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Mental Health Parity and Veterans and Military Suicide Prevention Among SPAN USA's Policy Priorities

Suicide Prevention Action Network USA Supports Prevention Across the Lifespan

Washington, D.C. (January 15, 2008) – The Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (SPAN USA), the nation's leading grassroots advocacy organization working to advance public policies that prevent suicide, today announced its 2008 public policy priorities, which include insurance coverage parity for mental health care and addiction services, and increased funding for prevention programs and research.

“Suicide does not discriminate based on age, and we must work to create awareness and develop early intervention and prevention strategies for people young and old,” said Jerry Reed, SPAN USA's executive director. “Most suicides are preventable through research, treatment and education programs and we are excited to work with Congress to accomplish our priorities.”

SPAN USA's policy priorities for 2008 are:

The passage of mental health parity legislation, which would counter discrimination by the insurance industry against people suffering from mental illness. Research suggests that 60% of adolescents and 90% of adults who die by suicide have a definable mental illness, substance use disorder, or both. However, 50% of suicide victims have never seen a mental health professional and 66% of suicide victims are not receiving mental health treatment at the time of their death. Mental health parity legislation has the potential to save lives by enabling more people in need of mental health services to obtain equitable insurance coverage for mental health conditions. Majorities of both houses of Congress, the President, and more than 250 organizations support parity legislation.

Funding for the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act programs, the first federal legislation to provide specific funding for youth suicide prevention programs. The Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act (P.L. 108-355) created a grant program at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to help states and tribes develop and implement a statewide youth suicide early intervention and prevention strategy; established a grant program for colleges and universities to

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establish or improve their mental and behavioral health programs; and authorized a suicide technical assistance center (the Suicide Prevention Resource Center) to provide guidance, establish standards for data collection, and evaluate suicide prevention activities and programs.

SPAN USA calls for appropriations in FY09 of \$48.8 million to be distributed as follows:

- \$38 million for youth suicide early intervention and prevention strategies
- \$5.8 million for college and university behavioral health programs
- \$5 million continued funding for the Suicide Prevention Resource Center

Reauthorization of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which provides necessary resources for the prevention of suicide. SPAN USA supports three specific priorities for SAMHSA reauthorization:

- Reauthorization of the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act grant programs;
- Creation of older American suicide prevention grants and an interagency geriatric mental health planning council; and
- A provision to make the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention permanent.

Further development of veterans and military suicide prevention legislative provisions aimed at addressing the preventable public health problem of suicide among our nation's veterans and active duty military personnel and their families.

Male veterans are twice as likely to die by suicide as male non-veterans, and the suicide rate in the Army is at a 26 year high. The Joshua Omvig Veterans Suicide Prevention Act (PL 110-110) and the successful Air Force Suicide Prevention Program are important steps in addressing suicide in the veteran and military communities.

Increased resources for behavioral interventions to prevent suicide through the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). The Institute of Medicine's *Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative* (2002) recommended that programs for suicide prevention be developed, tested, expanded and implemented. A leader in funding for suicide prevention research is NIMH.

SPAN USA recommends that NIMH increase the amount of funding it provides for evidence-based behavioral interventions to prevent suicide in FY09.

Additional funding for the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), which collects data from medical examiners, coroners, police, crime labs, and death certificates to understand the circumstances surrounding violent deaths including suicide. This information is important to develop, inform, and

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evaluate suicide prevention programs. The system does not operate in every state, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has the capability to continue expanding the system until all 50 states are covered.

SPAN USA recommends that additional funding for NVDRS be provided in the FY09 Labor, Health and Human Services appropriations legislation.

Elimination of Medicare mental health coinsurance discrimination and change, which imposes a 50% coinsurance rate for most mental health services under Part B instead of the usual 20% coinsurance for outpatient services. The higher coinsurance rate represents a serious barrier to care for some of the nation's most vulnerable populations.

According to the CDC, adults over the age of 65 have a suicide rate of 15 per 100,000, compared to the overall U.S. suicide rate of 11 per 100,000. Tragically, only about half of older adults experiencing a mental illness receive mental health treatment, due in large part to antiquated and discriminatory health coverage requirements such as the 50 percent coinsurance rate under Medicare.

“Eighty-nine Americans die by suicide each day,” Reed said. “Our legislators and policymakers must make suicide prevention a priority – today – lives depend on it.”

NOTE: To interview Jerry Reed, please contact Annika Toenniessen at (202) 715-1566 or annika.toenniessen@dittus.com.

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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 in 1996, SPAN USA has led the drive to make suicide a public health priority by building political will and calling for the development and 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. For more information, please visit www.spanusa.org.

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