



“Know the Signs” Suicide Prevention Media Campaign Is Aligned with Best Practices and Highly Regarded by Experts

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The California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) statewide Prevention and Early Intervention activities funded by counties under Proposition 63 included a multifaceted social marketing campaign for preventing suicide. One component of this campaign, which was developed in 2011, is a statewide mass media effort, called “Know the Signs,” that aims to prepare more Californians to prevent suicide by encouraging them to know the warning signs, offer support to persons at risk, and reach out to local resources. The program’s slogan is “Pain Isn’t Always Obvious.” Messages are promoted through common media channels (posters, banner ads, billboards) that encourage people to visit the campaign website (www.suicideispreventable.org) where potential helpers can learn about the warning signs for suicide and available resources.

As part of its evaluation of activities funded under Proposition 63, the RAND Corporation convened a panel of 12 experts in suicidology, suicide prevention, suicide prevention media campaigns, and other advertising and media campaigns. Experts participated in a two-phase process: In Phase 1, they developed a checklist of best practices in suicide prevention communication campaigns; In Phase 2, they applied a subset of items from the best practices checklist to selected materials from the Know the Signs suicide prevention communication campaign (Fitch et al., 2001). Experts’ ratings reflect an aggregate assessment of the extent to which the Know the Signs campaign adheres to each checklist item, based on their review of campaign content and materials.¹

Overall, the experts agreed that the Know the Signs campaign was strongly aligned with best practices and was one of the best media campaigns on the subject, mainly because it avoided many of the problems of prior campaigns, such as using stereotypical images associated with suicide. Specifically, the campaign scored the highest in areas listed in the table below; experts gave the campaign perfect or almost perfect ratings in all of these key domains.

There were, however, content areas that the experts identified as needing improvement. These areas for improvement were identified by experts during their discussion of campaign ratings. Experts believed that some of the information in the safety-planning section was either outdated or unsubstantiated and that it would be difficult for a potential helper to understand. The introductory video on the website’s home page was also viewed as difficult to understand.

Experts specifically noted that two of the warning signs reported in the materials (putting affairs in order and giving away possessions) were unsupported by scientific literature. With regard to the campaign’s imagery, some experts felt that the pictures looked like “stock images” or that the people depicted were “too good-looking” to seem realistic or relatable.

One point that was heavily debated among the experts was the phrasing of the “suicide is preventable” message. Some experts thought that such an absolute statement was insensitive to loss survivors and mental health professionals. Other panelists, however, believed that the message was extremely important for

Know the Signs’ Highest-Rated Best Practices, as Rated by Experts

Best Practice
1. The Know the Signs mass media campaign does not glorify or romanticize suicide.
2. The Know the Signs mass media campaign does not communicate myths about suicide.
3. The Know the Signs mass media campaign does not use the phrases “commit suicide” or “successful or failed suicide attempt.”
4. The Know the Signs mass media campaign avoids depicting a suicide act or means, including memorials, grieving relatives, and suicide notes.
5. The Know the Signs mass media campaign does not report the personal details of someone who has died by suicide or information about the means by which people die by suicide.

the general audience and that qualifying the statement by saying that “most” or “many” suicides are preventable detracted from the strength of the message. As a solution, experts suggested adding a component that acknowledged that not all prevention efforts would necessarily be effective and that although all suicides are worth trying to prevent, some may not be preventable.

Note

¹The rating tool used by the expert panel and a more detailed article on the Know the Signs campaign evaluation are forthcoming. The tool is currently available from the authors upon request.

Reference

Fitch, Kathryn, Steven J. Bernstein, María Dolores Aguilar, Bernard Burnand, Juan Ramón LaCalle, Pablo Lázaro, Mirjam van het Loo, Joseph McDonnell, Janneke Vader, and James P. Kahan, *The RAND/UCLA Appropriateness Method User's Manual*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1269-DG-XII/RE, 2001. As of July 30, 2014: http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1269.html

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RAND Health

This research was conducted in RAND Health, a division of the RAND Corporation. A profile of RAND Health, abstracts of its publications, and ordering information can be found at <http://www.rand.org/health>.

CalMHSA

The California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) is an organization of county governments working to improve mental health outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. Prevention and Early Intervention programs implemented by CalMHSA are funded by counties through the voter-approved Mental Health Services Act (Prop. 63). Prop. 63 provides the funding and framework needed to expand mental health services to previously underserved populations and all of California's diverse communities.

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