

Kentucky's Stop Youth Suicide

Said Shahtahmasebi, PhD

In the next article, Stockburger and Omar provide an overview of the Stop Youth Suicide (SYS) Campaign. Professor Omar is frequently invited to talk about the Campaign, or, provide training workshops around the globe. He has been supportive of the grassroots approach to suicide prevention and helped establish it in New Zealand (2010-2013). In his training workshops around New Zealand, Professor Omar explained that 'Stop Youth Suicide' Campaign in Kentucky, USA began in 2000 when he received a call from the coroner complaining about the high number of youth suicide he has to deal with: "Initially, we planned a one-off awareness campaign to run for six months to a year, but once we had started there was no going back."

In his lectures, Professor Omar reveals that the hard work has paid off and the suicide rates in Kentucky dropped from about 19 per 100,000 population to around the national average. The Kentucky SYS over the years has developed initiatives over and above public awareness of suicide including championing changes in gun legislation to ensure safe-keeping of guns by their owners in particular storage of ammunition separately and away from guns, suicide awareness and prevention trainings for schools, sharing the ownership of the suicide problem with the community, i.e. inclusion of the public, those bereaved by suicide, politicians, medical professionals, those survived suicide attempts, and so on.

One of the regular events organised by Kentucky SYS is their annual conference held every November. This is not a conventional academic conference acting as an outlet for academics to talk about their research and report their results. The conference is designed to be informative and relevant to practice at all levels from frontline workers to decision makers and politicians. Conference delegates and attendees are exposed to research results as well as to examples of good practice and results of SYS proposed initiatives.

Perhaps the most important and relevant part of the conference is the adolescent panel providing insights into their lives, perceptions, and beliefs. The inclusion of this panel is multi-dimensionally innovative, informative and relevant. First, the panel directly exposes delegates (parents, researchers and decision makers) to the dynamics of adolescence providing valuable information necessary to inform the process of decision/policy making. Second, parents, practitioners, and frontline workers become familiar with how to communicate with adolescent and support them. Third, it recognises adolescents' as contributors to the process of decision making. This recognition empowers them to feel part of the community and the society. The fact that a large proportion of adolescents who have been helped by SYS return as SYS volunteers is testament to empowerment of youth and a feeling of being valued.

The SYS annual conference is in essence more than just an academic convention, a training workshop, or more than providing information to frontline workers. The SYS conference help take the next step following provision of relevant information. For example, in the last annual conference (2013) several new grassroots suicide prevention groups were set up by the delegates for their particular community.

The Kentucky SYS annual conference 'Staying Alive Kentucky 2014: Building our youth for the future' sponsored by University of Kentucky has just been held. Click [here](#) to see the conference programme.

A copy of Professor Omar's lecture slides is available in the resources page of this Journal (click Resources/Teens development).