



ESSENTIAL AND EFFECTIVE MEASURES

Plea for suicide prevention in Quebec



AQPS

Association québécoise
de prévention du suicide

REDUCING THE NUMBER OF SUICIDES IS **POSSIBLE, NECESSARY AND URGENT**

APPEAL
WILL
URGENCY
AVOIDABLE

There are three suicides every day in Quebec. More than a thousand people take their own lives each year. Affecting thousands of people, suicide has become a pressing public health problem. Indeed, each suicide leaves an average of 6 to 10 bereaved loved ones. Furthermore, for every person who dies by suicide there are 20 to 30 who attempt to take their own lives and more than 100 who suffer from suicidal thoughts. Given that the World Health Organization has stated that suicide is a preventable cause of death, these statistics are simply unacceptable.

Reducing these numbers is possible, necessary and urgent. Considerable progress has been made in suicide prevention research in recent years. Many reliable studies with close ties to professional practice have clearly identified the most effective paths to prevention. What is more, Quebec has an efficient organizational structure that capitalizes on cooperation between community and public networks, as well as the private sector.

Addressing this public health priority requires more than just wishful thinking. Implementing efficient and relevant measures demand a will to provide the necessary human and financial resources. And the clock is ticking. With every passing day, we lose three more persons to suicide. The gap between what is needed and what is currently in place hurts all of us.

In keeping with its mission to raise the public's and decision-makers' awareness about suicide, to promote the emergence of a socio-political context conducive to suicide prevention and to support resources dedicated to suicide prevention, the Association québécoise de prévention du suicide (AQPS) addresses the following plea to all Quebecers: change is possible—and it is both essential and urgent that we achieve results.

With the help of several organizations involved in suicide prevention, the AQPS has identified 10 essential measures that will lead to a major decrease in the number of suicides and attempted suicides in Quebec. These measures summarize the proposal outlined in *La prévention du suicide au Québec : mettre en œuvre les mesures efficaces* (Suicide prevention in Quebec: Implementing efficient measures), presented in 2012 to the Ministry of Health and Social Services.

- 1 Increase access to the 1 866 APPELLE help line
- 2 Develop online support services
- 3 Enhance crisis services
- 4 Provide follow-up services for people who have attempted suicide
- 5 Develop postvention and services for bereaved survivors of suicide
- 6 Improve access to training for practitioners
- 7 Implement and support gatekeeper networks
- 8 Raise awareness through public campaigns
- 9 Restrict access to lethal means
- 10 Support knowledge development and problem monitoring

INCREASE ACCESS TO THE 1 866 APPELLE HELP LINE

Making effective interventions available at all times



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- Given the increase in requests for help, **supporting the help line** is essential to offering a satisfactory response to people at risk of suicide (and the people close to them) and to making **proactive follow-up calls** to those at greatest risk.
- To optimize the coordination of resources so that no call goes unanswered, organizations commissioned to answer calls, and manage the help line must have access to integrated technology able to accurately analyze **call data**.
- **Common standards** must be established for commissioned organizations in order to set intervention guidelines and standardize technology.

In service since 2001, the 1 866 APPELLE help line offers 24/7 assistance to people across Quebec. Designed for people at risk of suicide and their loved ones, bereaved survivors of suicide, gatekeepers and practitioners, it is one of the greatest assets of Quebec's suicide prevention network. More than 40,000 calls are answered by the help line each year.

DEVELOP ONLINE SUPPORT SERVICES

Reaching people in distress wherever they are

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- Developing online support services—through **chat, email and discussion groups**—is essential.
- With people increasingly inclined to seek help and resources online, it is vital for suicide prevention resources to make themselves visible on the web and offer appropriate information online. To achieve this, we must apply **search engine optimization for suicide prevention sites**.
- An increasing number of suicides and suicide attempts are preceded by messages of distress in social media. As such, a **proactive strategic monitoring system** should be implemented.

The Internet creates new challenges in suicide prevention—as well as new opportunities for reaching distressed people. Despite a clear need, there is not yet an efficient, systematic online intervention mechanism in Quebec. In fact, it may be easier to find information online on how to end one's life than on where to get help.

ENHANCE CRISIS SERVICES

Offering an alternative to hospitalization



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- To make their solutions more relevant, **crisis services**—in particular, **crisis housing**—must be enhanced and made accessible to citizens all across Quebec.
- Crisis services must be promoted.
- Organizations providing crisis services must increase their level of **coordination and cooperation** to provide unfailing support for people in crisis, whether they are facing psychosocial problems or suicidal thoughts.

Crisis services include all types of services offered to people in a suicidal crisis, including telephone support, face-to-face support and crisis housing. Crisis housing, which is not yet available in all regions of Quebec, relieves pressure on the healthcare system by providing vulnerable people with a place to stay and the support they need, using an approach that draws on their strengths.

PROVIDE FOLLOW-UP SERVICES FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE

Monitoring and following up with those at higher risk



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- **Action plans** must be developed by those responsible for providing support and following up with people who have attempted suicide. Strong partnerships and agreements between organizations must also be established, with clear province-wide procedures implemented locally.
- An **accountability framework** must be created to designate the organizations responsible for following up with people who have attempted suicide.

In the year following a suicide attempt, people who are hospitalized for their attempts are the highest risk group for suicide – and they remain vulnerable afterward. Close follow-up requires strong ties between the various organizations providing services after the person's release from the hospital. Although the need for priority care is clear, follow-up services are effectively provided in only a few locations across Quebec.

DEVELOP POSTVENTION AND SERVICES FOR BEREAVED SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE

Taking care of those left behind



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- The **services offered to survivors** must be improved throughout Quebec.
- **Postvention services**—that is, support and education following a suicide—must be provided systematically. Since men have much higher rates of suicide than women, this is especially important in male-dominated work environments.
- **Postvention protocols** must be implemented and maintained in all educational institutions.
- **Better promotion** is necessary to improve access to bereaved survivor and postvention services.

Following a suicide, the people closest to the deceased may become destabilized. Services are offered to survivors and direct witnesses of a suicide, primarily to ensure their safety. These services are not yet evenly distributed in Quebec. Many schools have introduced postvention protocols in recent years and work to maintain them. Few such protocols exist in other work and community environments.

IMPROVE ACCESS TO TRAINING FOR PRACTITIONERS

Increasing the quality and quantity of services



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- All stakeholders working in the field of suicide prevention who have not yet completed the *Intervenir auprès de la personne suicidaire à l'aide de bonnes pratiques* training course (Best practices in intervention with people who are suicidal) should receive this **training without delay**. Organizations should provide their staff with the time necessary to attend this training.
- Given the need to harmonize practices and develop a shared language for all workers who are in contact with a person at risk of suicide, **training programs must be tailored to the specific needs of certain professions**: general practitioners, nurses, 9-1-1 emergency centre staff, social workers, etc.
- A **collaborative web platform** on suicide prevention for trained practitioners and managers would help foster the spread of best practices, share experiential know-how and contribute to professional development.

Intervenir auprès de la personne suicidaire à l'aide de bonnes pratiques (Best practices in intervention with people who are suicidal) is a training that standardizes and develops suicide-prevention knowledge and skills. Based on estimating the danger of suicidal acts, the training teaches intervention techniques rooted in solution-focused brief therapy. In three and a half years, some 65 instructors have used this method to train 10,000 practitioners in various regions of Quebec.

IMPLEMENT AND SUPPORT GATEKEEPER NETWORKS

Weaving a safety net



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- **More gatekeeper networks** are needed in Quebec’s communities, schools and workplaces—and more financial resources must be dedicated to creating these networks.
- Gatekeeper networks should be introduced first in environments with high-risk populations: men between the ages of 35 and 50. This means **work environments**—suggesting that mechanisms are needed to encourage businesses to train gatekeepers and allow staff access to this training.
- Trained gatekeepers should be offered **more ongoing support**.

Gatekeepers are trained citizens who, in their workplaces or communities, reach out to people in distress and connect them with help resources. Some areas have not yet adopted these practices and implementation has been difficult in certain environments.

RAISE AWARENESS THROUGH PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS

Changing perceptions so that suicide is no longer considered an option

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- A province-wide **annual prevention campaign** is needed to change the way people think about suicide, make society more aware of the extent of the problem, find ways to decrease the suicide rate and promote available resources.
- It is essential for as many communities and workplaces as possible to **acknowledge this collective problem** and take steps to prevent it.
- For society as a whole to take ownership of the problem, it will be necessary to support measures that foster **public mobilization** or arise from it.

We need to change our culture so that suicide is no longer considered an option. This means acting collectively—before suicidal thoughts begin—through education, awareness and social mobilization. Quebec has never held a large-scale prevention campaign through which it can send a sustained message to the population at large.

RESTRICT ACCESS TO LETHAL MEANS

Giving positive outcomes a better chance



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- Quebec must maintain its efforts to **restrict access to firearms** (for example, by implementing its own firearm registry).
- Establishing **collaboration agreements between doctors and pharmacists** would help prevent voluntary drug overdoses.
- It is necessary to **raise awareness** among the different stakeholders who manage media or public platforms, about the effects of publicizing suicide methods.

The effectiveness of restricting access to lethal means has been demonstrated: people at risk of suicide often have a clear idea of how they will take their own life and will rarely make substitutions. There is also a connection between media exposure of a suicide method and an increase in the use of that particular method.

SUPPORT KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT AND PROBLEM MONITORING

Better understanding leads to better actions



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- To adequately address the problem of suicide, public and community organizations need access to accurate, thorough and up-to-date **monitoring data** for each health and social service area and each local service network.
- Advances in practical knowledge about suicide prevention are constantly raising new research questions. Continued **support for research** is required in a variety of disciplines related to suicide and suicide prevention.
- Questions related to suicide and suicide prevention should be more widely integrated into training programs offered at **the university level**.

Many research and education centres and networks supply suicide prevention organizations with quantitative and/or qualitative data. The reality of suicide varies from one region to another, and even from one town to another. By becoming more aware of the scope of suicide and attempted suicide in their region or town, local stakeholders can focus their prevention efforts on the groups most at risk.

ADDITIONAL MEASURES

Acting on multiple aspects of the problem

The 10 measures presented in this document are essential to reducing the number of suicides in Quebec. It should be noted that they represent the minimum threshold of effort, rather than the entire inventory of measures for a comprehensive suicide prevention program. Below are some additional measures that have been deemed effective for the prevention of suicide and other psychosocial problems.

EXPAND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF BEST PRACTICES

- Inspired by two guides published by the Ministry of Health and Social Services in 2010 to support the development of suicide prevention services, best practices in suicide prevention are now being implemented across Quebec. Expanding their implementation will require reaching out to managers of all 94 local services networks as quickly as possible.

DEVELOP COPING STRATEGIES FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD

- Education offers another promising venue for suicide prevention. Activities to promote mental health and the development of coping and social skills should be introduced in all primary and secondary schools in Quebec.

BUILD ON THE ROLE OF FAMILY, FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES

- According to research, family, friends and loved ones are powerful protective factors for a person at risk of suicide: they provide a reason for living and serve as essential intermediaries between the person in distress and support services. They also offer daily support. Their role should be given greater consideration when designing interventions.

INCREASE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

- It is essential that mental health resources be widely available and within reasonable timeframes for all people who require follow-up.

« The time has come to make
suicide prevention a national
priority in Quebec. »

Michael Sheehan,
Bereaved Survivor of Suicide and Volunteer



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