

FINAL REPORT - Executive Summary

CalMHSAs Directing Change Film Contest and Program Evaluation

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Executive Summary

The California Mental Health Services Authority (CalMHSA) is a joint powers authority representing California counties to provide an administrative and fiscal structure to support collaborative relationships and combined efforts. On behalf of the participating counties, CalMHSA implements the Statewide Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) Project, which aims to prevent mental illnesses from becoming severe and disabling. Through the PEI Project, CalMHSA provides outreach to recognize the early signs of mental illness, reduce stigma associated with mental illness and service seeking, and reduce discrimination against people with mental health challenges.

One component of the Statewide PEI Project is the *Directing Change Program and Student Film Contest (Directing Change)*, a program designed to promote mental health and prevent suicide by educating young people about mental health and the warning signs for suicide. *Directing Change* is implemented through a film contest designed to change conversations about mental illness and suicide in schools and communities through education, trainings and film viewings. As of 2017, *Directing Change* is entering its 5th consecutive year in California. Your Social Marketer and the Dallas Pugh Foundation implement *Directing Change* on behalf of CalMHSA.

NORC at the University of Chicago, in partnership with Runyon Saltzman, Inc. (RSE), conducted two studies to evaluate the *Directing Change Program and Student Film Contest (Directing Change)* from June through September, 2016. The purpose of the two studies was to evaluate the effectiveness of *Directing Change*, to learn about the strengths of the program, and to identify areas for improvement. The information gathered from respondents in the two studies will assist in future efforts related to implementation of *Directing Change*.

The first study was a cross-sectional case-control survey using an online survey instrument. The instrument was designed to compare differences between youth and young adults age 14 to 25 who participated in the *Directing Change Film Contest* submission system (cases) and other youth and young adults from California (controls) who were not exposed to the program. The second study was a series of group session interviews with the advisors of the youth who participated in *Directing Change*. The interviews were designed to capture more in-depth qualitative aspects of the program.

Key findings from the research are summarized below:

- Overall, the two studies demonstrated that *Directing Change* is effective at increasing knowledge and skills, as well as changing attitudes and behaviors related to mental illness and suicide prevention among youth and young adults who participate in the program.
- Significant differences between cases and controls indicate the effectiveness of *Directing Change*. The study shows evidence of knowledge, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes present among youth and young adults who participated in the program. It is remarkable that significant findings persisted even months after the program had ended—with fielding of the survey among participants in the program occurring three to six months after completing their film submissions.

- Cases and controls significantly differed in their understanding of mental illness and suicide. Cases disagreed more frequently with incorrect statements about mental illness and more frequently reported knowing the signs of suicide and where to seek assistance for themselves and others. They were also more willing to engage in conversation aimed at suicide prevention.
- Compared to controls, cases more frequently agreed that suicide is preventable and reported fewer attitudes that contribute to stigma and discrimination towards mental illness.
- Cases self-reported personal behavior change, such as learning how to support a friend experiencing a mental health challenge and what to do if a friend shows the warning signs of suicide.
- Advisor interviews provided in-depth qualitative data with rich insights regarding lessons learned, skill acquisitions, and actual behavior change among youth and young adults exposed to *Directing Change*.
- Advisors reported enhanced interpersonal communication, and acquisition of skills to begin conversations on the difficult issues of mental illness and suicide among participants in *Directing Change*. Actual changes in conversations were also mentioned as an important outcome of the program.
- Production of public service announcements (PSAs) was found by advisors to be an effective, tangible, and supportive way to generate open discussion about mental illness and suicide and to reduce stigma and discrimination.
- Advisors were highly supportive of continuation of the program and provided helpful feedback to improve program implementation.

Findings from the two studies demonstrate that *Directing Change* is effective at increasing knowledge and skills, as well as changing attitudes and behaviors related to mental illness and suicide prevention among youth and young adults who participate in the program. On a variety of mental illness stigma and discrimination reduction outcomes, as well as on suicide prevention measures, those who were exposed to *Directing Change* reported significantly different responses compared to a sample that were not exposed to the program. Findings from the advisor interviews underscored the effective elements of the *Directing Change* program also identified in the youth survey; specifically, they noted the effects of increasing interpersonal communication and engagement around the issue of mental illness and suicide. Advisors recognized the ability of the PSAs to reduce stigma and to support skill development in starting conversations about difficult subjects among youth participating in the program.

Statistically significant findings from the youth survey and the reported strengths of the program by advisors support continuation of *Directing Change*. The results from each of the studies are highly compelling and demonstrate how programs such as *Directing Change* can influence the attitudes and behaviors related to mental illness and suicide among youth and young adults. Advisors even suggested expanding the program and offered ideas for other subject areas that also cover challenging social issues.