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Incorporating QPR Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Training Into the WSU 4-H Shooting Sports Volunteer Certification Process

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Incorporating QPR Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper Training into the WSU 4-H Shooting Sports Volunteer Certification Process

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Abstract. 4-H Shooting Sports certification for adult volunteers is a structured and systematic process that allows for the addition of suicide prevention gatekeeper training without added staff burden at the state level. This article outlines how one state incorporated a one-hour QPR suicide prevention gatekeeper training into the certification process for shooting sports volunteers. Preliminary findings indicate that training was well-received by volunteers and that there was an increase in knowledge of suicide prevention by learners at the time of the training. Further research will be needed to study long-term outcomes and applicability outside of shooting sports.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide among young people in the United States continues to be a serious public health emergency. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022), the annual rates at which young people aged 10–19 die by suicide has steadily increasing since 2007, with a slight decline from 2017–2019 for youth aged 15–19 and from 2018–2019 for youth aged 10–14. In 2019, suicide was the second leading cause of death for youth aged 10–24, and firearms continue to be the predominant method of suicide among all age groups (Curtain & Martinez, 2022). Household firearm ownership is shown to be positively associated with youth suicides (Knopov et al., 2019). In a recent publication, researchers found that suicide rates amongst young people were higher than expected during the COVID-19 pandemic, with observed suicides using firearms more often than expected in nearly every month of the study period (Bridge et al., 2023). Given this, I selected 4-H shooting sports volunteers who instruct and mentor youth engaged in recreational firearm use as a fitting pilot population with whom to implement mandatory suicide prevention training.

4-H SHOOTING SPORTS

The 4-H shooting sports program is a popular project throughout the United States for youth ranging in age from 8 to 19. The program encompasses a variety of shooting disciplines, including (but not limited to) archery, riflery, shotgun, pistol, and hunting skills. The National 4-H Shooting Sports Committee is made up of Extension professionals from around the United States (National 4-H Shooting Sports Committee, n.d.). They provide a comprehensive training structure for 4-H shooting sports programs nationwide. This structure includes minimum and recommended instruction times, range curriculum, and discipline-specific training for all adults seeking certification as 4-H shooting sports volunteers. The discipline-specific trainings cover topics such as firearm safety, risk management, range safety, youth development, equipment maintenance and handling, and other important topics. Because of the intentionally structured nature of the National 4-H Shooting Sports certification process, suicide prevention training can be incorporated into existing programs without difficulty and with minimal burden on staff. This article describes the process of incorporating Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR), a suicide prevention gatekeeper training developed by the QPR Institute, into an existing shooting sports certification process.

SUICIDE PREVENTION GATEKEEPER TRAINING

QPR is a suicide prevention gatekeeper program created in 1995 that trains participants to recognize signs of crisis and provides instruction on how to intervene and refer individuals to appropriate care (QPR Institute, 2022). Several studies show that QPR increases the knowledge gain of participants in key areas such as knowledge and facts about suicide and how to ask someone about suicide (Litteken, & Sale, 2018; Mitchel et al., 2013; Witry et al., 2020). These studies show that the program increases participants' "belief that they had the resources and ability necessary to intervene" and significantly increases "participants' intention to intervene" post training (Aldrich et al., 2018). Encouraging results from QPR evaluation studies, as well as compatibility of the training module (a 1-hour in-person workshop) with the existing 4-H shooting sports training, are promising indicators that the gatekeeper training is an appropriate selection for integration into state shooting sports programs. The addition of QPR into 4-H shooting sports certification also aligns with the National 4-H Shooting Sports Committee's current efforts to reduce the misuse of firearms in violence and suicide, as evidenced by the Guardians 4 Health pilot project currently underway for youth 12 and up (Kesner & Ranney, n.d.).

INCORPORATING QPR INTO SHOOTING SPORTS CERTIFICATION TRAINING

I implemented the QPR training during the classroom portion of the certification process for new 4-H volunteers seeking to become Level 1 Shooting Sports instructors in the WSU 4-H program starting January of 2021. Level 1 volunteers can directly instruct enrolled 4-H youth in the discipline for which they are certified. A QPR instructor delivered a 1-hour, in-person workshop using the national QPR curriculum and PowerPoint; the workshop included participant discussion and role-play (where time permitted). The only additions to the curriculum were relevant Washington state suicide statistics and a brief discussion of empathy during the portion of the training centered around interactions with someone showing signs of mental distress.

The QPR Institute provided pre- and post-workshop surveys that the researcher used to analyze the training. Pre-surveys provided at the start of the workshop collected demographic data including age, highest level of education completed, gender, and race and ethnicity. Both pre- and post-surveys asked a total of nine additional questions that focused on the learner's perceived knowledge of suicide in the following areas: facts concerning suicide, warning signs of suicide, how to ask someone about suicide, persuading someone to get help, how to get help for someone, information about local resources, learner feelings about asking someone about suicide, likelihood that the learner would ask someone about suicide, and general level of understanding about suicide and suicide prevention.

The post-survey included an additional two questions asking learners to rate the overall quality of the training and indicating whether they would recommend the training to others. One final section of the survey allowed learners to provide general comments about the training.

RESULTS

LEARNER DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 62 4-H volunteers received QPR training over the course of seven workshops from 2021–2022. The majority of learners identified as Caucasian, there were more men than women trained, and most (76%) had completed at least two years of college. Table 1 provides a complete breakdown of learner characteristics.

GENERAL LEARNER SATISFACTION

Most learners rated the training highly: 26 (41.9%) learners rated the overall quality of the training as "excellent" while 36 (58.1%) rated it as "very good or good." None of the learners rated the workshop as "fair" or "poor."

Similarly, most learners would recommend the workshop to others: 55 (88.7%) of learners said they would recommend the workshop to others, while four (6.5%) said they were undecided, and one (1.6%) said they would not. The remaining two learners did not respond to this question.

Learners provided some comments about the training, which the researcher analyzed for overall themes. Most of the comments (43.5%) were expressions of gratitude for the training, while some (26.1%) alluded to specific knowledge, information, or skills participants took away from the training. Table 2 lists the themes, the total number of comments in each category, and examples of the comments in each theme. Not all comment text was included in the table, as some comments were personal to the learner or sensitive in nature.

QPR Suicide Prevention

Table 1. QPR Learner Demographics

	%	N
<i>Gender Identity</i>		
Man	65.5%	40
Woman	32.3%	20
Declined to respond	3.2%	2
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
Caucasian/Not Hispanic/Latino	83.9%	52
Other/Hispanic/Latino	4.8%	3
Other Race or Ethnicity	6.5%	4
Declined to respond	4.8%	3
<i>Age</i>		
20–29	6.5%	4
30–39	11.3%	7
40–49	12.9%	8
50–59	11.3%	7
60+	9.7%	6
Declined to respond	48.4%	30
<i>Highest Grade Completed</i>		
High School Graduate	17.7%	11
Trade/Vocational School	4.8%	3
2 years of college	3.2%	2
4 years of college	30.6%	19
5 years of college	27.4%	17
Declined to respond	16.1%	10

Table 2. QPR Evaluation Comments

Theme	Comment Count	% Total	Comment Text
Thank you / appreciation	10	43.5%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glad we received this training! • I appreciate the 4-H training included mental health as a priority. This was an important training for me. Thank you.
Skills / knowledge gained	6	26.1%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • . . . It's one thing to talk to your child (because it's an established relationship) versus talking to a stranger when you don't know their background. • . . . I feel I am more capable at recognizing signs (indirect verbal cues and behavioral clues) and feel confident I can direct people to the resources they may need.
Suggested changes	3	13.0%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some of the screens would make great handouts. • Would be great to have #'s and contacts for local resources.
Needed for wider audience	2	8.7%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs to be 4-H volunteer training standard. • This was very good. This should be required training for anyone who works with youth.
Personal connection to topic	1	4.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several aspects of the course and discussion came home to me . . .
Presenter feedback	1	4.3%	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very thorough and knowledgeable speaker.

PERCEIVED KNOWLEDGE GAIN

Both the pre- and post-surveys prompted learners to rate their knowledge in nine areas related to suicide and suicide prevention. I used an exact sign test to compare the difference between learners' pre- and post-surveys for each of the nine questions. For all questions, there was a statistically significant median increase in learner rated knowledge ($p = .000$ for eight measures, $.001$ for one). Table 3 shows the sign test results for all nine knowledge areas. Table 4 shows the mean scores for all learners in the pre- and post-surveys.

I performed an additional frequency analysis on the question, "Do you feel likely to ask someone if they are thinking of suicide?" as this question related directly to a learner's willingness to act in situations where a youth might be in emotional distress. For the pre-survey, 29% of learners replied "always;" this number rose to 59.7% reported in the post-training survey.

Table 3. Sign Results for QPR Learning Areas

	Asymp. Sig (2-tailed)
How would you rate your knowledge of suicide in the following areas?	
Facts concerning suicide prevention	0.000
Warning signs of suicide	0.000
How to ask someone about suicide	0.000
Persuading someone to get help	0.000
How to get help for someone	0.000
Information about local resources for help with suicide	0.000
Do you feel that asking someone about suicide is appropriate?	
Do you feel likely to ask someone if they are thinking of suicide?	0.001
Please rate your level of understanding about suicide and suicide prevention.	
	0.000

Table 4. Mean Change in QPR Learning Areas

	Pre-Mean	Post-Mean
How would you rate your knowledge of suicide in the following areas?		
Facts concerning suicide prevention	1.83	2.56
Warning signs of suicide	1.99	2.68
How to ask someone about suicide	1.82	2.68
Persuading someone to get help	1.85	2.56
How to get help for someone	1.76	2.40
Information about local resources for help with suicide	1.63	2.32
Do you feel that asking someone about suicide is appropriate?		
Do you feel likely to ask someone if they are thinking of suicide?	2.21	2.58
Please rate your level of understanding about suicide and suicide prevention.		
	1.86	2.48

Note. Low level of agreement=1; medium level of agreement=2; high level of agreement=3

QPR Suicide Prevention

DISCUSSION

Providing suicide prevention training for 4-H shooting sports volunteers was useful in the WSU 4-H program in multiple ways. First, it is prudent to provide 4-H volunteers with training on how to approach a youth who is showing signs of mental or emotional crisis. Suicide rates have been steadily increasing since 2007 for youth aged 10–19, and suicide was the third leading cause of death for youth aged 5–14 and the second leading cause of death for youth aged 15–24 in 2019 (CDC, 2020). According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (CDC, 2020), 18.8% of youth respondents reported seriously considering attempting suicide in 2019. The 4-H program reaches a wide range of youth in all areas of the United States, and as a result, it is likely that 4-H volunteers will mentor youth who will experience a mental or emotional crisis at some point. Training volunteers to recognize the signs of these crises and to appropriately intervene and refer is essential and could prove to be an important preventive strategy against youth suicide.

Incorporating suicide prevention gatekeeper training into an existing 4-H volunteer shooting sports certification process was well-received, educationally successful, and not a significant burden on the state shooting sports coordinator. 4-H volunteers expressed satisfaction with the one-hour QPR training module, and two of the 62 volunteers suggested that it should be required for a wider audience. The program showed statistically significant median increases in participant learning in nine knowledge areas related to suicide and suicide prevention. Notably, there was a 105% increase in the number of learners who stated that they would “always” feel likely to ask someone whether they are thinking of suicide after attending the workshop.

NEXT STEPS

While the results from implementing QPR in the WSU 4-H shooting sports training program are encouraging, additional evaluation is necessary to assess the long-term benefits of QPR training for 4-H volunteers. The population trained in QPR in Washington from 2021–2022 was majority Caucasian, and most had spent at least two years in college. As such, this study is not representative of more diverse 4-H shooting or non-shooting sports programs nationwide. Researchers need to conduct additional studies with more diverse audiences to determine if QPR is an appropriate training to incorporate into shooting sports or other 4-H project areas around the nation.

CONCLUSIONS

QPR can be easily incorporated into existing 4-H shooting sports programs that follow the structure set forth by the National 4-H Shooting Sports Committee; in the WSU 4-H program, it is shown to be effective in increasing learner skills and knowledge in the area of suicide prevention. Researchers need to conduct additional studies to determine if 4-H volunteers retain their suicide prevention skills long-term and if QPR would be an appropriate training to include for non-shooting sports projects and with a more diverse 4-H audience. Organizers should also consider providing additional follow-up training for volunteers who are interested in learning more advanced suicide prevention skills.

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