

The Facts: The American Public Recognizes that Too Many Teens are in Peril

A recent national poll found:

- A majority of Americans see teen suicide as a major problem.
- 42 percent of Americans know someone who as a teenager attempted or completed suicide.
- 38 percent of Americans have been told by someone that they were contemplating suicide.
- The public says that social stigma prevents teens from getting help and that teen suicide prevention is very valuable.

Source: *The Iris Alliance Fund/Research!America Teen Suicide National Survey, September 2004.*

IN EVERY ISSUE

Field Notes features important facts and information to help you keep abreast of the latest advocacy issues around youth suicide prevention. We will feature profiles of what other Leadership Council members are doing and offer concrete ways for members of the Iris Alliance Fund National Leadership Council to contribute to the work of reducing youth suicide.

Personal Story Spotlight: National Leadership Council Member Dr. Nina Gutin



Dr. Nina Gutin is passionate about reducing the stigma related to mental illness. Her experience as a clinical psychologist seems like enough to generate such passion—Dr. Gutin has seen patients with severe mental illnesses do their best to stay healthy and how the stigma—their fear of disclosure—makes it that much more difficult. However, her drive comes from a more personal place.

First, she had to overcome the depression of her teenage years that ultimately led to a suicide attempt at age 17. Dr. Gutin credits the therapy she received with saving her life and leading her to her chosen profession. “To be able to get from a point where I saw

no point in living to the point of having a happy and productive life...I know it works, and my gratitude for being able to receive this treatment made me feel compelled to give back.”

Another turning point in Dr. Gutin’s life was her brother’s suicide, which happened in his mid-30s. Her family mobilized to deal with the tragedy, initially creating the Jeffrey Gutin Fund for Young Adults, and subsequently the more broadly based Suicide Prevention Partnership. “People can take this tragedy and turn it into something meaningful, something that can make changes in the world,” she said.

The Partnership is currently collaborating

The Importance of Sharing Your Story

Research shows that we can reduce the stigma of mental illness. According to the New Freedom Commission, the most effective way to reduce stigma is through personal contact with someone with a mental illness.

As a member of the Iris Alliance Fund National Leadership Council, you can help reduce the stigma of mental illness by talking about your own experiences. Perhaps mental illness has affected you personally. Perhaps you have professional expertise to share with others. Talking about something as simple as why you joined the National Leadership Council can convey a message of hope and raise awareness about the importance of mental health.

Sharing personal stories is the Iris Alliance Fund's primary strategy for eliminating stigma. We want to hear your stories and incorporate them into our newsletter and other communications materials and activities. **If you are willing to share your story, please contact us at info@irisfund.org.**

“Even one voice reaching out with a message of hope is powerful enough to save a life.”

— Mary Hayashi

Promote Your Iris Alliance Fund Affiliation

The simplest thing you can do to raise awareness about the Iris Alliance Fund is to put your membership in the National Leadership Council in your official bio and curriculum vitae.

Nominations for the National Leadership Council

In this the third year of the Iris Alliance Fund, the National Leadership Council is 75 members strong. FowlerHoffman LLC, a nationally recognized policy advocacy firm, recently conducted an analysis of the National Leadership Council. Partner Mary Hoffman, who led the study, summarized the findings: “The Iris Alliance Fund already has identified and recruited an impressive cadre of national opinion leaders around mental health and suicide prevention. These are the expected allies for the movement. The success of the Alliance Fund’s national awareness campaign will be wedded to its ability to grow this base of support to reach new audiences through the engagement of unexpected allies in its activities.”

After Ms. Hoffman’s presentation at the planning meeting in July, the steering committee saw value in seeking more diverse voices from business, juvenile justice and faith-based institutions as well as bringing more advocates for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender youth to join the Council.

Expanding our “Circle of Influence” is an important task. Members of the National Leadership Council know what it takes to be a leader in mental health issues, and as such, the nomination of new members is entrusted to them. Potential new members must be sponsored by someone already on the Council. If you know of someone-from any field or expertise who is concerned about mental health-whom you would like to recommend, contact Mary Hayashi.

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with other agencies on local pilot projects that can be expanded nationally and included in the American Association of Suicidology’s database of best practices. For example, they are working with the National Association for the Mentally Ill on a pilot project in New Hampshire that aims to increase connections among various community groups, such as schools, police and the criminal justice system, so they can communicate better before, during and after a crisis and establish community-based support for young adults in need of help.

Personally, though, Dr. Gutin’s own goal for the Partnership is simple: “Life.” That is, saving lives and improving the quality of life for those who are suicidal, and survivors. The desire to save lives by preventing suicide is what drew her to the Iris Alliance Fund. “It’s really about a common goal,” she said. Plus, the Iris Fund’s focus on minority health is an important step in avoiding “one-size-fits-all” approaches to mental health.

Dr. Gutin’s passion for eliminating stigma is indeed a personal mission. In addition to

her calling to help others, it is also helping herself. There is a stigma even among mental health professionals, so she sometimes feels the need to be careful about disclosing her own history to people in the profession. Therapists are human beings and therefore not immune to prejudice. “There’s the general stigma, and there’s the distinction between the helper and the helped,” she said. “It’s more comfortable to see oneself as a helper as opposed to being vulnerable and needing help.”

When it comes to eliminating stigma, Dr. Gutin sees promise in the growing population of survivor groups. She is hopeful that as more people talk about their experiences in a non-judgmental setting and have them validated, that will give them the courage to speak publicly. After all, Dr. Gutin’s own optimism comes from her personal story. “There is hope even for people who are seriously suicidal. . . Hope comes from my own survival. We can use knowledge and experience to help others survive.”

What is Expected of Council Members?

The expectations for the National Leadership Council members is two-fold: support the Iris Alliance Fund's mission, goals and activities, and act as messengers and ambassadors to their peers.

Support may take several different forms, such as helping with fund-raising by identifying potential donors, testifying before decision-making bodies, participating in or assisting with Alliance Fund activities, lending professional expertise in the drafting of Alliance statements, issue briefs or analyses and/or sharing your personal or professional story.

Perhaps the most crucial role a member is asked to play is that of messenger to his or her own peers, speaking on behalf of the Alliance Fund in professional, business and social settings. The Alliance Fund will support the members in becoming messengers by providing communications tools, including a video, opinion polling, a periodic newsletter, fact sheets and sample presentations along with this series of advocacy tips. Mary Hayashi and the steering committee members are available and eager to offer guidance on identifying appropriate venues such as professional conferences, journals, newsletters, list serves, etc.



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Mary Hayashi Gathers Leaders as Alameda County Chair for Prop. 63

“Proposition 63 will finally fulfill the promise made over 35 years ago—after emptying California’s state hospitals—to fully fund community mental health care. This measure offers care for children, adults and seniors, using proven, effective programs, and encouraging innovation at the local level.”

— California Assembly Member Darrell Steinberg,
author of Prop. 63

At a briefing breakfast in Oakland on September 23, 2004, Iris Alliance Fund founder Mary Hayashi brought together elected officials and advocates to garner support for Proposition 63, the Mental Health Initiative, and discuss the many local programs that will benefit from the proposition's passage.

The audience heard from William Nealy, a formerly homeless Berkeley resident, and Terry Kalahar, the social worker who has been working with William for the last two years. When the two met, William's face was painted white, his hair was slick with motor oil, and he was living on the streets of Berkeley. He had spent years going in and out of various hospitals and jails without

ever really getting the treatment he needed.

Terry enrolled William in Berkeley's AB 2034 program, a nationally renowned program that provides an integrated set of services for homeless people, including alcohol and drug treatment, medical and psychiatric care, and even job training. Since he started in the program, William has stayed out of institutions and is currently working 20 hours a week. He has even been able to save a few thousand dollars.

Proposition 63 proponents point to stories like William's as not only heart-warming examples of proper mental health care, but also the fiscal prudence in fully funding such programs. Supporters argue that Proposition 63 will end up saving local communities money because there will be less costs associated with jailing, hospitalizing, and policing mentally ill homeless people.

Iris Alliance Fund founder Mary Hayashi with William Nealy

