



Suicide Prevention Call to Action: Middle/High School

Background:

Suicide is a leading cause of death in the US for all ages, and the two highest risk groups for suicide include Veterans and youth.^{1,2} Youth from 9th-12th grade in the state of Tennessee (TN) have higher percentages than the national average in suicidal ideations, suicidal planning, and suicide attempts (**Fig. 1**).³ Unfortunately, not much data is shared on youth at the county level as it could identify specific individuals. Also, we know for the state of TN youth ages 10-19 suicide is now the second-leading cause of death.⁴ In 2018, a House-Joint Resolution (HJR 0001) was submitted to TN General Assembly by Representative Staples to recognize teen suicide as a health crisis and as of February 3, 2020 has been signed by the TN Governor.⁵ As suicide is recognized as a health crisis in TN, what ACTION are we going to take as a community? Not only are the students in these schools thinking about suicide, but they are also isolated as the topic is stigmatizing and inducing fear of repercussions (**Appendix 1**). The Flatt Act requires that teachers are trained in suicide prevention, and the Jason Foundation provides a yearly 2-hour online training.⁶ Additionally, the Jason Foundation has created “A Friend Asks” application for smartphones, which comes highly encouraged as the students will have the Crisis Line at their fingertips.⁶ However, there is no direct training of the students and limited in-person training to school staff. Teen/youth suicide is a health crisis now, and we must do something now.

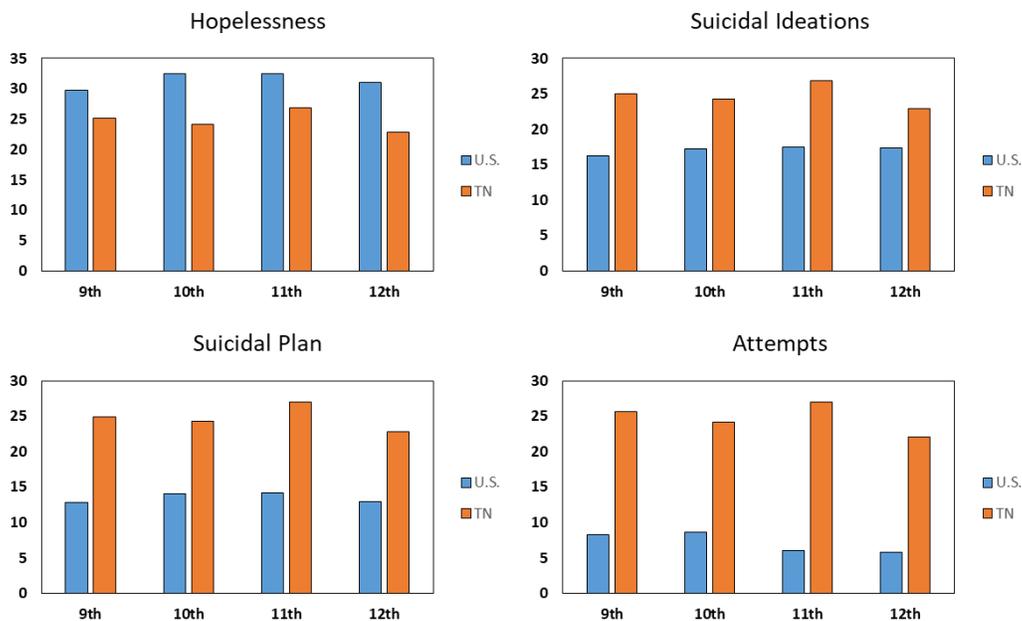


Figure 1. Graphical representation comparing national and the state of Tennessee percentage of students from 9th-12th grade reporting experiencing hopelessness, suicidal ideations, suicidal planning, and a suicide attempt acquired by YRBSS



Veteran suicide remains to be a crisis and has been recognized as one for years now with greater than 6,000 Veteran suicides each year from 2008 - 2017.² One of the greatest barriers to helping Veterans is identifying Veteran status and reaching Veterans in their daily lives.² Veterans age 18-34 suicide rate was the highest in 2017, however the highest Veteran Suicide Counts were Veterans ages 55-74 (**Fig. 2**).² Sixty-two percent of Veterans who died by suicide in 2017 were seeking care outside of the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) indicating the VA does not have a connection with the majority of suicidal Veterans.² Therefore, one great barrier facing the VA is connecting with the suicidal Veteran if they do not initiate care.² Veterans are dispersed throughout the community with different occupations making suicide prevention a COMMUNITY effort.

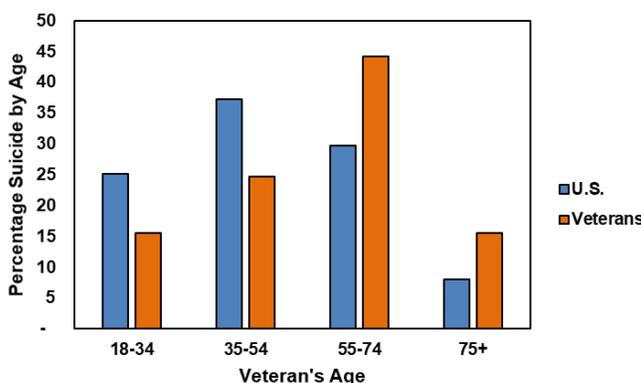


Figure 2. The percentage of Veteran suicides in the state of Tennessee compared to the national averages in 2017 broken down by age.

Program Summary:

VTVT has developed an **Action Plan** to reach not only our youth but our Veterans. Many different programs and laws have been established in attempts to rectify this suicide epidemic; however, these trainings only educate the providers/teachers, not the victims themselves. Most youth do not disclose to their issues with teachers out of fear of repercussions. *They do communicate with their peers.* We have developed a program that empowers the students to help their friends that is cost effective and can be quickly implemented. In our plan, the guidance counselors are first trained as QPR instructors giving them the freedom to schedule QPR Gatekeeper classes whenever and where ever they see fit. Next, the guidance counselors teach the QPR Gatekeeper Training in two 45-minute classes with each grade (6th-12th) certifying every student as a Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper. Then, these students are sent home with a QPR booklet and a magnet with the Crisis Line and Jason Foundation App. QPR Institute reports that once their book is released into a social network, e.g., family and friends, an average of five additional people benefit from reading and/or discussing the subject of suicide and how to respond in a helpful fashion. Therefore, in utilizing these booklets, QPR can reach the homes of suffering, isolated Veterans through the backpacks of children. The children become the resource bringing QPR into the home. In addition to the training,



data is also being collected from the children and the guidance counselors over time as the students matriculate as the training will occur every year.

State of Tennessee Goals:

1. In one year, we can have approximately 1,000 school guidance counselors trained as QPR Instructors.
2. In one year, we can have every middle/high school student in the state of Tennessee training as QPR Gatekeepers.
3. In one year, we can have every student sent home with a QPR booklet and a magnet with the Crisis line for family members that may need help.
4. In one year, schools can have the opportunity to address their action plan if a child is suicidal.

We also strongly encourage communities to host the “Worth It” suicide prevention comedy, dramatic theater play at a Veteran Military Friendly Congregation. We have received great feedback about the play, and many have begun intervention/treatment after acting or experiencing the play. Additionally, and most importantly, the students will receive shirts that say, “You’re Worth It,” which is a statement that ALL people need to see and hear more frequently (**Appendix 2**).

FOR \$5.00 PER STUDENT by utilizing the established resources already available within the community (**Appendix 3**).

Save a Life at the Cost of a Coffee!

Conclusion:

In the East Tennessee region within the last three weeks, VTVT has had three rural counties seek out our program and assistance to help their students. One school panicked to the awareness of a suicidal student and had the student escorted to jail before intervention was administered. There must be a plan put into place to protect our children. We have begun our pilot program in Monroe County schools, where the guidance counselors recognized that they have never received a suicide prevention training of this depth before. Many of them were unaware of how to respond to a suicidal student, and they are addressing their protocols. These actions must be taken NOW! Too many children are dying for lack of adult action.



References:

1. National Institute of Mental Health. Statistics: Suicide. Site visited February 5, 2020. Last updated April 2019. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>
2. Department of Veteran Affairs: Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. January 2020.
3. US Department of Health and Human Services/Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report: Surveillance Summaries. 67 (8). June 15, 2018.
4. Tennessee Department of Health. 2018 Child Fatality Annual Report: Understanding and Preventing Child Deaths in Tennessee.
5. Tennessee General Assembly. HJR0001 actions. <http://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default.aspx?BillNumber=HJR0001>.
6. Jason Foundation. Jason Flatt Act. jasonfoundation.com/about-us/jason-flatt-act/



Appendix 1: Letter and Account from After-School Activities Instructor

I, an after-school activities instructor, record the statements below to the best of my memory and do not endorse prying into students' personal experiences with suicide. I do support opening the conversation about suicide in a mature, informational manner if one is a mandated reported school-worker.

In late January, one student (approximately 9 years old, female) made the statement "I'm gonna kill myself" during a large group (about 18 students total) activity. She included this statement as one of her "fun facts" about herself. Although she claims to have said it as a "joke," I and another instructor lightly told her individually that we had to report this to our boss, who then would call her family and go through the required procedures of reporting this intense statement. This student was escorted to the office with another instructor.

About 5-10 minutes after this statement was made by student A. Another student (9-10 years old, female) made a statement explicitly mentioning the word "suicide." Student B said 'something about how "stupid" the activity the class was doing that "I'm gonna commit suicide." Immediately, I quietly pulled her aside and told her, just as the last student, that I must report this to our supervisor and our supervisor will contact her family. She tried to retract the statement and claimed she was not serious. Nevertheless, me and my coworkers took this statement seriously. We got the student to walk to the office with the other instructor so as to not be left alone.

I remained in the class with the rest of the students, some who overheard the other students' statements about suicide. I did not draw attention to the students who had been escorted to the office, but I sat down with a small group of female students (4th graders) while I reflected on the situation, and thought about how to maturely and supportively bring up the fact that I am a mandated reporter for these types of situations. As I sat there, some of the students, who had overheard the previous statements about suicide, complained to me that they were unaware that statements implying suicide would "get them in trouble." I calmly told the group sitting near me, "a student is not in trouble if they mention suicide or killing themselves; however, I as an adult who works with children am required by law to report about this situation whether or not you claim it is a joke. You are not in trouble if you tell me or another trusted adult about any feelings you have about hurting yourself. We get support for you and your family. We do not send you to the office for being 'bad' for talking about hurting yourself. We want to help you if you feel this way about yourself."

Then, another student (9-10 years old, female), Student C mentioned how upset she was that an adult she knew (whom she referred to with a formal title such as 'Mrs.')

had told Student C that she would not tell anyone else about a previous quote made by Student C along the lines of 'killing myself.' Student C then recollected aloud about her experience and shock when a counselor and later Child Services started appearing (whether at school or at home she did not say). I thanked Student C for sharing her story, and told her "If any adult tells you they can keep a secret, go to another adult. Legally, anyone who works with children is never supposed to promise you something like that." I realized then, that I would maturely and succinctly tell the class about mandated reporting because they had overheard Student A mention suicide a few minutes ago.

I stood up from my chair to get the whole class's attention. Once they turned attention to me, I said, "Just to make this clear, you or any other child will not get in trouble if you tell me or any other adult you trust about suicide, or if you know someone who talks about it. If a teacher, counselor, or any other trusted adult



tells you that they will keep your secret, go to another adult. Adults should never keep secrets with a child. That is not appropriate. If you want to talk about this more you can ask me questions, but if you do not trust me, please tell another adult who you trust more so they can give you support, not punishment." As I was about to say more, another student(10-11 year old male), who had been sitting farther away from the immediate group I was with, stood up and walked over closer to me and announced in a very direct and not ashamed way: "There is a suicide hotline too! I have called it before, because I know I have thought about it." The students listened to him (Student D) and did not make any jokes about him and his experience in that moment. I was astonished. I was and am so proud of these kids handling a heavy topic so maturely. I thanked Student D for sharing, and applauded him for knowing his boundaries and reaching out.

The fourth and fifth graders I work with are not unaware of the words and phrases that imply, or explicitly state thoughts of and occurrences of suicide. I have only worked with this group of fourth and fifth graders for about two months, but there is no doubt in my mind they can handle a training in suicide prevention. Despite kids' high-energy and silly moments of distraction, adults must listen and respect this age group (9 years old and up) because they, developmentally, are so very in-tune with social dynamics, and in turn, their own self-esteem developing because of how people treat them, support them, or ignore them. I urge and beg you to consider my 9 to 11 year olds students experiences. They have seen and heard more than you know about suicide. Trust their stories. Teach them they are WORTH IT!

Thank you,

After-school Activities Instructor (22 years old, female)



Appendix 2: “Worth It” Play Testimonies

1. When I got the audition material for this play, I didn’t know Tonya or any of the cast members. I’m a member of a talent agency, and I get casting calls all the time. I treated it like any other audition—I wasn’t thinking about saving any lives...least of all, my own. At the time, I thought about death almost every day. Not necessarily killing myself, but just death. I would imagine how the people I left behind would feel. An idea began to form in my mind that, after the initial shock, other people wouldn’t care much. I didn’t think I was worth it. When I got my acceptance email and read the script, I remember thinking it was almost funny that the play was about suicide and being “Worth It” and how that was so unrelatable to me. When I went to the first rehearsal and read through the lines, I started to realize — this was powerful stuff. I thought it was entirely possible that this could save some people. Still, I never thought it could be me. As rehearsals passed, I was still having those thoughts of “nobody cares”. But then I realized, every time I thought that, my mind was directed back to the play. “No, someone needs me,” I would think. “The cast needs me, Ms. Tonya needs me, and someone needs me out there, someone whose life I’m going to save.” It wasn’t until one of the last rehearsals that I realized—the person who needs me most is myself. I didn’t know it, but each and every rehearsal brought me closer to realizing that I was WORTH IT!!!!
2. I spoke with a man whose father - a veteran - had committed suicide. He said he had felt exactly what Kylie said in her lines. I spoke with a Viet Nam veteran who said it was the most realistic portrayal he'd ever seen of what it's like to be a soldier coming home from war. I spoke to a man who said he'd seen a lot of church presentations, but he had never seen such a vivid and accurate picture of the spiritual warfare a believer goes through as he did in Creere'. I had several people share with me that they had loved ones who had committed suicide or had come close to it. They commented on how deeply the show impacted them. And then there were so, so many comments (I can't even count them all) about how talented you all are, and simply what a great show it was. But it's not limited to the audience. The process of putting this show together has deeply impacted me, and I hope it's meant something special to you, too.
3. I just wanted to add that through working at the VA, I knew many of the audience members last night. Not only the Veterans but also some VA mental health professionals and mental health leadership were present, and they were all deeply impacted by the show and filled with emotion. Everyone I spoke with felt it was incredibly well done as well as courageous and unique in its approach and message.

On a personal note, I just want to take the opportunity to say, as a non-theater person and as someone who has had more of an opportunity than many of you to be an observer during rehearsals, what an amazing and inspirational experience this has been for me, and what an honor it has been to be involved with this show and this group of people even in a small way. And how truly great and talented each of you are! When Ed approached me about participating, I asked for a non-speaking part, so that gives you an idea where I'm coming



from, in terms of my comfort zone. I also am going through a difficult family situation and wondered if it was a good time to do this. And then to see how much I came to look forward to rehearsals as a source of energy and regular boost of inspiration! It turned out to be exactly the perfect time to be involved in something larger than myself and something so beautiful and uplifting.

It has been such a privilege and inspiration to me to be able to witness so much talent and hard work come together to make this show happen. Seeing it go from that first raw script reading, through all of Tonya's brilliant direction and fine tuning during rehearsals, to the show presented last night is something that is familiar to most of you as the normal artistic process, but it absolutely blew me away! The energy and talent and commitment of the actors and performers, especially our many so gifted younger cast members, kept me in a perpetual state of awe. I would imagine each of you would say that you have been forever changed with each production you've ever done. Without knowing it, and more than you could possibly know, you have all been such an enormous blessing in my life and brought me closer to God at a time when I needed it.

I also want to wish each of you a blessed life. I know each of you will go on to do many more amazing things!

4. Yes, Amen, and Hallelujah! The closest word I can think of to describe this event is "WOW"! What an amazing experience for start to finish. There were many people that I spoke to last night that had awesome things to say. What a mighty GOD we serve! I am honored and blessed to have been chosen to be a part of something great. You all are gifted and you brought it last night. God has used this play to touch many lives. I love that we met and had this precious time carved out of our lives to connect. I also wanted to say on the heels of "you're worth it", whatever you are going through in your lives right now, "it is not over until you WIN"! I have been praying for each of you and will continue to pray that "He who began a good work in you is able to complete it".
5. I am truly blown away by the play and the whole experience. Everyone was exceptionally thoughtful and caring from the moment you walked in the door. I thought the shirts were a wonderful item for guests to take home. I had a great number of individuals stop by my table..mostly kids! They loved getting a bracelet. I think having those two tables front and center in the lobby was a wonderful idea..so with that, thank you so much for allowing TSPN and me to join in on this event!!! Our collective goal is to reduce the number of suicides, and I think by tabling we shared information that may or may not have been received elsewhere. Again, thank you!

I am beyond impressed with the talent the actors exhibited. Their dancing, singing, collaboration, humor, etc. all exceeded my expectations. I think the play shared key information for individuals that might have no knowledge of suicide prevention; but also shared secret items/warning signs that individuals in suicide prevention efforts could pick-up on throughout. I loved every second of it. I would and will attend future plays.



6. Hi. Two of "Eden's veterans" (men she met as a result of participating in the American Legion Oratorical last spring) came to the performance last night. One served in Vietnam (and was personal guard to Werner Von Braun, which I find really cool). The other served in various locations for 20 years from the mid-1980s till early 2000s. I asked them what their impressions were and whether there was anything they found inappropriate/offensive or especially powerful/meaningful. They both agreed that it is an incredibly meaningful/necessary/powerful portrayal. One thought the portrayal of internal struggles of veterans was so real. The other thought that the message of "don't stay quiet b/c you're afraid of offending" is so incredibly necessary to be heard. Both loved the visual drama of Creere, as it really encapsulates the entire message of Christ being with us no matter how dark, how dreadful, how hopeless a situation seems. They were both very grateful to you for the vast amount of passion and effort and creativity you poured into this production
7. I was very impressed with the play. The manner in which they brought Veteran and Teen Suicide to the same conversation was great. I thought the use of the talent show was both entertaining as well as a great context for the message of the play. The message of faith was evident, but not overpowering where folks that do not subscribe to faith would be offended. The message of worth it allowed for other ways of understanding how someone could help.
8. I wanted to let you know that we had another cast member who was evidently suicidal and we didn't even know it. The mother tells me the student's behavior had recently changed and after the parents took away some privileges, the student sunk into a very dark place. The student's phone was confiscated, and the parents found some things that were out of character - and then a couple of suicidal SnapChat posts.

The mother says "we didn't know!" The mother also says the process of this play has been so wonderful for their child, and they feel like they're on their way to getting their child back because of it.

9. We wanted to sincerely thank you for inviting our family to the Worth It performance. Natasha and I know that you pour your heart and soul into everything you do and absolutely wanted to support you. We were initially concerned about the subject matter of the performance given the ages of our children: eight, ten and eleven. We debated getting a babysitter for them but ultimately decided it was best we use this as an opportunity to have a conversation with them about one of the difficult realities of life. It's easier as a parent to assume your children are well and not exposed to topics like suicide. Unfortunately, recent events in our community involving child suicide at very young ages have demonstrated otherwise. The concern of introducing them to the idea of suicide, fearing they may then consider trying it themselves, is far outweighed by the reality that they have likely already been exposed to it either through social media or peers or both. We spent time with our children prior to the performance discussing what suicide is, how people may find themselves in a position to consider taking their life due to mental



illness, traumatic experiences, bullying, etc, and also talking about how devastating it is to the people left behind. We were amazed at how perceptive and engaged they were with what is obviously a difficult topic. When it came time for the performance I think we were all still a little nervous. However, you guys did such a great job crafting and executing the play. The context in which the play occurs and the characters were very easy to understand. The moments of humor were also well planned and provided opportunities for rest. Most importantly, the development of the individuals that were struggling emotionally was clear and realistic. It was so easy to see that they were hurting and at the same time so easy to see how we all tend to dismiss those signs in the people around us. Encouraging everyone to take notice and have the courage to ask the people around them if they are ok was a simple and profound takeaway from the performance. We definitely want to commend you for including faith in the performance. Society today puts so much pressure on people to leave faith out of challenging topics for fear someone might be offended. We believe that our faith is the key that turns the lock and opens the door from hopelessness into hope, something we all need. People have the choice to decide whether they agree or disagree without being offended. Our children's favorite part was the silent battle between the angels and demons followed by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. It was very powerful to say the least. We had some more great discussions on the way home from the performance, particularly about how to recognize signs that our friends or family might be struggling and how to talk to them about it. We also discussed how we can recognize those same signs in ourselves and be brave and talk to our loved ones if we find ourselves struggling. We know the performance had a very positive impact on our family. Your efforts will no doubt impact countless people, save lives and shine a light on a topic that affects so many.

10. Overall, I was quite impressed with the quality of the script and the show, it was moving and managed to convey the seriousness of the problem while still inspiring hope. The quality of the acting and singing was exceptional. I also appreciated the realistic portrayal of stigma about suicide and treatment, and the message about getting professional help, an important part of healing and prevention. One of the central concerns of the show, faith, grace, and our relationships with God do seem like essential parts of healing that professionals can miss, especially in a formal setting like the VA. Thanks for all of your hard work on reaching out and spreading the word, this was a great example of your admirable skill in raising awareness and fighting stigma. Wishing you lots of luck as the show grows and reaches out to even more families and communities.



Appendix 3: Cost Analysis of Program

Phase	Expense	Per unit	#units	Total
Phase I				
Counselors	QPR Gatekeeper Instructor Kits	\$395.00	10	\$3,950.00
	Business meals for training	\$15.00	14	\$210.00
	Misc office expense	\$250.00	1	\$250.00
	Classroom	\$0.00	1	\$0.00
	Total cost for Phase I			\$4,410.00
Phase II				
Students	QPR for School Health Professionals	\$79.00	10	\$790.00
	QPR Advance Training	\$149.00	4	\$596.00
	QPR Gatekeeper booklets	\$2.50	3,000	\$7,500.00
	Business meals for training	\$15.00	20	\$300.00
	Misc office expense	\$250.00	1	\$250.00
	Classroom	\$0.00	2	\$0.00
	Total cost for Phase II			\$9,436.00
	Total cost for Phase I & II			\$13,846.00
	Total cost Phase I & II per student			\$4.62
Phase III				
Worth It				
Play	Script	\$1.00	40	\$40.00
	Playbills	\$1.00	1,000	\$1,000.00
	Props/misc	\$160.00	1	\$160.00
	Outreach material	\$300.00	1	\$300.00
	Worth It tee shirts	\$10.00	100	\$1,000.00
	Rehersal rooms	\$0.00	10	\$0.00
	Total cost for Phase III			\$2,500.00
	Total cost for Phase I, II and III			\$16,346.00
	Total cost Phase I, II & III per student			\$5.45