prevention essay contest for high school students that will empower teens to help seek solutions to resolve the health issue of suicide. In addition, as a member of the task force, she will help Hawaii compete for federal youth suicide prevention funds through the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act.

While her advocacy work keeps her grounded, Kaninau acknowledges that the pain of losing her son lies right beneath the surface. Thus, her relationships with other survivors and advocates have become extremely important. "These friendships sustain me," she said. ■



Media FROM PAGE 1

do but then when a report hits the paper or TV, I cringe."

Other advocates report that their local journalists are aware of and use the media guidelines. Carol Helmlinger of SPAN NC says that her local media has treated the subject of suicide "with great sensitivity and dignity." Several organizers said reporters willingly have them read their stories before publication to ensure appropriateness; one reporter even removed specific details about a suicide death when requested by an advocate. Pennsylvania's Heidi Bryan says, "For the most part, [journalists] are willing to listen if you couch [your concerns] in terms of sensitivity and fear of contagion. I try not to challenge their knowledge or expertise or give them the impression I'm trying to tell them how to do their job. Most are good about it." ■

MEDIA RESOURCES

"Reporting on Suicide: Recommendations for the Media." Media guidelines were developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute of Mental Health, Office of the Surgeon General, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, American Association of Suicidology and the Annenberg Public Policy Center in collaboration with the World Health Organization, National Swedish Centre for Suicide Research and New Zealand Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. See www.sprc.org/library/sreporting.pdf.

Real examples of appropriate and problematic reporting on suicide. See the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Web site at www.afsp.org/education/media_coverage2.8.htm.

Media contacts. Identify local media outlets through "Alert the Press" at www.spanusa.org. In addition, SPAN USA is developing a media guide for advocates, which will be available at the National Awareness Event in September 2005.

SPAN 2006 PUBLIC POLICY PRIORITIES

The SPAN USA Public Policy Committee met in January 2005 to develop the 2006 national advocacy agenda for the organization. As a result of its deliberations, SPAN USA will actively pursue the following public policy priorities in the year ahead:

- *Full appropriation of the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act* (PL 108-355). SPAN USA calls for the full FY2006 appropriations of \$27 million, including \$4 million funding for the Suicide Prevention Resource Center; \$5 million for college and university behavioral health programs; and \$18 million for youth suicide early intervention and prevention strategies
- *Passage of mental health parity legislation*. Mental health parity legislation would end discrimination by the insurance industry against people suffering from mental illness by providing equitable access to insurance coverage for mental health conditions.
- *\$5 million for suicide prevention research and evaluation*. SPAN USA recommends a \$5 million increase for suicide prevention activities at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to support the

evaluation of suicide prevention planning, suicide prevention programs and efforts to change knowledge and attitudes to reduce suicide and suicidal behavior.

- *Legislation on senior suicide early intervention and prevention*. Suicide claimed the lives of more than 5,500 senior Americans in 2002. Research suggests that 75 percent of seniors who die by suicide have seen their primary care physician within the last month of their life.

GARRETT LEE SMITH MEMORIAL ACT FUNDING AVAILABLE

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration is soliciting applications for campus suicide prevention grants and state-sponsored youth suicide prevention and early intervention. Applications are due June 1, 2005. For more information, see <http://www.samhsa.gov/grants/2005/grants.aspx>.

MAY IN WASHINGTON

If “April showers bring May flowers,” then what does May bring?

May brings ...

Mental Health Month. May is designated as Mental Health Month to raise

SPAN USA REMEMBERS

Eleanor Bennett

1923-2005

Teacher, Advocate, Survivor

public awareness about mental health and mental illness. For Mental Health Month publicity ideas, online materials and a calendar of key observances (including Older Americans Mental Health Week, May 22–28, 2005), see www.nmha.org/may/index.cfm.

Older Americans Month. Beginning with President John F. Kennedy, this annual month to honor older Americans is an excellent opportunity to focus attention on their unmet physical and mental health needs, including their higher suicide rates. SPAN USA Executive Director Jerry Reed addressed suicide among the elderly during a White House Conference on Aging Listening Session (see Jan. 24, 2005 Listening Session at www.whcoa.gov). For more information and materials about Older Americans Month activities, see the federal Administration on Aging Web site at www.aoa.gov/press/oam/oam.asp. ■



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