

September 20, 2004

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
September 20, 2004

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### **SPAN USA Urges Congress to Support Funding for Suicide Prevention and Mental Health**

*New Poll Shows Americans Believe Mental and Physical Health Should be Treated with  
Equal Importance, but Acknowledge They Are Not*

**Washington, D.C. (September 20, 2004)** – Eighty-eight percent of Americans consider mental and physical health to be equally important, but only 26 percent believe they are treated with equal importance. These are the key findings of a poll released today by the Suicide Prevention Action Network (SPAN USA), the nation's leading suicide prevention advocacy organization. Jerry Reed, executive director of SPAN USA, announced the findings during SPAN USA's ninth annual National Awareness Event.

Reed said, "Our goal in SPAN USA has always been to advance the *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (NSSP)*. We lose 84 Americans every day, one person every 17 minutes, to suicide, and this must end. To do our part to advance the *NSSP*, we chose to measure the public's view of mental health. This will serve as a baseline in the future to determine how well we are doing in achieving the goals of the *NSSP*."

"The majority of Americans want to see parity in mental and physical health care," added Reed. "As the nation's leading advocacy organization for suicide prevention both in Washington and the states, SPAN USA has a responsibility to educate policymakers about the need for laws and regulations that will end the stigma surrounding mental illness and replace it with policies that treat mental and physical health on an equal footing."

Among the key findings of the research conducted by Charlton Research Company for Research!America and SPAN USA are the following:

- While 88 percent of those surveyed considered mental and physical health to be equally important, only 5 percent of respondents said that physical health was more important than mental health.
- Ninety-one percent of Americans surveyed either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that mental health services such as treatment for depression and suicide prevention are fundamental to overall health and should be part of any basic health care plan. Only 6 percent of respondents disagreed.
- Despite these supportive attitudes, 62 percent of respondents said they believe that physical health is treated with more importance in our current health care system.

"The American people want the discriminatory and unfair practices interfering with their seeking health care removed," Reed added. "When it comes to suicide prevention and receiving mental health support, the barriers to receiving quality care that exist must be removed. As a nation, we should settle for nothing less."

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The survey results will act as a benchmark for SPAN USA to measure the nation's progress on achieving the goals of the *NSSP* as it relates to public attitudes about mental health. The *NSSP*, announced by the U.S. Surgeon General in May 2001, established 11 goals and 68 measurable objectives for government agencies and private organizations engaged in suicide prevention. SPAN USA is dedicated to moving this agenda forward and working for accountability and results. Based on *NSSP* goals, by 2005 the nation should achieve an increase in the proportion of the public that:

- Views mental health and physical health as equal and inseparable components of overall health
- Perceives mental disorders as real illnesses that respond to specific treatments
- Recognizes that consumers of mental health, substance abuse and suicide prevention services are pursuing fundamental care and treatment for their overall health

In a keynote address to suicide prevention advocates today, U.S. Surgeon General Richard Carmona added, "Advancing the objectives set forth in the *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention* will ensure that this nation takes the necessary steps to reduce suicide and work to promote access to care. We will not have a complete health care system in the United States until we can say the words 'public health' and everybody thinks of that as including mental health."

### **SPAN USA Urges Full Funding of Garrett Lee Smith Act**

In other remarks today, Sharon Smith, wife of Senator Gordon Smith (R-OR) and SPAN USA board member, spoke of the death of her son to suicide just a little over one year ago. "As difficult and painful as it is for my husband and I to talk about our son's suicide, we do it because there is a chance that it will encourage others to seek help, learn the warning signs and perhaps save a life. Many of you in this room today have experienced a similar pain with the loss of a loved one to suicide. My husband and I are grateful to all of you for being in Washington to raise awareness about suicide prevention and urge Congress to fully fund the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act."

Last week, Congress passed the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act, authorizing \$82 million for youth suicide prevention. Tomorrow, the suicide prevention advocates will meet with their Members of Congress to urge them to fully appropriate the authorizing legislation. If fully appropriated, the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act will provide over three years:

- \$55 million for youth suicide early intervention and prevention strategies
- \$15 million for mental and behavioral health services on college campuses
- \$12 million for a Youth Interagency Research, Training and Technical Assistance Center (the Suicide Prevention Resource Center)

"If this nation is serious about saving young lives then Congress must ensure that communities receive the funds they need to implement these vital education, awareness and prevention programs," said Reed. "If fully funded, this legislation will go a long way to help communities come together to prevent suicide. We believe without question that suicide prevention happens at the grassroots level so providing these funds to states and communities is the right thing to do."

*SPAN USA is the nation's only suicide prevention organization dedicated to leveraging grassroots support among suicide survivors and others to advance public policies that prevent suicide. Since its founding nine years ago, SPAN USA has led the drive to make suicide a public health priority by building political will and calling for the development and*



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*implementation of a national strategy for suicide prevention. Using its extensive grassroots network of survivors and advocates, SPAN USA has actively promoted the cause on Capitol Hill and in state legislatures.*

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