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Adults Exposed to “Know the Signs” Are More Confident Intervening with Those At Risk for Suicide

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California’s Prevention and Early Intervention activities funded under Proposition 63 included a multifaceted social marketing campaign for preventing suicide. One component of this campaign is a statewide mass media effort 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 statewide mass media effort is entitled “Know the Signs” and its slogan is “Pain Isn’t Always Obvious.” Messages are promoted through common media channels (television, online and print ads, billboards) that encourage people to visit the campaign website (www.suicideispreventable.org) where helpers can learn about the warning signs for suicide and resources available to help.

As part of its evaluation of activities funded under Proposition 63, in the spring and summer of 2013 RAND launched a statewide survey of 2,568 California adults ages 18 and older who were reachable by telephone (landline or cell phone). For the suicide prevention initiative, the survey was designed to estimate the proportion of Californians exposed to social media campaigns funded under Proposition 63, as well as to better understand Californians’ preferences for suicide crisis services and confidence in their ability to intervene with persons at risk of suicide. We initially surveyed a random sample of 2,001 adults in the spring of 2013 and then surveyed additional African American and Asian American adults in the summer of 2013 in order to enhance the diversity of the sample so that racial/ethnic differences could be tested. In total, the respondents included 1,014 White, 631 Latino, 401 Asian American, and 360 African American individuals, as well as 108 individuals who identified as another race or multiracial. Fifty-four respondents declined

to report their race. Participants were allowed to choose the language of survey administration, including English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Hmong, and Khmer. A total of 305 Latino individuals completed the survey in Spanish; 254 Asian Americans completed it in an Asian language. We applied a weighting procedure to the data so that the results of the survey approximate those of the adult population of California. However, because our additional sampling of Asian Americans emphasized Chinese and Southeast Asian subgroups, the views of Korean, Filipino, Japanese, or other Asian groups residing in California may not be fully represented.

In one series of questions, participants were asked if they had been exposed to Know the Signs materials,¹ and about 35 percent of participants reported they had been.² In a separate series of questions, respondents rated their feelings of confidence serving as gatekeepers to identify, intervene, and refer people at risk for suicide to help (“confidence to intervene”). For each question respondents could answer from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Scores were then combined across items to create an overall indicator of confidence to intervene that ranged from 1 (low) to 7 (high).

Across items, adults who were exposed to Know the Signs agreed more strongly with each item than those not exposed (see Table 1). Those exposed also had higher overall confidence to intervene than those not exposed. All differences were statistically significant ($p < .05$). Though we cannot rule out the possibility that those with greater confidence to intervene were more likely to notice or remember seeing or hearing one of the Know the Signs materials, these encouraging results suggest that Know the Signs may be effective at achieving its targeted outcome.

¹ Specifically, respondents were asked if they had, in the past 12 months, “seen or heard an advertisement that has the slogan ‘Know the Signs’ or ‘Pain Isn’t Always Obvious’ or ‘Suicide Is Preventable’”, “visited the website ‘Suicide Is Preventable dot org’”, or “seen or heard an advertisement for suicide prevention with the website ‘Suicide is Preventable dot org.’” Respondents reporting “yes” to any of these questions were categorized as having been exposed to Know the Signs.

² When exposure was measured by also including reporting yes to the questions “seen or heard an advertisement for a suicide hotline or crisis line” or “seen or heard an advertisement about recognizing the warning signs of suicide,” 59.7% report being exposed; results regarding confidence to intervene are similar.

Table 1 Confidence to Intervene with Those At Risk for Suicide

Item	Exposed to Know the Signs (35.4%) Mean (SE)	Not Exposed to Know the Signs (64.6%) Mean (SE)
<i>Overall Confidence to Intervene (Average of the items listed below)</i>	4.56 (0.05)	4.09 (0.03)
I feel comfortable discussing suicide with my friends, colleagues, and family members	4.74 (0.08)	4.31 (0.06)
I am aware of the warning signs of suicide	4.49 (0.07)	3.90 (0.05)
I can recognize friends, colleagues, and family members contemplating suicide by the way they behave	4.22 (0.07)	3.69 (0.05)
I don't have the necessary skills to talk about suicide with a friend, colleague, or family member (Reverse Coded)	4.24 (0.07)	4.04 (0.06)
If a person's words and/or behaviors suggest the possibility of suicide, I would ask directly if he or she is thinking about suicide	4.93 (0.07)	4.56 (0.06)
I have easy access to the educational or resource materials I need to learn about helping a person at risk of suicide	4.80 (0.08)	4.20 (0.06)
I can identify the places or people where I should refer somebody thinking about suicide	4.53 (0.08)	4.08 (0.06)

NOTE: All differences were statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

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RAND Health

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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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