

UPA – Sentinel Program



Farmers are subjected to many of the conditions that can lead to mental illness and suicide. Isolation, lack of control over things like the weather and trade agreements and financial stressors all work together to make farmers a vulnerable population that often does not have the same type of support structures available to people in urban areas.

In response to this, the Union des producteurs agricoles (UPA), in partnership with the Association québécoise de prévention du suicide (AQPS), made a plan to create a network of “Sentinels” across Quebec. These Sentinels are individuals that regularly interact with farmers who are trained to identify people at risk. They are trained to be able to recognize the early signs of distress or suicidal risk behaviors so that they can refer people to the appropriate support

resources, or at least ensure a link between those vulnerable people and the aid resources in their area.

The Sentinel program came into being after a survey on Quebec’s agricultural producers highlighted the high levels of distress felt by many of them. UPA decided they needed to take action to reduce psychological distress and the number of suicides in farming.

Working in partnership with the AQPS to develop the training, 57 trainers and 637 Sentinels have been trained since 2016. Approximately 255 of these Sentinels are farmers, with the remaining being professionals who regularly work with farmers, such as veterinarian and agronomists. These Sentinels cover every region of rural Quebec.

The Sentinel program has become an accredited training program by the Ordre des agronomes du Québec, making it available to every agronomist in Quebec.

The eventual goal of the Sentinel program is to have 800 Sentinels across Quebec, working in tandem with health and social service networks, allowing for a constant link to support services for farmers.

“Deploying the sentinel network, with the assistance of producers in all Quebec regions, has made mental health much less taboo,” said Charles-Félix Ross, Director General of the UPA.

By inviting agri-food partners to participate in their program, UPA has effectively multiplied the amount of stakeholders involved. Two provincial forums on Quebec brought together more than 600 people on the topic of mental health. UPA’s next goal for the program is the promote work/life balance for the betterment of farmers’ physical and mental health.

“The UPA has taken a special interest in issues that are still considered taboo and are stigmatized, namely mental health and suicide prevention. It embraced the cause with the deep conviction that it is possible to prevent loss of life by suicide, a spirit of solidarity that drives its organization and the strong desire to value the fundamental place that farmers hold in Quebec society.” said Jerome Gaudreault, General Manager of the Association québécoise de prévention du suicide.

