

Teen Suicide Crisis in a Mountain Community

Kern County Sheriff's Office

Sheriff Donny Youngblood

May 31, 2011

Project Summary

I. SCANNING:

- A. The Problem:** The communities in Kern River Valley of Kern County experienced a rash of teen deaths through suicide and attempted suicide during a two-month period in late 2010. The incidents culminated in the deaths of two teens by suicide and the attempted suicide of another.
- B. Identification:** The incidents naturally resulted in a heavy media saturation as the situation expanded to include more area teens.
- C. Project Selection:** The gravity of the problem was immediately felt throughout the entire community. As such, the issue deserved and received the highest project priority.
- D. Project Focus:** Each incident involved area teens so the immediate project-focus was in that direction. The Kern County Sheriff's Office had fostered a good working relationship with the school districts in the region through the implementation of the School Resource Team. The team was well known in the area as having developed a good rapport with the area youth, so they were asked to play a primary role in the prevention plan.

Deputy Joe Garcia's previous relationship with the stakeholders (through the School Resource Team) was considered critical to the developing effort. Sheriff Youngblood facilitated Deputy Garcia's reintroduction to the area to assist with the prevention effort.

II. ANALYSIS:

- A. The Data:** The community was immediately engaged due to the enhanced media attention. Evidence of the community's concerns was readily apparent in direct communications and through the various forms of social media.
- B. History & Potential Harms:** The various incidents occurred during a very small period, so the history of the problem actually developed as each incident was reported. The potential harm was obvious to the entire community. The regional stakeholders were compelled to move quickly to address the issue.

- C. Open Discussions:** There were community meetings facilitated in addition to the normal discussions prompted by such incidents.

III. RESPONSE:

- A. Response Alternatives:** The range of potential responses covered a wide operational spectrum. The options ranged from doing nothing (from an enforcement perspective) to deploying additional personnel to the School Resource Team to demonstrate an investment in the developing prevention effort.
- B. The Decision:** Sheriff Donny Youngblood opted to transfer Deputy Joe Garcia back to the area due to his unique relationship with the community and with the area youth. The operational premise was to reintroduce a trusted adult (Deputy Garcia) into the school fabric. It was hoped that this level of trust would maintain (or expand) communication avenues with the area youth.
- C. Community Values:** Protecting the community dynamic represented the primary decision making factor for committing additional Sheriff's Office resources.

IV. ASSESSMENT:

- A. Results:** Deputy Garcia's participation is ongoing, as he remains engaged in the process. To date, there have been no further suicides associated with the area youth. This fact must ultimately represent the utility of effort.
- B. Stakeholder Evaluation:** The community must maintain primacy in the evaluation process. Other stakeholders include professionals from the various mental health entities, the school district, law enforcement, community leaders and others.
- C. Continued Effort:** The Kern County Sheriff's Office has committed to maintaining the effort for as long as the situation dictates.

Project Description

SCANNING:

The Nature of the Problem and Problem Identification

The communities in the Kern River Valley (of Kern County) experienced a rash of teen deaths through suicide and attempted suicide during a two-month period in late 2010. The incidents culminated in the deaths of two teens by suicide and the attempted suicide of another. The deaths sparked immediate concern and public debate about how a community should respond to prevent such incidents. The gravity of the situation was immediately felt by the community and was recognized by supporting elements as deserving prompt attention.

The Kern County Sheriff's Office functions as the primary law enforcement agency in the region. As such, the community expectations have always called for enhanced levels of area involvement by the individual members of the enforcement team. The community leaders have promoted an expectation that they personally know the area managers, the sergeant and the members of his/her team. This expectation has been supported and reciprocated by Sheriff Youngblood during recent years, which was a factor in the eventual decision to reallocate personnel to assist with the prevention effort.

Project Selection & Focus

The Kern County Sheriff's Office has collaborated with the area schools (for several years) through the implementation of a School Resource Team. The team was designed to manage the various enforcement issues within the schools and to facilitate a functional relationship between the area youth and law enforcement. Deputy Joe Garcia represented the Sheriff's Office as the

School Resource Officer from 2006 to 2010. During the performance of those duties, Deputy Garcia was able to gain the trust/acceptance of the school district, the community and specifically the area youth.

Deputy Garcia transferred to another operational area shortly before these problems surfaced in any measurable strength. On the heels of these tragic incidents, Deputy Garcia was asked to return to the Kern River Valley to marshal the fruits of that trust toward the furtherance of a collaborative prevention effort.

ANALYSIS:

Data and Information Sources

The speed with which the suicides (and attempted suicide) occurred created a palpable tension in the region and in the surrounding schools. That momentum virtually precluded the possibility of presenting lasting relief to the remaining students or to the community. The media coverage was extensive and it naturally stimulated personal conversations and others through the various forms of social media. The following excerpts represent the strength of the problem as described by the various media providers:

- In October of 2010, the community was rocked by the suicide death of 17-year-old Caitlyn Rhynes (KGET TV 17, 2010). Caitlyn was a senior at the local high school and was by all accounts very involved in her school through extracurricular activities (Mayer, 2010).
- *“She was an active member of the student council, as well as a tennis player and member of the wrestling team. Her suicide has galvanized the Kern River Valley to help troubled teens...that’s why a team of mental health professionals, as well as teachers, church pastors, parents and students met last week to try to manage the crisis and work toward solutions”* (Mayer, 2010).

- In November of 2010, yet another area teen had tragically committed suicide. Fifteen year old, Steven Whisler took his life some 27 days after the initial incident (Mayer, 2010).
- *“About 200 parents, students and community members turned out for a second informational meeting at Wallace Middle School. A panel of mental health specialists addressed the issue of teen suicides and signs parents should look for I their children...with the two suicides, a concern is that other teens might start imitating the behavior, thinking there is no other way to deal with their problems”* (Smith, 2010).
- In December of 2010, a community meeting was organized to address the mounting confusion concerning the recent deaths. In attendance was a 15-year-old girl, whom also attended the local high school (KGET TV 17, 2010). The 15-year-old reportedly returned home from the meeting and attempted suicide (KGET TV 17, 2010).

Methods & Community Discussions

This level of media coverage coupled with the personal observations of the students and citizenry initially allowed for some measure of an ad-hoc qualitative analysis as the situation matured. A component of the analysis naturally included the information (direct source and that presented through the media) obtained at the community meetings.

RESPONSE:

Response Alternatives and Project Decision

The range of potential responses covered a wide operational spectrum. The options ranged from doing nothing (from an enforcement perspective) to deploying additional personnel to the School Resource Team to demonstrate an investment in the developing prevention effort.

The community was naturally reeling from the type and number of incidents involving the area youth. Sheriff Donny Youngblood (and staff) recognized the situation as uniquely volatile and he took proactive steps to align the Sheriff's Office response with the needs of the

community. To this end, Deputy Joe Garcia was returned to the Kern River Valley in the hope that his services would lend some measure of relief to the community.

Deputy Joe Garcia was ultimately returned to the area due to his unique relationship with the community and with the area youth. The operational premise was to reintroduce a trusted adult (Deputy Garcia) into the school fabric. It was hoped that Deputy Garcia's existing connection with the students would maintain (or expand) communication avenues with those most affected.

The basic structure for Deputy Garcia's participation in the prevention effort was as follows:

1. **Intelligence gathering:** Deputy Garcia's relationship with the Student-body was ultimately predicated on years of effort and personal interest in the wellbeing of the each student. This relationship afforded a unique opportunity to gather and disseminate important information to the mental health professionals and to the school district leadership.
2. **Education:** Deputy Garcia attended topic-specific training that assisted him with suicide first responder duties. This extra training added another layer to Deputy Garcia's ability to be an effective participant of the crisis management team.
3. **Emotional Support:** Deputy Garcia's presence fostered an atmosphere of comfort and calm during a difficult time. His ability to connect with the students allowed for a more effective response.

Deputy Garcia was able to supplement his prevention effort through the coordination of extra-curricular functions for the area youth. For example, Deputy Garcia coordinated spring-break trips to Cal-Poly, Disneyland, and Red Rock Canyon. Deputy Garcia also planned and coordinated sporting events at the school and he participated in other fund raising activities to support the community.

Community Values & Potential Effectiveness of the Response

The townships in the Kern River Valley collectively provide the nucleus for a unique community within the County of Kern. This California community is like many others in that it is bound by familial ties and long-standing personal relationships. In this respect, residents of the Kern River Valley are very familiar with each other. The Kern River Valley has a limited number of schools so this type of heightened familiarity (and sense of community) germinates from an early age.

Protecting the community dynamic and providing some level of relief represented the primary decision making factors for committing additional Sheriff's Office resources. The community's closeness and its collective values sparked the serious discussions previously mentioned in the media and elsewhere. Those values also represented the potential for success in the intervention effort.

Deputy Joe Garcia and the School Resource Team are currently collaborating with the school district, mental health professionals and other stakeholders to manage the situation. Deputy Garcia's participation included various forms of interaction with the student body and daily contact with those most affected by the incidents.

ASSESSMENT:

The Results

The assessment of Deputy Garcia's participation in the collaborative prevention effort is ongoing, as he remains actively engaged in the process. To date, there have been no further suicides associated with the area youth. This important fact, stands as a testament to Deputy

Garcia's intimate understanding of the community-dynamic in the Kern River Valley. Deputy Garcia's ability to work closely with the available school and mental health professionals ultimately allowed the short-term situation to stabilize and the long-term response to mature.

Response Goals

One of the response goals for the reintroduction of Deputy Garcia to the Kern River Valley was to promote a mechanism for intelligence gathering that may have been missed in his absence. Deputy Garcia actively engaged the youth of the Kern River Valley through direct interaction, and electronic communication mechanisms (phone calls, text conversations etc...) and through the normal non-verbal cues exhibited by the community youth (proximity). These types of communications lend themselves to an informal style of dialog that Deputy Garcia has apparently learned to exploit in a positive manner.

Individual students would often be referred to Deputy Garcia by school officials for direct emotional support and attention. These students would shadow Deputy Garcia for the day in an effort to manage the emotional residue of the recent losses and/or daily crisis. This level of direct support from Deputy Garcia afforded the school district with a valuable mechanism for emotional observation.

The success of the prevention effort in the Kern River Valley (at the micro level) underscores the difficult truth surrounding teen suicide on the national level (macro). Teen suicide, "*remains the 3rd most common cause of death for adolescents 15-19 years of age (behind accidents and homicide)*" (Horowitz, 2009). This information is striking and important for any community to understand. How a community chooses to respond to these types of tragic incidents is equally important.

It is true that the communities of the Kern River Valley recently experienced a series of tragic events that will not soon be forgotten. Deputy Garcia's participation in the events that followed were proven to be an important component of the community's ability to respond and recover from such a series of emotional events. It is in that spirit that the Kern County Sheriff's Office supports Deputy Garcia's nomination for this level of recognition.

Sources

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