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Umatter Youth Suicide Prevention in Vermont

Everyone who knows her describes Alexandra as brilliant, beautiful, gifted and good-natured. And yet two years ago she plunged into a steep depression. At first a combination of therapy and medication appeared to help but lately she has been feeling pressured by bullying peers. She never liked the way the medication made her feel and recently stopped taking it. Her commitment to learning is slipping, as evidenced by her lack of motivation to do well, or follow through on homework and how much she seems to care about school. She fears she has become a burden to her family. Is she at risk for another depressive episode or even suicide?

Students like Alexandra may not be so rare. According to the Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 22% of youth between the ages of 11 and 23 report feeling depressed for two weeks or longer. Among the same group, suicide is the second leading cause of death. The *Umatter* Youth Suicide Prevention program addresses the needs of at-risk youth and provides school and community-based support for youth suicide prevention planning statewide.

Administered by the Center for Health and Learning (CHL) with grant funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the US Department of Health and Human Services, *Umatter* expects to train the administrators, faculty, staff and parents from at least 60 Vermont schools in recognizing the warning signs of suicide and helping suicidal or depressed youth find the support they need. CHL uses *Connect*, a research-based community development model, to provide training and technical assistance to schools while linking school counselors with other professional resources available in their community.

CHL also offers training in the use of *Lifelines*, a nationally accepted best practice curriculum that encourages students to understand the crucial role they play in identifying suicidal behavior in their friends (or themselves), giving an appropriate response and seeking help from trusted adults. It fulfills Vermont law H.630, which requires the inclusion of youth suicide prevention in the health education curriculum for middle and high school students.

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