Community Responses to a Teen Suicide Cluster

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Background
Palo Alto, California (PA) is a Bay Area community with a population just over 65,000 located in the northwest corner of Santa Clara County. Since 2009, the community has experienced two separate suicide clusters—defined as a group of three or more suicides in close time or geographic proximity. In a community that is demographically 60% white and 27% Asian, Asian-American students have been disproportionately represented in the most recent suicides.

When responding to suicides, CDC guidelines emphasize the need for a coordinated community-wide response. The following highlights some of the community efforts that have taken place as part of Palo Alto’s crisis response, focusing on 2014-2015.

Community Responses
HEARD Alliance (Healthcare Alliance in Response to Adolescent Depression and related conditions)
Partners: Stanford Children’s Health and community health care professionals, including primary care, schools and mental health
Mission: to increase collaboration among primary care, mental health and educational professionals to enhance the community’s ability to respond to adolescent depression
Outputs: Website (heardalliance.org) serves as resource for primary care screening tools, mental health resources, and professional referrals; Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Toolkit developed based on national best practices
Professional affiliations and consultation partners:
Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC)
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP)
Sources of Strength/ University of Rochester
Project Safety Net Palo Alto
Partners: community collaborative with >20 organizations represented, including City of Palo Alto, PA Unified School District, health and mental health partners, advocacy organizations, and others
Mission: develop and implement an effective, comprehensive, community-based mental health plan for youth well-being
Recent initiatives:
1. Restructuring to a Collective Impact model (see Figure 2)
2. Free gatekeeper training in QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) suicide prevention for the community
3. Means restriction that limits access to train tracks
   • higher and more comprehensive fencing along rail corridor
   • intrusion detection system using thermal infrared cameras
   • continued presence of security guards during hours of operation

Future Events
2016 Hackathon for Mental Health
Weekend-long community engagement event focused on high school and Stanford University students to collaborate on creating apps focused on mental health

2016 Adolescent Mental Health Conference
Educational and awareness event with broad audience including youth, parents/families, health care providers, and community partners (collaboration with Stanford Psychiatry Department)

Education and Awareness Events
Partners: Stanford Psychiatry Department in lead, with the school district, Palo Alto University, Kara (grief support) and Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI) as community partners, collaborating with county and advocacy groups
Recent initiatives:
1. Culturally focused community panel events
2. Fall transition events for middle school and high school parents
3. Mental health education and stigma reduction programming
4. Media education events focused on local and regional media outlets regarding best practices in coverage of suicide-related events

Grassroots Projects
• “Palo Alto Mental Health Dialogue” and “Success and Wellness: Life After PAUSD”: PAUSD student alumni coordinated events addressing youth, families and partners focused on teen health, life balance and definitions of ‘success’ as young adults
• Unmasked – documentary by Palo Alto HS and Gunn HS students about growing up in Palo Alto, highlighting positive coping strategies
• Student initiated clubs focusing on mental health awareness and stigma reduction (Let’s Bring Change to Mind)

References
-Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Programs for the prevention of suicide among adolescents and young adults; and Suicide contagion and the reporting of suicide: recommendations from a national workshop. MMWR 1995:44 (No. RR-6)