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JAIL SUICIDE UPDATE

JAIL SUICIDE PREVENTION INFORMATION TASK FORCE

W11 1986-87

In an average city of 200,000 people, someone will commit suicide every two weeks. For the approximately 200,000 inmates in county jails and police lockups on any given day, however, at least one person, and perhaps two persons, will kill himself. The suicide rate in jails is 16 times greater than one would expect in a city having a population comparable in size to these jails. This is just one of many significant findings of the first national study of jail suicides (see page two of this update).

That study, And Darkness Closes In...National Study of Jail Suicides, was completed in October, 1981, by the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives (NCIA). The research was conducted under a grant from the National Institute of Corrections, U.S. Department of Justice. At the conclusion of the NCIA study, the authors stated: "The National Study of Jail Suicides has investigated serious problems plaguing our nation's jails. While we now know more about jail suicide than we did in the past, additional research is warranted. The act of committing suicide occurs as a result of many factors....Such research could provide insight into many still unanswered questions."

Beyond the unanswered research questions regarding jail suicide, the fact remains that suicide is the leading cause of death in our nation's jails. The sheer number of such deaths has increased. The NCIA study documented 419 suicides occurring in 1979; today, an estimated 1,000 such deaths occur annually. In addition, these suicides have created publicity, increased public awareness, and ultimately, litigation against jail facilities, city governments, county commissioners, etc. Local jailers have also felt the pressure and have increasingly asked for technical assistance, often times from the National Institute of Corrections (NIC), within the U.S. Department of Justice, in preventing jail suicides. In response, in June, 1984, the NIC formed a National Jail Suicide Task Force, an advisory board developed to design strategies for reducing jail suicides nationwide. One strategy of the advisory board was to establish a national coordinator for jail suicide prevention and information.

In September, 1986, following a competitive bidding process, the National Center on Institutions and Alternatives received a one-year, \$100,000 grant from the NIC to act as National Coordinator of the Jail Suicide Prevention Information Task Force. In cooperation with Juvenile and Criminal Justice International, Inc., and with assistance from the National Sheriffs' Association, the Project will:

- 1) Gather information from each county jail and police lockup on the incidence of jail suicide (occurring in 1985 and 1986) and related issues, including the replication of NCIA's 1981 National Study of Jail Suicides;
- 2) Conduct 10 regional jail suicide prevention seminars throughout the country;
- 3) Act as a clearinghouse by providing technical assistance materials to state officials and individual correctional facilities, and interested others regarding jail suicide prevention, including the dissemination of a periodic newsletter; and
- 4) Develop a model training manual on suicide detection and prevention for use in jails and lockups.

For more information on the Project, contact either of the co-directors:

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In October, 1981, NCIA completed the study — And Darkness Closes In...National Study of Jail Suicides for the National Institute of Corrections. The study documented 419 suicides occurring in county and local jails during 1979, the year selected for analysis. From demographic data collected on 344 of these suicides, the NCIA study constructed a profile of the victim.

The victim was most likely to be a 22-year-old White, single male. He would have been arrested for public intoxication, the only offense leading to his arrest, and would thereby be under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs upon incarceration. Further, the victim would not have had a significant history of prior arrests. He would have been taken to an urban county jail and immediately placed in isolation for his own protection and/or surveillance. However, less than three hours after incarceration, he would be dead. He would have hanged himself with material from his bed (i.e., sheet or pillowcase). The incident would have taken place on a Saturday night in September, between the hours of midnight and 1:00 a.m. Jail staff would have found the victim, they say, within 15 minutes of the suicide. Later, jail records would indicate that the victim did not have a history of mental illness or previous suicide attempts.

The scenario described above, according to the study, reflects a "hypothetical construct" based on those characteristics appearing most often in jail suicide victims.

Data also showed that 73.6% of the suicide victims were charged with crimes that fell within the non-violent category. Alcohol/drug related charges accounted for over 30% of these charges. In regard to the presence of intoxication upon arrest and confinement, almost 60% of the suicide victims were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs at the time of arrest and incarceration. Two out of every three inmates who committed suicide were being held in isolation. Over 50% of all suicide victims in the study were dead within the first 24 hours of incarceration, with 27% occurring within the first three hours.

In addition, over 88% of inmates under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs at the time of incarceration committed suicide within the first 48 hours of confinement, with over half of these victims being found dead within the first three hours of confinement. In addition, the majority (63%) of the inmates placed in isolation committed suicide within the first 48 hours of incarceration, with over 30% of these victims dying within the first three hours of confinement.

The current Task Force is in the process of replicating this 1981 study by collecting data on jail suicides that occurred during 1985 and 1986. For more information, contact Lindsay M. Hayes at the NCIA.

REGIONAL JAIL SUICIDE PREVENTION TRAINING SEMINARS

A major objective of the Jail Suicide Prevention Information Task Force is to perform 10 one-day regional training seminars throughout the country. The seminars will train participants in symptomology, intervention, research, liability, architectural design and other issues as they relate to jail suicide prevention. The sites of the training seminars will be determined by several criteria, including selecting areas: 1) which have a high incidence of jail suicides; 2) where there has been little or no previous jail suicide training; 3) where Project staff can train a large representation of jurisdictions, i.e., multi-county areas; and 4) which are most geographically accessible to participants. Each session will be limited to 75 participants.

Further, preference will be given to participants who are "correctional managers," and/or trainers, i.e., having the specific responsibility to an agency/facility (county or local) for training and developing a system approach to preventing jail suicides in their respective jurisdictions. It is hoped that correctional managers/trainers will return to their respective jurisdictions and implement a prevention system for their facility and training for their staff.

Project staff are currently determining the site locations for the 10 training seminars. If you are interested in participating, or would like your state to be considered for such a seminar, contact Joseph R. Rowan of JCJI immediately.

WHO IS THE TASK FORCE?

The National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, in cooperation with Juvenile and Criminal Justice International, Inc., and with assistance from the National Sheriffs' Association, will administer the Jail Suicide Prevention Information Task Force.

The National Center on Institutions and Alternatives (NCIA) is a private non-profit organization whose goal is to provide a forum for gathering and disseminating information about institutions and innovative alternatives. NCIA, incorporated in 1977, seeks to stimulate support for creative and effective programs through research and public education. In October, 1981, NCIA completed the study — And Darkness Closes In...National Study of Jail Suicides, for the National Institute of Corrections. This study, the first national look at the problem of jail suicides, has been extremely well publicized

and disseminated throughout the country. Lindsay M. Hayes, Project Director of that study, is Co-Director of this current Task Force. Mr. Hayes, a nationally known expert on jail suicides, also provides technical assistance to NIC in suicide prevention training to local jails, serves as an expert witness in jail suicide litigation, and was a member of NIC's National Jail Suicide Task Force.

Juvenile and Criminal Justice International, Inc. (JCJI), is a private, non-profit organization whose major areas of emphases are the training of detention/correctional staff, as well as survey, consultation and master plan services in the crime and delinquency fields. JCJI, incorporated in 1975, is directed by **Joseph R. Rowan**. In 1978, while heading the American Medical Association's (AMA) Jail Project, Mr. Rowan supervised the development of the AMA manual on the Training of Jailers In Receiving Screening and Health Education, an NIC-sponsored project which was devoted in part to suicide detection and prevention. In 1984, he published the brochure/monograph — Almost All Suicides In Jails and Lockups Can Be Prevented If....

Mr. Rowan, Co-Director of this Task Force, is also a nationally known expert on jail suicides. He also provides technical assistance in jail management and suicide prevention training to local jails, serves as an expert witness in jail suicide litigation, and was a member of NIC's National Jail Suicide Task Force.

The **National Sheriffs' Association (NSA)** is a highly respected national membership organization representing over 45,000 members, including most of the nation's county jail administrators. As the largest professional law enforcement organization in the country, the NSA provides technical assistance, research, and advocacy to its members with the intent of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the office of the sheriff and the criminal justice profession. Most recently, NSA has produced, in cooperation with the Suffolk County (New York) Sheriff's Office, a 30-minute video cassette on jail suicide. Entitled Suicide: The Silent Signals, the film vividly addresses causes of suicide, the warning signals that suicidal inmates give out, and procedures that jail/correctional officers can follow in helping to prevent suicides from occurring. NSA is serving as consultant and facilitator to the Task Force.

The **National Institute of Corrections (NIC)**, within the U.S. Department of Justice, is the funding agency for the Jail Suicide Prevention Information Task Force. NIC is both a direct-service and a funding agency serving the field of corrections. Its five legislatively mandated activities are: 1) training; 2) technical assistance; 3) research and evaluation; 4) policy and standards formulation and implementation; and 5) clearinghouse. The basic objective of the Institute's program is to strengthen corrections at all levels of government, but primarily at the state and local levels.

SUICIDE PREVENTION OVERHAUL IN MASSACHUSETTS

In mid-1983, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts established a Special Commission To Investigate Suicide In Municipal Detention Centers. Following seven months of research, investigation, and testimony, the Commission, chaired by State Senator Richard A. Kraus and State Representative Nicholas J. Buglione, formed two conclusions: 1) Since a lockup is a controlled environment, virtually all suicides within it can be prevented; and 2) Every detainee, simply by virtue of being incarcerated, is at risk of suicide.

The Commission's final report was completed in May, 1984. Entitled Suicide in Massachusetts Lockups: 1973-1984, the report concluded that the "Commission emphatically rejects the argument...that if a person is determined to commit suicide, there is little anyone can do to prevent it. While this may be true in the community at large, it has little validity in the context of lockups." The report also listed several Commission recommendations concerning jail suicide prevention, many of which were incorporated into a January, 1985, law covering the Commonwealth's 1,311 detention cells. They include:

- 1) Installation of high impact, low-abrasion transparent plastic (i.e., Plexiglass) in each cell;
- 2) Installation of audio equipment and electronic time clocks;
- 3) cell checks every 15 minutes;
- 4) recording of all suicide attempts in the Department of Public Safety computer within 24 hours, to be maintained in the criminal offender record information system;
- 5) notification to any receiving facility of a previous suicide attempt when the inmate is transferred;
- 6) reporting of all suicides and other deaths to the state chief medical examiner within 7 days of their occurrence;
- 7) establishment of annual inspections by the Department of Public Health, and written rules and procedures for each lockup; and
- 8) training of lockup personnel in the detection, intervention, and prevention of suicide, including in-service training for all current staff.

The state legislature had appropriated over \$12 million to municipalities in order to come into compliance with the new law. Following several extensions, the jurisdictions now have until June, 1987, to come into compliance.

For more information, contact David S. Park, Administrative Aide, Special Commission To Investigate Suicide In Municipal Detention Centers, Room 511, State House, Boston, Massachusetts 02133, (617/722-1432).

NEW YORK'S SUICIDE PREVENTION CRISIS SERVICE MODEL

In Fall, 1984, the state of New York embarked upon an ambitious and comprehensive jail suicide prevention program. Through the combined efforts of the state Office of Mental Health, state Commission of Correction, and Ulster County Mental Health Services, the Local Forensic Suicide Prevention Crisis Service Model was developed and field tested in five counties throughout 1985.

The Model, developed to assure that jail and police lockup inmates who are suicidal or seriously mentally ill are promptly identified and receive timely emergency and non-emergency care, contains four major components: 1) **Policy and Procedural Guidelines** for county jail, police lockups, and mental health agency personnel; 2) **Suicide Prevention Intake Screening Guidelines** that can be administered by jail and lockup officers during intake to identify high risk inmates; 3) **An Eight-Hour Training Program** for jail and lockup officers in suicide prevention, including a trainer's manual and videotape; and 4) **A Mental Health Resource Manual** which can be used to familiarize local mental health personnel with mental health and operational issues relevant to county jails and police lockups.

In January, 1986, the Office of Mental Health received \$750,000 in block grant funds to implement the Model

throughout the state. Seven community mental health centers were also selected to provide technical assistance to **each** county to effect the implementation process.

For more information on the Model, contact Judith F. Cox, Office of Mental Health, 44 Holland Avenue, Albany, New York 12229, (518/474-7275).

This technical update, to be published periodically, is part of the continuing effort of the Jail Suicide Prevention Information Task Force to keep state officials, individual correctional staff, and interested others aware of developments in the field of jail suicide prevention. Please contact us if you are not on our mailing list, or desire additional copies of this publication. As the Project acts as a clearinghouse in jail suicide prevention information, readers are encouraged to forward pertinent materials for inclusion into future updates.

NEXT ISSUE: JAIL SUICIDE LITIGATION

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