Youth Suicide Prevention for High Schools and Middle Schools: 
The Signs of Suicide (SOS) Program

The Need for Youth Suicide Prevention in Schools

New Mexico youth need your help. It’s literally a matter of life and death. New Mexico youth are shooting, hanging, and poisoning themselves or finding other ways to end their lives because life has become unbearably painful for them. Many more of our youth are considering killing themselves, but have not taken that final step and are at risk for doing so.

Regarding New Mexico youth, 11-19 years of age:

- For 2000-2005, the number of young people taking their own lives was equivalent to a suicide every 12 days.¹
- In 2005, suicide was the 2nd leading cause of death.
- For 2004, among the 50 states, New Mexico had the 4th highest suicide rate.

Additionally, the 2005 New Mexico High School Youth Resiliency & Risk Survey shows:

- 8% (about 1 in 13) reported they had attempted suicide during the past 12 months.
- 16% (about 1 in 6) reported having made a suicide plan in the previous 12 months.

Putting aside, for a moment, the sheer quantity of New Mexico youth who have seriously thought about, attempted, or committed suicide, ONE youth suicide is one too many. The impact of a suicide in a family, school and community is enormous. There is the subsequent, painful awareness about the suffering that must have been endured by the person who committed suicide - until they could no longer endure that suffering - as well as the deeply felt emotions experienced by family, friends and community members after the suicide. Furthermore, research has shown that one suicide can lead to another among peers, other family members, or others in the community.

¹ Based on New Mexico Department of Health data
The Signs of Suicide (SOS) Program

The Signs of Suicide (SOS) program has two versions: one for high schools, the other for middle schools (the middle school version was developed after – and based on – the high school version). The nationally recognized high school version, evaluated in a randomized-control study, has demonstrated a reduction of suicide attempts by 40% (American Journal of Public Health, 2004, Vol. 94/No. 3) and a dramatic increase in help-seeking behavior (Adolescent & Family Health, 2003, Vol. 3/No. 2), a critical element in preventing suicide. The original SOS program is the only school-based suicide program selected by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to be included on its National Registry of Effective Programs. It is also endorsed by leading school-based professional organizations including the American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Nurses, National Association of School Psychologists, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and others.

The education part of the SOS program can be implemented in one class period, e.g., in a health class. The main teaching tools for the high school version are a video and discussion guide, and a brief 7-question, non-diagnostic screening tool for depression. The main teaching tools for the middle school version are a video and discussion guide, classroom games, and student/parent newsletters.

What You Can Do

Implement the SOS program in your school(s). Schools provide an optimal setting for youth suicide prevention. The program kit provides extensive, detailed step-by-step information on how to implement the program. This implementation will need support from the school’s administration, counselors, nurses, and teachers, as well as support of local mental health professionals. The cost of SOS program kit is $300 (funding may be available for the kit). For more information about the program, go to Screening for Mental Health at www.mentalhealthscreening.org. If you’re interested in implementing the SOS program, please contact Bruce Jacobs, Ph.D., Health Specialist, with New Mexico State University’s Cooperative Extension Service at (505) 646-4270, bjacobs@nmsu.edu.

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