In the interest of public safety and quality of service, the National Council for Suicide Prevention (NCSP) has developed and is sharing the following Position Statement on Suicide Prevention via Internet Chat Systems.

Introduction

People have traditionally accessed crisis services by telephone crisis lines or face-to-face crisis centers in or near their local community. Technological advances have increasingly brought people to communicating through written channels including Instant Messaging, Texting, Online Chats and social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube. These mechanisms for communication, including crisis communications, allow for an even greater level of anonymity than traditional telephone services, and may be increasingly used in the future by people in need. With increasing use of these forms of technology, the NCSP recognizes that Internet-based interventions may and will be developed for on-line crisis services. Further, it is reasonable to expect that a number of these on line users will be in suicidal crisis, thus on line crisis response services will be involved in suicide interventions. There are, however, a variety of issues and challenges raised by this development. The Veterans Administration recently completed a 6- month pilot test of Veterans Chat service and has noted several of these challenges, ranging from issues regarding security, privacy, the lack of precedent, the non-linearity of interactions, to the greater anonymity of the visitor thus difficulties in getting persons at risk the immediate help that may be needed, etc. To date, these issues have not been sufficiently explored and solved; nor have quality assurance and improvement mechanisms been sufficiently developed for these types of services. Most importantly, the VA has recognized significant concern and need for extensive training and ongoing monitoring of interactions provided via chat services.

Position

The NCSP supports and has partnered with local and national crisis intervention and telephone services. The NCSP strongly supports accreditation systems for telephone crisis intervention services which, in general, requiring extensive (a minimum of 32-40 hours) training followed by ongoing supervision and quality improvement systems. Crisis lines have been singular in their focus on training and supervision to insure that those who provide services first do no harm and, second, develop skills sets that go well beyond simple gatekeeper functions. Therefore, the NCSP strongly urges further research, development and standardization of training protocols that recognize the complexity and challenges inherent in this model of service delivery and, in light of the issues raised above, training programs for chat volunteers equal to or more extensive than those required of and provided to crisis telephone workers so that the health and welfare of those using the services is best provided and maintained.

The NCSP recognizes and applauds the efforts developed by the VA for their chat services. These efforts have utilized best practices and have been done in a way to help develop the

highest quality standards of excellence. It is in part because of their work in this area, their commitment to ensuring the safety and quality for all users of the chat service and their lessons learned that we believed a statement outlining our position was important for future chat services. Our statement was directed at the field as a whole and stated our belief there is a need for further research, development and standardization of training protocols and training programs. We recommend these next steps for the field, support of the groundbreaking work of the VA and support their own recommendations based on their initial experiences with chat services.