

# PROVIDING SUICIDE PREVENTION TRAININGS IN AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION: A POLICY BRIEF PROPOSAL

Amador Gonzales  
Dr. Thomas Dormody

New Mexico State University  
Domenici Scholar Program-2018

## **Executive Summary:**

It was reported by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that suicide is the second highest cause of death in individuals aged between 10 and 34, behind unintentional injury (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Furthermore, the CDC reported that individuals working in the farming, fishing, and forestry sector had the highest rate of suicide of any occupation, with 84.5 deaths out of 10,000, as compared to the average of 20.3 for other occupations (McIntosh, et al., 2012). In 2018, the current Farm Bill passed the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) to provide mental health services through the Cooperative Extension Service programs. These programs will be only offered to individuals currently working in the agriculture industry, not students with aspirations for agricultural careers. Therefore, through research and review of written material on mental health programs, youth agricultural organizations, interviews with stakeholders, and current written policy, various issues and solutions have developed. This policy brief proposal (a) reviews suicide rates and historical context of youth organizations and current policy practices, (b) reviews findings of challenges regarding these issues surrounding the need to reduce the overall rates of suicide in the agricultural industry, and the lack of current reports and statistics, (c) and recommends the inclusion of suicide prevention programs within youth agricultural education programs as a benefit to the stakeholders of these programs and the agriculture industry in general.

## **Historical Background and Overview:**

In 2008, 7 USC § 5936 was adopted as part of the Agriculture Improvement Act (Farm Bill), which stated that the, “Secretary (of Agriculture), in coordination with the Secretary of Health and Human Services, shall make competitive grants to support cooperative programs between State Cooperative Extension Services and nonprofit organizations to establish a Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network that provides stress assistance programs to individuals who are engaged in farming, ranching, and other agriculture-related occupations” (Cornell Law School, 2008).

In 2018, as part of the revised Farm Bill, an amendment to 7 USC § 5936 has been proposed, which would include, “training programs and workshops, for — (i) advocates for affected farmers and ranchers; and (ii) other individuals and entities that may assist affected farmers and ranchers in crises” (United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, 2018). As part of these trainings and services, the United States Secretary of Agriculture is authorized, “to carry out this section \$10,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2019 through 2023” (United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, 2018) should the amendment be passed.

According to a study published by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suicide is the second highest cause of death in individuals between the ages of 10 and 34 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). The CDC also reported in 2012 that individuals working in the farming, fishing, and forestry sector had the highest rate of suicide of any occupation. A total of 84.5 deaths out of 10,000 deaths were suicide related, as compared to the average of 20.3 out of 10,000 deaths for other occupations. (McIntosh, et al., 2012). This study was conducted to include a total of 17 states:

- Alaska
- Colorado
- Georgia
- Kentucky
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- New Jersey
- New Mexico
- North Carolina
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- Rhode Island
- South Carolina
- Utah
- Virginia
- Wisconsin

As of 2016, there are a total of 865,300 individuals working in the agricultural farming industry (US Department of Labor, 2018), and furthermore, there are many students who have connections to the agriculture industry through agricultural education programs. In fact, two of the largest student organizations related to agricultural education are the 4-H and the FFA. The National FFA Organization, formerly known as Future Farmers of America, has reported that, “there are 669,989 FFA members, aged 12-21, in 8,630 chapters in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (National FFA Organization, 2018).” 4-H is sponsored through the Cooperative Extension Service, and has a total of 6,000,000 students nationwide, and each student is challenged to, “complete hands-on projects in areas like health, science, agriculture, and citizenship, in a positive environment where they receive guidance from adult mentors and are encouraged to take on proactive leadership roles (4-H, 2018).”

The FFA is primarily sponsored through middle school and high school agricultural education courses. The FFA mission statement states that, “FFA makes a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education” (National FFA Organization, 2018). To help enforce the ideals of the mission, the FFA:

- Develops competent and assertive agricultural leadership.
- Increases awareness of the global and technological importance of agriculture and its contribution to our well-being.
- Strengthens the confidence of agriculture students in themselves and their work.
- Develops interpersonal skills in teamwork, communications, human relations and social interaction.
- Promotes cooperation and cooperative attitudes among all people.

These are just some of the many examples of how the FFA develops the overall personal growth of students to succeed within the agriculture industry (National FFA Organization, 2018). However, the FFA is just one part of agricultural education, as is 4-H. The primary focus of 4-H is that it, “empowers young people with the skills to lead for a lifetime. It’s a research-based experience that includes a mentor, a hands-on project, and a meaningful leadership opportunity (4-H, 2018).” As of 2017, the 6,000,000 members and 25,000,000 alumni have been impacted by the as part of the 4-H program. Today, these programs are facilitated by 500,000 adult and youth volunteer leaders (National 4-H Council, 2017). As a part of agricultural education, 4-H shares some similarities to the FFA. In fact, some of the benefits and principles of agricultural education include, but are not limited to:

- Career awareness and exploration in and about agriculture
- Leadership development and practice
- Professional development and growth
- Partnerships
- Interdisciplinary initiatives

When it comes to student education, these principles are, “effective in teaching and learning in agriculture, providing a foundation for practice, research, and new developments (Williams, 2002)”. Students in these organizations fall within the overall targeted ages of individuals with higher suicide rates. As such, these students are encouraged to pursue careers in the agriculture industry, but without proper mental health preparations.

When interviewing Jerrod Smith, Executive Secretary of the New Mexico FFA Association, and President of the National Association of State Supervisors in Agricultural Education (NASAE), he has stated that there have been instances where students in agricultural education statewide have contemplated suicide and have conveyed their thoughts to the student state officers. The proper interventions were enforced once higher officials were informed, however, there was a lack of preparation for both student officers and agricultural educators to deal with situations of this nature (Smith, 2018). The NASAE, “is a professional organization established to provide members with information essential for planning and conducting quality agricultural education programs. NASAE members are professionally engaged in the administration and/or supervision of career education in agriculture on the district, area, state and national level” (National Association of Supervisors of Agricultural Education, 2018).

Recently, there has been a partnership between the NASAE and a suicide prevention training program, *Question, Persuade, Refer*, otherwise known as *QPR*. The purpose of *QPR* is to, “To save lives and reduce suicidal behaviors by providing innovative, practical and proven suicide prevention training. We believe that quality education empowers all people, regardless of their background, to make a positive difference in the life of someone they know (QPR, 2018).” This program helps train individuals to recognize the warning signs in individuals with suicidal ideations and take the appropriate steps to intervene.

An additional program of note is *Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program*. The individuals in this program, “are members of communities across this country/world who are empowering people (of all ages) to raise awareness about and to prevent youth/teen suicide (Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program, 2018). As *Yellow Ribbon*’s primary focus is on youth/teen suicide, this program would be an excellent to collaborate with *QPR*, in which trainings to adults are provided. Both programs are dedicated to lowering the overall rates of suicide and providing resources to those in need.

### **Challenges & Recommendations:**

As part of 7 USC § 5936, services that are provided through the Cooperative Extension Service programs are designed for individuals who work in either mental health, or agriculturally-based fields. There is no inclusion of students in agricultural education within this policy, and as such, this portion of the general population is left out when it comes to potential suicide prevention trainings and services.

Lawmakers in New York and Virginia have passed legislation to create a requirement of mental health courses be taught in the classroom. New York has targeted the curriculum to students in middle school and high school, while Virginia is targeting 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students (Quinn, 2018). While this legislation is a big step for these states, there are still many states that do not provide this curriculum to their students. And unfortunately, students with interests in the agriculture industry are not being focused on as well.

Additionally, one of the biggest challenges with this issue is the overall lack of accurate information surrounding the topics. In June of 2018, the CDC retracted their original report regarding the rates of suicide in various occupations due to the overall confusion of classification of occupations and the extremely high rates being reported (Ivanova, 2018). Due to this

retraction, information is limited for this report. However, when the CDC releases new information and data, it will be incorporated into this paper to reflect recent changes in suicide rates within the agriculture industry.

With the information provided, the recommendations below are made to incorporate suicide prevention trainings into agricultural education.

**Recommendation 1:**

Funding- As a total of 10 million dollars are already being provided to the Cooperative Extension Service programs for suicide prevention trainings and resources for adults. In addition to these funds, additional funding is requested to provide a suicide prevention training program sponsored through 4-H Youth Development and state FFA programs. This funding would target students who are educated in traditional and non-traditional settings and have constant interactions with various individuals in the agriculture industry. This funding would be provided to create trainings for adult educators and student state leaders within these settings. To better determine funding for each state program, funding will be distributed proportionally based on the overall enrollment of students in agricultural education statewide for the creation and implementation of suicide prevention trainings annually between 2019 and 2023, the same timeline as listed in 7 USC § 5936.

**Recommendation 2:**

Partnerships- Organizations such as *QPR* and *Yellow Ribbon* provide suicide prevention trainings to various individuals. With *QPR*, their partnership with the NASAE has provided information and training to individuals who work within the organization. The overall goal of this partnership between the two organizations is to provide trainings to agriculture educators and 4-H leaders nationwide to offer them resources and the ability to take appropriate steps in working with



students with suicidal tendencies. As part of the proposed amendment to the Agricultural Improvement Act, this amendment would fund youth agricultural education suicide prevention programs and create partnerships/sponsorships with suicide prevention training organizations.

**Recommendation 3:**

Curriculum- Both *QPR* and *Yellow Ribbon* provide trainings to individuals of all ages that are interested in helping to prevent suicide. As these partnerships continue to grow, various forms of curriculum should be developed that encompasses lessons and topics surrounding the agriculture industry. The primary recipients of this curriculum will include high school agricultural education professionals and adult volunteers. As mental health is a controversial subject, it might be better for this information to be presented by an adult, rather than a student who may not fully comprehend the material to present it. However, with both the FFA and 4-H having student officers and adult leaders, training certifications should be developed, so that these individuals can have a better understanding of symptoms and issues. They will also be given the option of being provided the resources necessary to properly handle instances of students confiding to them their suicidal ideations. Additionally, it would be of great benefit to include a yearly training at higher educational institutions to provide information and resources to forthcoming agricultural educators.

**Recommendation 4:**

Evaluation- As part of these training programs, it would be beneficial to include an evaluation system to be utilized once trainings have been completed. The purpose of these evaluations is to determine presenter needs, improve program presentations and curriculum, as well as determine if students are retaining the information being taught. This evaluation system would allow for the

program to determine areas of improvement and continue to be relevant in the classroom as new material is being developed.

### **Conclusion:**

Suicide is one of the highest causes of death in the nation and is extremely damaging towards a conducive high school environment, and towards the agriculture industry. Students in agricultural education are essentially the primary leaders within their homes, schools, and communities. Providing these trainings to these students will give them the tools to continue to develop their leadership skills and to build sound and healthy relationships with others. Adults within agricultural education can benefit from these trainings as it will provide them resources and the ability to work with youth to practice safe mental health and avoid potentially negative situations. The funding of these programs would be used to help develop suicide prevention curriculum for various settings within agricultural education, implementation with educators and student/adult leaders for use in the classroom, and the creation of new partnerships with suicide prevention organizations, as well as an evaluation system for program growth and improvement that can benefit students pursuing a potential career in agriculture.

## References:

- 4-H. (2018). *What is 4-H?* Retrieved from 4-H | Positive Youth Development and Mentoring Organization: <https://4-h.org/about/what-is-4-h/>
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). *10 leading causes of death by age group, united states – 2016*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/pdf/leading\\_causes\\_of\\_death\\_by\\_age\\_group\\_2016-508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/pdf/leading_causes_of_death_by_age_group_2016-508.pdf)
- Cornell Law School. (2008). *7 U.S. Code § 5936 - Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network*. Retrieved from Legal Information Institute: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/7/5936>
- Ivanova, I. (2018, June 29). *CDC retracts widely cited study on farmer suicide rates*. Retrieved from CBS News: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cdc-retracts-study-that-found-farmers-had-highest-suicide-rates-of-any-occupation/>
- McIntosh, W., Spies, E., Stone, D., Lokey, C., Trudeau, A., & Bartholow, B. (2012). *Suicide rates by occupational group — 17 states, 2012*. Atlanta, GA: Center for Disease Control and prevention.
- National 4-H Council. (2017). *National 4-H Council 2017 Annual Report*. Retrieved from Annual Reports: <https://4-h.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/AnnualReport-2017.pdf>
- National Association of Supervisors of Agricultural Education. (2018). *Home*. Retrieved from NASAE: <https://nasae.ffa.org/>
- National FFA Organization. (2018). *FFA Mission and Motto*. Retrieved from National FFA Organization: <https://www.ffa.org/about/who-we-are/mission-motto/>
- National FFA Organization. (2018). *Our Membership*. Retrieved from National FFA Organization: <https://www.ffa.org/our-membership/>
- QPR. (2018). *About QPR*. Retrieved from QPR Institute: <https://qprinstitute.com/about-qpr>
- Quinn, M. (2018, September 6). *New School Year, New Mental Health Lessons: 2 States Now Require It*. Retrieved from Governing: The States and Localities: <http://www.governing.com/topics/education/gov-mental-health-education-new-york-virginia.html>
- Smith, J. (2018, October 12). Interview with Jerrod Smith. (A. Gonzales, Interviewer)
- United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. (2018). *2018 Farm Bill*. Retrieved from United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry: <https://www.agriculture.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Agriculture%20Improvement%20Act%20of%202018.pdf>

US Department of Labor. (2018, September 6). *Occupational Outlook Handbook- Agricultural Workers*. Retrieved from Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/farming-fishing-and-forestry/agricultural-workers.htm>

Williams, D. L. (2002). Footprints in the agricultural education profession: the application of principles. *The Journal of Agriculture Education*, 49(1), 1-9. doi:10.5032/jae.2003.01001

Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program. (2018). *Who We Are: Our Mission*. Retrieved from Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention Program: <https://yellowribbon.org/who-we-are/>