

This article highlights some critical issues in our community. Some of our challenges are mirrored elsewhere, and others may hope to learn from our experience and our responses.

As we grieve the loss of any youth, we are gratified by the enormous dedication and collaboration of local community leaders, teens, and families to address the myriad challenges the suicides have brought to light. We are facing these issues candidly, publicly, and with heartfelt compassion. We are guided by the scientific evidence about what works, by advice from national and local experts, and by the voices of our own youth. We have asked the CDC to help assess local suicide risk factors, to advise what we should supplement from the “best practices” already implemented.

We are addressing the risk factors that can lead youth from stress to distress, to overt depression and anxiety, to suicidal thoughts and actions. Over the past six years, we have implemented and continually refine many specific steps and programs to improve youth well being: decreasing stigma about addressing mental health concerns, reducing academic and performance pressure, improving mental health care, reducing access to means of self harm, and improving public and media communication about these issues.

Our city convened “Project Safety Net,” coordinating the work of the many public and private organizations focused on teen wellbeing ([www.psnpalto.com](http://www.psnpalto.com)<<http://www.psnpalto.com>>). We have worked with media about to write responsibly about suicide and to reduce the risk of contagion fostered by sensationalistic reporting. Many resources for teen and families with concerns can be found at [AFSP.org](http://AFSP.org), [HEARDAlliance.org](http://HEARDAlliance.org), and 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Comprehensive school resources can be found in the Suicide Prevention Toolkit written by PAUSD and now disseminated statewide:

<http://pausd.org/comprehensivesuicidepreventiontoolkit>

Our schools bolstered living skills courses to reduce stigma and address wellbeing holistically, eliminated early morning academic classes, implemented block scheduling, reduced homework, started peer and teacher-mentor support programs, educated parents about teen mental health (including meeting with multi ethnic groups), added mental health specialists, and adopted nationally known programs (Sources of Strength, Break Free from Depression, etc).

Our major local health care organizations formed a collaborative ([www.heardalliance.org](http://www.heardalliance.org)), with initial focus on training primary care physicians to screen and treat teens routinely for mental health issues, and know when to refer. New “navigators” surmount notorious difficulties in accessing mental health care specialists, linking teens directly to therapists and psychiatrists. A new youth wellbeing center at Stanford’s Psychiatry Department will consolidate their clinical care and research.

Our city has addressed “means restriction,” limiting access and improving visibility along the rail line, adding motion detectors, and staffing guards at rail crossings 24/7.

Finally (and really firstly), are many student-led efforts to manage stress and pressures to succeed. Students’ projects include a high school peer support program (“ROCK:” Reach Out, Care, Know), a documentary (“Unmasked”), and a newspaper series (“Change the Narrative”), where students share stories of strength, hope, and healing.

Steven Adelsheim 11/15/2015 10:14 AM

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We embrace our responsibility to help our youth grow into happy, healthy, well-rounded adults. We are grateful to have the commitment and talents of a diverse, passionate, fully engaged community.

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Palo Alto Medical Foundation

