



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Palo Alto Project Safety Net Planning Team

Amy Drolette (PSN Co-Chair), PAUSD Student Services Coordinator
Rob De Geus (PSN Co-Chair), City Community Services Manager
Wes Cedros, PAUSD Vice President, Gunn High School
Kim Diorio, PAUSD Vice President, Palo Alto High School
Ken Dueker, City Police Department
Greg Hermann, City Manager's Office
Minka van der Zwagg, City Community Services – Office of Human Services
Roni J. Gillenson, Adolescent Counseling Services, Program Director of Campus Counseling
Ray Bacchetti, Human Relations Commission Chair
Vic Ojakian, Suicide Prevention Advocate and Former Mayor
Emily Leonard, Covington and Burling, Pro Bono Legal Counsel
Cyndy Ainsworth, Kara Grief Counseling, Executive Director
Shashank V. Joshi, MD, Lucile Packard Children's Hospital and Stanford University, Director of School Mental Health Services, Division of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
Becky Beacom, Palo Alto Medical Foundation, Health Education Manager
Pat Markevitch, Parent Representative and Park and Recreation Commission
Terry Godfrey, Parent Representative and PTA Council President
Dan Dykwel, Chamber of Commerce

Consulting Team

MIG, Inc.

Carolyn Verheyen, Principal
Andrea Nelson, Project Associate
Lisa Tyler, Graphic Designer

Sponsors

Santa Clara County Mental Health Department

Dr. Nancy Peña, Director, Mental Health Department
Elena Tindall, Suicide Prevention Coordinator

With special thanks to the Project Safety Net Planning Team and the City of Palo Alto community.



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SECTION ONE

introduction

This Guide was created to help communities organize a coordinated community response to emerging problems related to suicide, the phenomenon of “suicide contagion” and possible cluster of suicides.

One community’s response to a cluster of youth suicides is presented. The outlined approach is a blueprint that can guide your community’s efforts to prevent and respond to suicides in any demographic group, and create a comprehensive community suicide prevention effort.

Since May 2009, the Palo Alto community in California has experienced suicide contagion with a cluster of teen suicides. Project Safety Net (PSN) is a grassroots network of concerned agencies, organizations and individuals that formed in response to this crisis and has grown stronger over the past two years. In January 2011, the Santa Clara County Mental Health Department (SCCMHD)

sponsored a planning process to identify organizational options to sustain the Palo Alto community-wide effort to prevent youth suicides.

This Guide describes PSN’s planning process, reviews its strengths and challenges and provides subsequent recommendations for similar communities. The purpose of this Guide is to share with communities experiencing a similar crisis the experiences and learnings of PSN with regard to its mission, organizational structure and strategy.

An organized and collaborative community response is essential to long-term success in suicide prevention. The SCCMHD hopes this Guide will help other communities coordinate their response to a suicide cluster and develop a sustainable effort to support youth or community well-being.



Between May 2009 and January 2011, the Palo Alto community experienced seven teen suicides.

Case Study— Palo Alto, California

Palo Alto is a city of over 60,000 people in the northern part of Santa Clara County in California. Located in an area known as Silicon Valley, Palo Alto is home to many technology companies and Stanford University. Palo Alto residents and businesses state that there is a deep sense of community and shared values in the city.

The Palo Alto community is mostly affluent and well-educated. The majority of students attend schools in the Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD), a public school district of over 11,000 students known for consistent academic achievement.

Youth Suicide and Community Response

Between May 2009 and January 2011, the Palo Alto community experienced seven teen suicides. The initial suicide shocked and horrified the community. Over the summer and fall of 2009, the City, PAUSD, health care professionals, faith community and residents initiated a community-wide response to prevent additional suicides. School officials, local agencies and community members held meetings to address the tragedy as well as forums on mental health strategies for teens. The PAUSD staff developed a 14-point action plan to make institutional changes for the 2009-2010 school-year. The Palo Alto Medical Foundation (PAMF) and Lucile Packard Children's

Hospital (LPCH) staff encouraged the health care community, City entities and PAUSD officials to develop support plans within their organizations.

Local health care officials formed the group Health Care Alliance for Response to Adolescent Depression (HEARD). City officials and Caltrain (operators of the trains that pass through Palo Alto) addressed safety issues at the railroad crossing. Caltrain also met with several groups to support community-based suicide prevention efforts. The faith community formed support groups and Santa Clara County considered the development of a task force. Local and national experts recommended efforts focused on interventions that were discrete, planned and did not unintentionally romanticize the act of suicide or the means of death.

During PSN's first two years, organizations and community members devoted countless hours and resources to prevent additional youth suicides. Although PSN members maintained hope, their spirits were at times challenged by subsequent youth suicides. PSN's development has required the City, PAUSD, health care professionals, faith-based community and residents to cooperate and communicate in new ways. Though sometimes difficult, PSN's development is an evolving process that includes challenges, successes, opportunities and lessons learned.

Project Safety Net

PAUSD and City staff decided to bring together everyone interested in supporting the prevention efforts. In September 2009, local agencies, non-profits, physicians, parents, and PAUSD and City staff were invited to a meeting. Eager to respond to this crisis in the community, these organizations and community members collaborated to form a network or coalition. This initial group agreed to meet regularly and form a Community Task Force, later called Project Safety Net (PSN). The name was chosen to reflect the integrated system of strategies that together form a safety net for youth and teens in the community.

Project Safety Net participation is voluntary. Participating organizations and individuals tend to join PSN because they have been personally impacted by suicide or they are directly or indirectly involved in youth education, health and/or quality of life, and because they care deeply for youth well-being and the Palo Alto community.

Project Safety Net Leadership

During the first two years of its collaborative efforts, an Executive Committee acted as the PSN leadership body and two Co-Chairs were appointed by the City of Palo Alto and PAUSD.

In July 2010, the PSN Executive Committee produced the Project Safety Net Plan (PSN Plan). The Plan builds on

PAUSD's 14-point action plan, adding eight strategies for a total of 22 education, prevention and intervention strategies that build on the strengths of existing community collaborations and efforts in support of youth and teens. One of the Plan's Priority Next Steps was to create an effective and sustainable structure for PSN.

The current PSN mission statement is: *“to develop and implement an effective, comprehensive, community-based mental health plan for overall youth well-being in Palo Alto.”*

The PSN strategies have two essential pillars at both ends of the prevention spectrum. On the one end are specific suicide prevention strategies, seeking out and supporting those most vulnerable. Suicide prevention is the reason PSN came to be and remains the core focus. On the other end of the spectrum are strategies that focus on youth well-being more generally that aim to activate the entire community in supporting the social and emotional health of all youth. This other end of the spectrum, which also relates to suicide prevention, is best described by the 41 Developmental Assets initiative which has also become a focus of PSN's work as the group has evolved.

PSN members tend to gravitate to either end of the spectrum depending on their expertise, interests and/or area they feel they can have the greatest impact.

The current PSN mission statement is “to develop and implement an effective, comprehensive, community-based mental health plan for overall youth well-being in Palo Alto.”

In response to the Project Safety Net Plan's Priority Next Steps, the Co-Chairs convened a Planning Team in May-June 2011 to address PSN organizational structure and implementation.

PSN has made a concerted effort to keep all community members, from both ends of this spectrum, working together, as the belief is much can be learned and gained from a united effort.

For more information regarding Project Safety Net, please visit PSN's website at: www.psnpaloalto.com.

Organizational Structure and Implementation Plan Process

In response to the Project Safety Net Plan's Priority Next Steps, the Co-Chairs convened a Planning Team in May-June 2011 to address PSN organizational structure and implementation.

The goals of the organizational structure and implementation planning process included:

- Develop a sustainable organizational structure for PSN;
- Build on existing strategy implementation processes;
- Identify roles and responsibilities within the organizational structure;
- Enable resource development and fundraising; and
- Maintain the spirit of PSN.

Plan Development Methodology

To develop the PSN Organizational Structure and Implementation Plan, the Planning Team worked closely with MIG (a strategic planning consultant) between January and June 2011. Sponsored by the Santa Clara County Mental Health Department, plan development included Co-Chair meetings, five Planning Team Meetings throughout the five-month time frame as well as a PSN Questionnaire

distributed to individuals, including representatives from each organization participating in PSN.

For more information regarding the plan development process, please visit PSN's website at: www.psnpaloalto.com.

Agreements on Organizational Structure and Function

Over the course of five meetings, the Planning Team defined a preferred PSN organizational structure for moving into the future. The group identified the following:

- A preferred level of collaboration for the PSN Community Coalition;
- PSN's role and functions including those for:
 - o The Palo Alto Community;
 - o The PSN Community Coalition (formerly referred to as Task Force);
 - o The PSN Steering Committee (formerly referred to as the Executive Committee);
 - o The partner organizations and individuals (those who develop a Memorandum of Understanding with PSN);
 - o The Community Collaborative Teams (strategy implementation teams comprised of participating organizations and individuals); and
 - o The PSN Staff including a Coordinator/Program Manager and Administrative Assistant who are supported by the fiscal agent.



SECTION TWO

success factors and lessons learned

Project Safety Net participants have formed a solid team, developed a comprehensive action plan, initiated several strategies and learned numerous lessons regarding organizational development and strategy implementation. Since its inception, PSN's strengths and challenges have provided the Community Coalition with ongoing opportunities to learn and improve. Upon reflection, PSN Planning Team members shared considerations and recommendations for similar communities experiencing a youth suicide cluster or contagion.

Strengths Needed

Strong Leadership and Diverse Support

PSN is built on strong leadership, a diversity of organizations and an established youth support infrastructure. With strong support from their elected bodies, the school district (PAUSD) and the City initiated and championed the PSN effort; their strong leadership was

at the inception and continues to be a critical success factor for PSN. The City and PAUSD were also able to convene a number of local organizations and community members.

There is a long history of collaboration to support youth in the Palo Alto community. Numerous organizations and individuals are a part of the robust infrastructure that has been supporting youth health and well-being in Palo Alto for years. These existing organizations and individuals further coalesced in response to the community's suicide contagion. The PSN Plan's suicide education, prevention and intervention strategies are implemented in Palo Alto with the aid of this infrastructure. Additionally, PSN reached out to local and national experts for recommendations and advice to help understand, prevent and respond to youth suicide.



Empower local advocates and organizational leadership in the community.

Recognizing PSN's excellent and necessary work, Stanford University donated \$2 million in Spring 2011 to support PSN's actions and organizational sustainability.

Recommendations:

- Enlist local elected officials, councils and appointed committees.
- Empower local advocates and organizational leadership in the community.
- Cultivate a partnership between the City and the school districts and other community leaders, such as faith-based organizations.
- Support collaborative strategy implementation efforts among organizations and individuals.
- Build on the existing youth support infrastructure to enable youth suicide prevention and well-being.
- Demonstrate effectiveness and seek funding from local institutions and other community resources.
- Invite organizations and individuals from the clinical community to participate.
- Request recommendations and expertise from within and outside the community.

Immediate Community Response and Coalition Development

The Palo Alto community responded quickly at the beginning of the suicide contagion. Over the summer and fall

of 2009, the City, PAUSD, health care professionals, faith-based community and residents initiated a community-wide response to prevent additional suicides.

Immediately after the second youth suicide, the Health Care Alliance for Response to Adolescent Depression (HEARD) formed an organized health care, mental health, and educational professionals' network. By September 2009, the City and PAUSD invited organizations and individuals to participate in PSN.

Recommendations:

- Build on existing infrastructure and community resources to respond to crisis in the community.
- Host community meetings to address the tragedy and hold forums on mental health strategies.
- Emphasize that youth well-being is in the hands of the whole community, not just individual families, the school district or health practitioners.
- Focus on interventions that are discrete, planned and do not unintentionally romanticize the act of suicide or the means of death.
- Develop action plans to make institutional changes at schools.
- Move quickly and with the knowledge that these efforts may take many years.
- Document the work and take the time to define the strategies, actions taken and recommended next steps.

Coalition Informality and Community Spirit

PSN's informality, teamwork and community spirit are three of its greatest assets. From the beginning, community members contributed tremendous good will and energy. PSN's success is largely due to the combined efforts of different organizations and individuals who participate in strategy implementation.

The Planning Team embarked on the organizational structure and implementation planning process to achieve one of the PSN Plan's Priority Next Steps: to create an effective and sustainable structure. PSN needed a more formal organizational structure or non-profit status in order to accept and oversee donations and funding. A number of Planning Team participants had concerns that a formal organizational structure or a new non-profit organization would compromise the Community Coalition's efforts, send the wrong message regarding responsibility for suicide prevention and youth well-being, and create duplication rather than coordination.

In developing the Organizational Structure and Implementation Plan, the Planning Team sought to maintain PSN's informal, inclusive character, while ensuring effectiveness and efficiency in achieving its mission. Therefore, the Plan calls for designated partnerships of specific organizations and individuals

as Community Collaborative Teams associated with each of the 22 strategies in the PSN Plan. At the same time, the Planning Team recognized that, in order to keep an alliance of this sort focused and coordinated, a leadership body of some kind was also needed. PSN will benefit from both a permeable "membership" that grows over time and expresses the inherent inclusiveness of the mission *and* the clarity of structure and accountability in the Community Collaborative Teams and the Steering Committee.

Recommendations:

- Preserve the community coalition's collaborative spirit, encouraging inclusive relationships and openness to new participants.
- Allow time for informal relationship building among coalition participants, such as sharing meals and socializing.
- Define the directing group's role as an advisor and authorize each strategy implementing body (e.g., PSN's Community Collaborative Teams) to develop and share strategy-specific action plans.
- Create enough structure to facilitate decision-making and action and to sustain the efforts over time.

PSN's success is largely due to the combined efforts of different organizations and individuals who participate in strategy implementation.

The Planning Team recognized that coalitions built on good will and organized under an MOU umbrella have initial potency but are inherently short-lived without dedicated resources.

Opportunity to Form New Connections and Partnerships

Through the development and work of PSN, organizations and individuals learned of previously unknown community services and developed lasting cross system and inter-agency partnerships. For example, now Palo Alto Unified School District better understands available youth health services and will collaborate with additional service organizations in the future.

Prior to the formation of PSN, the mental health community lacked the organizational connectedness of the physical health community. Through PSN, mental health providers had the opportunity to know each other and to work collaboratively. The HEARD Alliance connects primary care, mental health providers, and educational professionals to increase the community's ability to respond to adolescent depression, as a result of forming under PSN.

Recommendations:

- Allow time for informal collaboration and relationship building.
- Support information exchange and alliance formation among organizations and individuals.
- Participate in a community coalition knowing that organizational missions may be different and complementary at the same time.

- Continue to grow the coalition, adding organizations and individuals who can make a difference and leverage their efforts further through the collaboration.

Challenges to Expect

Need for Fiscal Agent and Dedicated Staff

Since the beginning, PSN leadership was lodged in the City and PAUSD Co-Chairs and the Executive Committee, relying on volunteers to make things happen. Due to the talent, engagement and commitment of PSN partners and other participating organizations and individuals, progress was made in identifying, prioritizing, and implementing PSN strategies, though, it was time consuming and, at times, exhausting for volunteers.

The Planning Team recognized that coalitions built on good will and organized under an MOU umbrella have initial potency but are inherently short-lived without dedicated resources. Improving and sustaining a community in which suicide contagion gets no traction and where youth and teens thrive is a long-term endeavor that requires dedicated resources. Applying for and accepting dedicated resources, though, requires PSN have an organized structure to manage them.

Recommendations:

- Develop a mechanism to accept and retain organizational resources early in the life of the community coalition.
- Arrange a fiscal agent to:
 - o Hire staff support;
 - o Provide a mechanism to receive and disburse funds to partner organizations; and
 - o Direct resources for staff compensation and potentially to partner organizations.
- Manage a staff:
 - o Hire a one to two-person staff with the capacity to coordinate, manage programs and to take care of operations and reporting;
 - o Ensure staff work closely with the directing group; and
 - o Authorize the fiscal agent to supervise staff.

Suicide Prevention as a Long-Term Endeavor

The suicide contagion continued in Palo Alto, while PSN education, prevention and intervention efforts were underway. Coalition members experienced feelings of relief when a suicide attempt was intercepted, as well as defeat when a life was lost to suicide. PSN participants believe that they need to maintain a long-term perspective in the context of an urgent need: to act in a coordinated, informed and sensitive fashion without losing heart when the efforts do not prevent all youth suicides.

The Planning Team recognizes that suicide education, prevention and intervention are a long-term investment. They believe that these efforts must be built into the fabric of youth school curriculum, parenting and mentoring, mental health and youth well-being support, and social service delivery.

Recommendations:

- Consider investing in suicide education, prevention and intervention strategies before experiencing a crisis in the community.
- Build suicide prevention into the fabric of any existing youth well-being and support infrastructure.
- Identify the local and statewide resources available for suicide education, prevention, intervention and crisis response.
- Maintain focus, positivity and perseverance throughout the coalition formation, development and on-going implementation process.

Lack of Clarity regarding Responsibility for Youth Suicide Prevention

The Palo Alto community often looks to PSN as the solution to stemming the city's suicide cluster and crisis. Representatives from the Planning Team, the City and PAUSD noted the pressure they felt as a result. Suicide prevention and youth well-being necessitates the entire community's support and involvement.

PSN participants believe that they need to maintain a long-term perspective in the context of an urgent need.

PSN elected to designate Community Collaborative Teams to maximize collaboration and leverage partnerships, without diluting responsibility.

Recommendations:

- Create an organizational structure and implementation plan that is sustainable into the future and is part of an inclusive community coalition that works with the broader community.
- Emphasize the critical role and responsibility of the full community in preventing suicides and ensuring youth well-being.
- Use the 41 Developmental Assets (<http://www.projectcornerstone.org/index.htm>) as a community to support youth well-being.

Need for Collaboration in Strategy Implementation

Planning Team members discussed the role and responsibility of partner organizations and individuals regarding strategy implementation. Some representatives hesitated to commit their organization to be solely responsible for specific strategy implementation. Some were apprehensive that partner organizations would be held responsible if a strategy is not implemented and/or if there is another tragedy in the community. PSN elected to designate Community Collaborative Teams to maximize collaboration and leverage partnerships, without diluting responsibility.

Recommendations:

- Define the strategy implementation teams as collaborative entities to avoid putting undue pressure on any one organization or individual.

- Emphasize that suicide education, prevention and intervention efforts rely on the entire community and not just on the actions of a couple of partner organizations and/or individuals.

Need for Communications Plan

The Planning Team agreed that communications within the PSN Community Coalition and between PSN and the Palo Alto community need to be enhanced. Community Collaborative Teams will periodically report strategy implementation progress to the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee, in turn, will share suicide education, prevention and intervention efforts with the Palo Alto community. Additionally, the Steering Committee will continue its role as an advocate and education resource. One of the duties of the PSN Coordinator will be to develop a Communications Plan to help PSN more effectively communicate its mission, efforts, outcomes, needs and opportunities to the broader Palo Alto community.

Recommendation:

- Develop and implement a Communications Plan to increase awareness of and participation in PSN and to educate others about suicide prevention and youth well-being.

SECTION THREE

conclusion

Project Safety Net's lessons learned are applicable for any community that is eager to respond to a suicide crisis, or work proactively to prepare for such an occurrence, and hopefully prevent one. Though specific incidents may differ, suicide prevention is a long-term endeavor that requires support from all facets of the community and a range of education, prevention and intervention strategies, and benefits by coordinated implementation. PSN exemplifies one community united in a common desire to save lives and enhance its collective well-being.

Communities can organize at a variety of levels. In August 2010, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors adopted the comprehensive Suicide Prevention Strategic Plan. The Plan reviews data on suicide and risk factors, summarizes local needs and recommends prevention strategies for the county moving forward. The full plan, an executive summary,

sample suicide prevention policy templates and more can be downloaded from www.sccgov.org/spac.

Preventing suicide requires the energy and contributions of each community member. By maintaining hope and perseverance, PSN has taught us that it is possible. We encourage communities to share their successes and lessons learned. Together, we can educate, prevent and intervene to give each other help and hope in the face of tragedy.

prepared for:
SANTA CLARA COUNTY MENTAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT
and communities experiencing a suicide cluster

prepared by:
MIG, INC.



in collaboration with:
PALO ALTO PROJECT SAFETY NET
Emily Leonard, Covington and Burling