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Preventing Rail Suicides: Communities and Transit Organizations Come Together

New study from MTI shows ways for transit authorities to help save those who might self-harm

San José, Calif. April 4, 2016 – Increasing attention to railway suicides has led to more aggressive efforts on the part of commuter railroads to understand and help prevent rail-related attempts to self-harm. Conventional preventative methods have included erecting physical barriers, posting warning signs with telephone numbers for hotline crisis counseling, using video surveillance on platforms, and training key personnel to identify and intervene with at-risk individuals. Little or no evidence, however, has been reported to demonstrate whether or not these existing methods are effective.

Research at the [Mineta Transportation Institute](#) surveyed personnel from a large commuter railroad both before and after participation in a workplace suicide prevention training program, to determine whether such training might improve an employee’s ability to identify and help prevent rail-related suicide. The peer-reviewed report, [Remedial Actions to Prevent Suicide on Commuter and Metro Rail Systems](#), has resulted in policy recommendation for transit authorities to pursue in reducing the number of individuals abusing rail lines in attempts to end their lives. The investigator on this report was Patrick Sherry, PhD.

Dr. Sherry suggests that “recommendations for prevention strategies include continued efforts to identify hotspots and to erect barriers to reduce access to the railroad right-of-way, and for installing signage with warnings and contact information for crisis services. The use of drones equipped with video monitoring systems working in tandem with trespasser intrusion alert technology could be one way of dealing with more remote locations. Training programs for railroad employees designed to increase their confidence and skill intervening with suicidal individuals is also needed.”

In addition to training of railroad employees, monitoring of tracks, and signage with crisis information, further recommendations included that:

- Training programs set clear boundaries and guidelines for employees regarding their responsibilities, and what is/is not expected;
- Transit authorities keep in mind that although physical barriers are needed, they are not always sufficient: some individuals who are intent on self-harm will circumvent these barriers;
- Community involvement is key, particularly in areas that house potentially high-risk individuals who may have alcohol or substance abuse problems, and/or those who may have been adversely affected by economic downturns and layoffs.

Remarks Dr. Sherry: “it was suggested that railroads focus their prevention efforts by partnering with other groups devoted to preventing suicide, as well as with government agencies. Suicide is a community-wide concern – community residents feel some responsibility for prevention, and railroads should not be expected to be the sole source of preventive activities for intentional fatalities by rail. It would also be beneficial to expand training to include merchants and other key people *in the community* who can also assist with suicide prevention activities and identify potential victims.”

For a free, no-registration download, go to <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1129.html>.

Tweet this: How can railroads help to avert suicide attempts? New MTI report provides recommendations. <http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1129.html>

ABOUT THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Patrick Sherry, PhD, ABPP, is a Research Professor and the Executive Director of the National Center for Intermodal Transportation at the University of Denver. Dr. Sherry specializes in transportation safety and critical incidents in the workplace. He has consulted extensively with Fortune 500 companies throughout the US and Canada with respect to safety, safety culture assessment, intermodal workforce development in transportation, and leadership training. Dr. Sherry is licensed as a psychologist in New York and Colorado, and a Fellow of the Academy of Counseling Psychology.

ABOUT THE MINETA TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

The Mineta Transportation Institute (MTI) conducts research, education, and information and technology transfer, focusing on multimodal surface transportation policy and management issues, especially as they relate to transit. The Institute has been funded by Congress through the US Department of Transportation’s (DOT) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology University Transportation Centers Program, the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and by other public and private grants and donations, including grants from the US Department of Homeland Security. The Institute operates from the College of Business at San José State University. Visit MTI at transweb.sjsu.edu.

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