

The Importance of Track Patrols in Palo Alto

Our community has been traumatized by the four deaths of teens in the last year, all of which happened at the rail tracks in the same general area. For our current high school students, especially those at Gunn, it has come to seem frighteningly routine that a young person might die at the train tracks.

We must do all we can, for as long as possible, to try to prevent such loss and trauma. The loss of a friend or class mate should not be our students' most vivid high school memory. We are working on many fronts to help support student mental health, but **a critical component of our collective efforts should be to make sure the train crossings are monitored.**

It has been established that there is an element of impulsivity in many suicides, particularly in young people who may not present warning signs. For such cases, cutting off or slowing down the means to act allows time for the impulse to pass, and in many cases even blocks it from being triggered. **Research shows that restricting the means to suicides can significantly reduce the incidence of suicides. (See some of the evidence below.)**

The City of Palo Alto will install new lighting at the Meadow crossing, and the Palo Alto Police have hired a private firm to monitor the crossing throughout the day for the next few months. Brave volunteers are taking shifts at the Charleston crossing. If possible, it would be good to monitor the Churchill crossing as well. The presence of patrols at the tracks has made a visible difference, and it is clear that the teens in particular are grateful for it. However, private patrols are very expensive, costing over \$3,000 a week.

By making a tax deductible contribution to help pay for the patrols, the community will send a clear message to the City that we support track monitoring and want it continued.

Monitoring the tracks can save lives and allow us to heal. Please make a donation or sign up to help today. Your support is critical.

To make your tax deductible contribution online, visit

http://www.cityofpaloalto.org/depts/csd/community_and_family_resources/safetynet/p4.asp

Checks, made out to the Palo Alto Police Department, Safety Net Fund, should be sent to Palo Alto Police Department c/o Barbara Teixeira, 275 Forest Ave, Palo Alto, CA 94301.

To help by becoming a volunteer Track Watch monitor, write to hopepaloalto@gmail.com. Come whenever you can, for as long as you can, or just bring warm drinks to other watchers. You will find the gratitude of the community rewarding.

PLEASE HELP SUPPORT THIS CRUCIAL EFFORT TO KEEP OUR KIDS SAFE.

Thank you!

-Terry Godfrey, President of the Council of Palo Alto PTAs

-Anat Admati and Kathy Schroeder, Gunn parents

Some evidence that restricting means to suicide can help in prevention¹

- When Britain changed from coal gas to natural gas heating in the 1970s, the national suicide rate dropped by nearly a third, and it has remained close to that lower level ever since.
- In the seven years before a suicide prevention barrier was built on the Duke Ellington Memorial Bridge in Washington, D.C., 24 people committed suicide at the site, whereas only one person died by suicide in the five years after. The nearby Taft Bridge is just a short walk away — but there was no increase in suicides from the Taft Bridge following the Ellington barrier.
- The 1983 installation of a barrier on the Augusta River Bridge, where 14 people had jumped to their deaths, eliminated suicides at the site. A study in the two decades since found no increase in jumps from other high structures. The city's overall suicide rate also declined.
- When Switzerland's Muenster Terrace installed netting, there was no increase in jumps from two other high bridges, only five minutes away.
- A barrier installed in 1998 on the Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol, England halved the number of suicides at that site, and no increase was seen in jumps from surrounding structures.
- More than 90% of those who were thwarted from leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge between 1937 and 1971 did *not* die of suicide subsequently. Kevin Hines, who is one of only 29 survivors of the fall said in an interview: "I can't get out of my head... my hands coming off that railing and thinking to myself" My God, what have I just done?... I know almost everyone else who's gone off that bridge... all of a sudden, they didn't want to die, but it was too late." This is consistent with interviews conducted with other survivors of suicide attempts at the bridge.
- Statistics collected by the Injury Control Research Center at Harvard School of Public Health on nearly 4,000 suicides across the United States shows that those who had killed themselves with firearms (the most lethal method) had a markedly lower history of depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, previous suicide attempts or drug or alcohol abuse than those who died by the least lethal methods. Those who ranked the highest for at-risk factors tended to choose methods with low "success" rates.
- The incidence of firearm suicide, as well as total suicides, runs in close parallel with the prevalence of firearms in a community. From the various studies the Injury Control Research Center at Harvard estimates that a 10% reduction in firearm ownership in the US would translate into a 2.5% reduction in the *overall* suicide rate, or about 800 fewer deaths a year.
- In a 1985 study of 30 people who had survived self-inflicted gunshot wounds, more than half reported having had suicidal thoughts for *less than 24 hours*, and none of the 30 had written suicide notes. In a 2001 University of Houston study of 153 survivors of nearly lethal attempts between the ages of 13 and 34, only 13 percent reported having contemplated their act for eight hours or longer. 70 percent set the interval between deciding to kill themselves and acting at less than an hour, including an astonishing 24 percent who pegged the interval at less than five minutes.

¹ Sources: Scott Anderson, "The Urge to End it All," *NY Times* magazine, July 6, 2008, Lisa Krieger, "Preventing Suicides at Palo Alto Train Crossings," *San Jose Mercury News*, October 25, 2009.