

Preventing Suicide Among College Students: A Community Wide Approach

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In September 2006, Western Michigan University Suicide Prevention Program (WMU SPP) received funding from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Department of Health and Human Services, under the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act (2004), along with 33 Universities across the United States. The proposed workshop will present detailed information about the program model that includes transferable elements adapted from the Air Force Suicide Prevention Program (2001), considered “promising” by SAMHSA. Elements adapted include the utilization of a community-based approach, use of community leaders to carry out and support the program; dissemination of information about risk factors, warning signs, protective factors, and referral sources; and promotion and destigmatization of help seeking behavior.

WMU SPP was developed and is maintained using a community-wide approach that involves the collaboration of University faculty, staff, and administration; community leaders and interested citizens. An overview of the program will be presented and program goals will be discussed. Five program goals are to 1) develop an increased sense of shared community and responsibility for each other’s welfare, 2) increase the probability that those in leadership positions will intervene with at risk students, 3) increase participants’ knowledge of depression, suicide, ways to intervene and referral resources, 4) reduce stigma of having mental health concerns and increase help seeking behavior, and 5) develop a comprehensive plan to address substance abuse, mental health, and suicide on campus.

Innovative program activities will be demonstrated including culturally sensitive experiential in-person and web-based training activities targeting faculty, staff, students, and student leaders. Three levels of in-person training will be discussed and participants will be engaged in sample experiential activities aimed at disseminating information and increasing the likelihood that participants will effectively intervene with persons at risk for suicide or suicidal behavior. Web-based training activities will be demonstrated such as a suicide prevention website developed as a resource for students, parents, and the community; an online training course for faculty and staff, and social networking sites (FaceBook and MySpace).

Preliminary outcome data and implications will be presented. WMU SPP’s community-wide approach to suicide prevention programming will be discussed in light of successes and challenges related to establishing long term sustainability.