

Innovations in Post Vention Services - An Intersectoral Partnership Auspiced by an NGO.

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Auspice body of the Sutherland Shire Support After Suicide - Support Group SSSASSG.

In 2000 at an inaugural partnership day in the Sutherland Shire a specific service and policy gap was identified in the field of support for families after suicide. This presentation will detail a collaborative intersectoral partnership that developed over a two year period that established three specific initiatives to address these gaps. The final outcome being an NGO receiving state government funding to co-ordinate a local post vention project. The project utilises the expertise of government and non government agencies (e.g.dept of mental health, dept of forensic science, police, funeral directors, counseling agencies) as well as consumers. The initiatives include the development of an information booklet, dissemination of this booklet and other support information through first response agencies, and, the establishment of a support group facilitated by volunteer professionals from participating agencies and specialist services. Policy and procedural development is detailed including job design and volunteer requirements. Evaluation methods and outcomes both qualitative and quantitative are summarized from the first year of service provision and will be presented and discussed. How the project works in accordance with the national community life strategies and guidelines will also be reviewed. The presentation will conclude with structured discussion on replication issues, implications for NGO's auspicing intersectoral partnerships and general question and answer on the initiative.

Introduction

In a recent report Ellitt of Suicide Prevention Australia noted that research into understanding the impact of suicide deaths on bereaved families and friends had led to the recognition of the need to increase provision of services and initiatives that target this specific type of bereavement to prevent follow on suicides in the Australian community (Turley, 2002). Coupled with the specific nature of bereavement after suicide, is the statistical correlation which demonstrates that those bereaved through suicide are at higher risk of suicide themselves than the general community (Clark, 2003). The work of Dr Clark at Adelaide University in South Australia has clearly identified the need for the provision of support groups specifically targeting those bereaved through suicide as an essential element in preventing follow on suicides (Clark, 2003).

The Sutherland Shire Suicide Safety Network (SSSSN) came to similar conclusions in its inaugural partnership day in March 2000, finding that post vention was a critical need in the field of suicide prevention and at that point was not properly identified and addressed.

The SSSSN then began to research appropriate initiatives that would be congruent with the goals of the SSSSN. Primarily the following:

- To combine the work of advocates, clinicians, researchers and community members across Sutherland.
- To work toward a framework for action to prevent suicide and to guide development of an array of services and programs.
- Be a catalyst for social change with the power to transform attitudes, policies and services.

Consultation

Consultations were conducted with the community via a number of conferences and workshops, letters received from bereaved family members and consultations with local health / community workers (eg Local Networks and Conference Working Parties)

Policy

In accordance with objectives documented in Council's Strategic Plan, the SSSSN places emphasis on establishing partnerships and increasing participation and community input. The post vention working party was established drawing together representatives from police, mental health, a funeral director, community based organisations and local government working together for a common purpose.

Additionally Council's Strategic Plan under the key direction to 'maintain a healthy Shire community' recognises the importance of mental health issues and the need for greater allocation of resources in this area.

The sub committee identified a twofold benefit to post vention initiatives (American Association of Suicidology (AAS)).

- 1) To reduce the chances of anyone else committing suicide by preventing the death from being over generalised and,
- 2) To assist people with the grieving process. Post-vention activities provide an opportunity to teach individuals the warning signs of suicide so that further suicides can be prevented.

Furthermore this type of care needs to be localised. As quoted often in suicide prevention strategies - caring communities save lives.

The primary objectives of the working party were:

- To establish a partnership initiative with first response organizations i.e. local funeral directors and police in the immediate distribution of literature specific to bereavement by suicide.
- To develop an information booklet that was local specific that addressed the immediate pragmatic issues associated with suicide.
- To develop a support group / network for those bereaved by suicide.

Funding & Early Initiatives

In 2001 the SSSSN received a \$2000 grant through the Community Development Support Expenditure (CDSE) scheme via Club Menai. This funding was used to develop an information brochure "What Do I Do Now". Training was then undertaken with Police volunteers and participating funeral directors as part of an initial post vention project that offered support via information and referral services.

In 2002 via the Sutherland Shire Council's Community Services Grants Program \$3000 was directed to Southern Community Welfare Inc (SCW). This funding was utilised for the development of a Post Vention support group. Policies and procedures were developed and manualised in consultation with the Coordinator of the Burwood Support After Suicide Group, NSW State Coroners Office, and key stakeholders in the Sutherland Shire through the SSSSN. Recruitment and training of eight voluntary facilitators who were all mental health professionals was also undertaken with the NSW State Coroners Office providing the training.

In 2002 the SSSSN received a \$10400 grant from the NSW State Government Dept of Health to establish a Support After Suicide Support Group (SASSG). The SSSSN appointed Southern Community Welfare to auspice the support group program.

The Auspice Agency.

Southern Community Welfare is a not for profit, charitable institution with the primary purposes of assisting those in our community through the development and provision of services that address the reduction of harmful, abusive or at risk behaviour.

There are three streams within SCW that ensure this purpose is achieved. They are education, direct intervention and community capacity development initiatives.

Sutherland Shire Support After Suicide - Support Group SSSASSG

The model adopted was the same used by the Burwood group developed by NSW Dep't of Forensic Medicine, although alternatives existed this model has been tested and successfully operate in Burwood and Wagga Wagga (see attachment 1). Particular emphasis is given to;

1. The strength of continuing care provided by professional counsellors from the Coroner's Office who facilitate the group, offering consistency and demonstrates genuine care to group members.
2. The Club venue is very good because:
 - It provides social and friendly atmosphere
 - The remembrance / memorial nature of the venue is accepting and compatible with aims of group
 - The neutrality of the venue ensures shared ownership and belonging of group members
3. The progression of the meeting from a larger informative group situation towards more personal sharing in smaller groups is seen as desirable.
4. The Remembrance Book as a good source of contribution for members.
5. A well resourced Coordinator position to administrate the group and keep in regular contact with members.

Outcomes / Findings

In summary the main achievements of the project are:

- The group commenced November 2002 two months ahead of schedule.
- The group operates monthly and every month has had attendance of more than five people. There is a consistent increasing trend of attendance with the last meeting having fifteen attendees.
- The group records now list 37 names of people who have attended at least once during the first twelve months.
- 67% of attendees are bereaved by males under 45 years.

- There is a developing community spirit developing within the group and new members are constantly being welcomed.
- Qualitative feedback suggests the group provides:
 - Improvement in the symptomatology of participants.
An environment to empower group attendees to understand their grief process.
 - Development of broader support networks for attendees.
- The provision of training for consumer advocates regarding mental health.
- Redirecting the focus of service delivery to the specific needs of these families.
- Assessing service need, usage and outcome from the perspective of the consumer.
- Expanding community networks and cooperation between agencies.
- Establishing local mental health support groups.
- Identifying gaps in service delivery.

Some responses that are consistently echoed in our monthly qualitative evaluation.

“You are the only people who know what I am feeling”

“you understand and help me to know I am not going mad”

”The importance of being listened to”

“Knowing I am not alone”

“The group made it possible for me to understand what my husband is feeling.

It gave us back our communication”

“This group has been very important in my grief journey”

“I look forward to coming and notice the length of time when it is a 5 week month”

American Association of Suicidology
<http://www.suicidology.org/associations/1045/files/AAS%20Suicide%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20Surviving%20Suicide.pdf>

Clark, S. (2003) National Audit of Support Groups/Services for People Bereaved through Suicide – Research & Development Proposal, Suicide Prevention Australia, Sydney; Australia.

Turley B. (2002). A national approach to suicide postvention. Department of Health and Aged Care, Commonwealth of Australia.

Attachment 1:

Burwood Suicide Bereavement Support Group Model

The following description is based on the group set up by Mary Walsh with the assistance of NSW Institute of Forensic Medicine Counsellors (42-50 Parramatta Rd, PO box 90, Glebe NSW 2037, Ph - 8584 7800).

Group Aims & Objectives :

- The support group compliments services already being provided to those bereaved by suicide
- The group is long term and open in nature, providing flexible, proactive and ongoing support
- The group is run in a way that is supportive of people talking about their feelings and the deceased, in an attempt to reduce isolation and normalise experiences
- The group combines professional counselling, shared experience and the use of a sensible venue
- The group is run by professionals, who attempt to create an atmosphere can assist people to 'move on' in their grief
- The Forensic Counsellor provide immediate and on-going support to bereaved families. Four to five weeks after the death the Coordinator contacts each family/next of kin with information and an invitation to link in with the Support Group.

The role performed by workers, and environmental issues related to this support group structure are as follows;

Coordinator initiates and maintains regular contact with group members, also publishes a bimonthly newsletter and organises the monthly meetings (c/f Letter of Invitation to *The Support After Suicide Group*).

Facilitator maintains the integrity of the group's objectives and facilitates meetings. The facilitator is usually a Senior Counsellor, though the role is regularly shared with other counsellors.

Venue / Location must ensure that the participants do not feel isolated or separated from the rest of the community (eg Scout Halls, Community Centres). Further stigmatisation by the use of such venues is unhelpful for the healing of bereaved people who already feel isolated. A helpful venue can assist with breaking down isolation, bring bereavement back into normal community settings (eg Returned Services Leagues Clubs).

Group Meetings are started and completed with informal discussion opportunity between members. The following aspects are considered :

- Basic refreshments are provided and members are encouraged to stay after the formal part of the meeting is completed.
- New members are welcomed and supported by group members.
- Each meeting has a quiet time for reflection of those who have died through suicide, and acknowledgment of anniversaries.

- A remembrance book with photos and dedications is kept and shared by members.
- Participation is encouraged because it is considered unhealthy that the group is dominated by one member / person.

Membership is not confined to those who attend meetings, but also include anyone on the mailing lists of the support group. Other issues relevant to membership are ;

- Members are encouraged to seek individual counselling because the group is seen as a complimentary program not a replacement. Some members of the support group feel that the group is enough support, but their progress is monitored and if there is any risk they are encouraged to obtain individual counselling.
- There are plans for a web-site to be set up for those who are isolated, currently the group uses the NSW government web-site to promote its activities.
- 30-40 of the over 300 members currently attend each monthly meeting.