

If Means Matter...

What Are State Suicide Prevention Groups Doing to Reduce Suicidal People's Access to Lethal Means?

Background: Reducing access to lethal means of suicide ("means reduction") is one of only two intervention types that currently has evidence of effectiveness in preventing suicide, according to a review by an international expert panel.¹ Firearms make up the majority of U.S. suicides. Every U.S. case control study that has examined the association has found the presence of a gun at home is a risk factor for suicide. Means reduction is believed to work not by reducing suicidal behavior but by reducing the lethality of attempts. Nearly every method that an attempter would substitute for a gun has a lower probability of death. 90% of those who attempt suicide and survive do not go on to die by suicide later.

Purpose: To determine the extent to which statewide suicide prevention groups (SPGs) are implementing means reduction interventions.

Method: Between May '06 to March '07 we conducted: 1) telephone interviews with a leader of the group or agency responsible for statewide suicide prevention policy in each of the

50 states, and 2) content analysis of written statewide suicide prevention plans.

Results: Most state groups had published a statewide suicide prevention plan (44 of 50) or were in the process of doing so (4 of 50). Among the written plans, 84% called for reducing access to lethal means. Among the 50 state leaders, 90% believed that the presence of a gun at home is a risk factor for suicide. However, only 9 state groups had implemented activities aimed at reducing suicidal people's access to firearms.

Discussion: Most state suicide prevention plans call for reducing access to lethal means, yet only 9 SPGs have implemented interventions aimed at reducing suicidal people's access to firearms.

Why so few? Some leaders stated that the political contentiousness of the issue prevented their addressing it. Some states are taking a promising and non-controversial approach. For example, New Hampshire's CALM program is training mental health, primary care, and emergency care providers to talk with patients at risk for suicide,

50 State Suicide Prevention Groups (SPGs)

States with a suicide prevention plan...	
Published	41
Part of state injury prevention plan	3
In process (as of 2006)	4
No plan	2
Plan calls for reducing access to lethal means	84%
SPGs actively implementing any type of suicide prevention activity (e.g., gatekeeper training, screening, etc.)	33
SPGs sponsoring firearm means reduction activities	9

and their families, about reducing access to guns and lethal medication at home.

¹ References provided on handout

Harvard Injury Control Research Center.
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