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U.S. Accelerates Suicide Prevention with National Action Alliance Leadership

Public-private collaboration forges next-generation partnerships to address major public-health threat in America

WASHINGTON, DC., September 10, 2010— Today, on World Suicide Prevention Day, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and Department of Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates announced acceleration of efforts to respond to what has become a foremost, preventable public-health tragedy in our nation: suicide. Together they announced the founding membership of the executive committee and public and private sector co-chairs of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention.

In the United States, suicide claims over 34,000 lives annually, the equivalent of 94 suicides per day; one suicide every 15 minutes. In the past year, 8.4 million adults aged 18 or older (3.7 percent of the adult population) had thought seriously about committing suicide, 2.3 million (1.0 percent) had made a suicide plan, and 1.1 million (0.5 percent) had attempted suicide.

Fortunately suicide has been declining in two of the groups that have been the focus of attention for the past decade: people in their early teens and older adult males. National concern continues to mount, though, as we witness rises in suicide among other groups, such as members of the military, working aged adults, and young American Indians and Alaska Natives. Working-aged Americans die by suicide in the highest numbers and at the highest rates, and we have high rates of non-fatal suicide attempts in other groups, especially young Latinas and Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual and Transgender (LGBT) youths.

"This alliance gives us an opportunity to engage every sector of society—public, private and philanthropic," said Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. "Now we will be able to work together more effectively than ever before to reach people at risk and help them stay safe."

Secretary Gates added, "As Secretary of Defense, my top institutional priority is taking care of those who have born the burden and paid the price for protecting our nation, including doing everything possible to prevent military suicides. It's always a horrible tragedy to see a servicemember safely off of the battlefield only to lose them to this scourge - we can, must, and will do better."

Leading the Action Alliance as private sector co-chair is former United States Senator Gordon H. Smith, currently President and CEO of the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington, DC. Representing the public sector as a co-chair is Secretary of the Army, John McHugh.

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“The time has come for our country and its leaders to take seriously the threat of suicide. We have lost too many to suicide – young, old, current and former service members, and many others. I am honored to be the private sector co-chair of the Action Alliance, which will create the nation’s roadmap to ending suicide. As a father who lost his son, I am committed to seeing the Alliance succeed,” noted Sen. Smith.

“The global problem of suicide deserves a unified approach to prevention,” said Secretary of the Army John McHugh. “We may never completely eradicate suicide, but we will not be deterred from focusing our best efforts each and every day on preventing this tragedy.”

The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention provides an operating structure to catalyze planning, implementation and accountability for updating and advancing the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention. Out of this alliance will grow advancements for practitioners, policymakers, service providers, communities, families, agencies and other partners that play a vital role in reducing the burden of suicide in America.

Creating the Action Alliance was a key recommendation of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (2001). The Action Alliance will build on noteworthy achievements reached thus far in national suicide prevention. These achievements include: Federal and state legislation that has advanced suicide prevention planning and programming; programs to improve detection of suicide risk and access to care; the establishment of the national Suicide Prevention Resource Center, a national Best Practices Registry for Suicide Prevention, the Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK); and development of the National Violent Death Reporting System.

As the Action Alliance moves forward its focus will include:

- Updating and advancing the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention
- Development of effective public awareness and social marketing campaigns, including targeted messages for specific segments of the population that can change attitudes and norms and reduce suicidal behaviors
- Advancing suicide prevention among high-risk groups.

In 2009, The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) with support from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the input of many public and private sector stakeholders took the final steps to plan for the creation of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. The work of the Action Alliance will be guided by an Executive Committee drawn from public and private sector leaders who can bring the needed experience, expertise and/or resources needed to advance the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention. Success of the Action Alliance will be measured in the near term by changes in policies and practices and in the longer-term by fewer attempted and completed suicides; the Action Alliance will suggest course corrections as necessary.

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