

L'UPA de l'île d'Orléans and the Île d'Orléans Agricultural Awareness Committee



Following the suicide of a farmer, Île d'Orléans farmers decided to create a committee called the *Île d'Orléans Agricultural Wellness Committee* to prevent further tragedies in the agricultural community.

The committee held a meeting after the farmer's death, which was attended by nearly 50 farmers to discuss the issue of suicide with qualified care providers. During the meeting, farmers were encouraged to talk openly to each other about mental health issues. They made suggestions for reflection and proposals for action that would help the

farming community deal with mental health issues together. The committee then went over the proposed actions and implemented the best options. This approach made it possible to respond to the needs of farmers which included getting together, working together and taking time for themselves. These actions focus on strengthening community bonds and reducing psychological distress.

Some of the actions that sprung from this meeting included:

- A postcard which was sent out to all 175 farms in the area to remind everyone of the available aid services.
- A training program was provided to interested farmers called "Be a Sentinel for Suicide Prevention" which taught them to recognize the signs of mental distress in others and to have them direct those they were concerned with to the proper resources and support programs.
- During the summer they organized a BBQ to encourage farming families to take a breather even during the summer season. Nearly 75 farmers and their families came to this event
- A fridge magnet was produced and sent out to the farms in the area to remind everyone of the importance of taking care of yourself.
- The committee is planning to give the Be a Sentinel training again and will be inviting farmers to a half-day conference covering topics such as stress management.

The committee worked closely with the local UPA of Île d'Orléans to prevent psychological distress among farmers. Together, the farmers mobilized around a common cause and implemented a series of actions in a very short period of time. It is not just the UPA that has mobilized, but the entire agricultural community in that region, including agricultural stakeholders which have become involved.

The impacts of the project are very high: all farmers and their families, agricultural stakeholders and all stakeholders in the Regional County Municipality (RCM) have benefited. The postvention meeting and the actions put in place by the committee helped them to better understand the mental health issues that affect farmers. This approach has created a forum for exchange and cooperation between farmers and stakeholders. The project helped to better equip farmers and their families regarding the support resources available. Be a Sentinel training has made it possible to train farmers and responders on how to respond in specific situations. The social activity helped break down some of the isolation and gave farmers the opportunity to spend some quality time with their fellow farmers. In short, the actions taken cover several levels of prevention that are essential in preventing psychological distress.

The implementation of the various measures had the effect of destigmatizing mental health issues because farmers decided to act collectively on prevention. Also, the committee's actions have attracted the attention of the program *La semaine verte*, an agricultural program broadcast on Radio-Canada's national television network. The team followed the committee through the various steps leading up to the actions that sprang from the meeting. This program will highlight the committee's achievements and raise the public's awareness of the psychological distress experienced by farmers.

Solidarity among the farmers of Île d'Orléans has been a source of motivation for making a difference in addressing psychological distress. All the farmers came together to find solutions to prevent psychological distress among their peers. In addition to the farmers, their families and stakeholders have also come together to make a difference. The community has shown a strong desire to get involved to help farmers. In addition, many contacts were made with trained suicide prevention responders and health professionals. These contacts allow them to be better equipped in specific situations. This program could easily be expanded to other communities that would be open to participate.

In the future, the committee would like to organize a day of training on stress management and work/family balance in agriculture. Also, a second Be a Sentinel training session is expected in the coming months to train other sentinels. Farmers and agricultural stakeholders will be invited to participate in this event. Finally, the committee wants to continue to provide information through the mail to various farms in order to inform families about the services available in case of need.

This program is an excellent example of how a community can come together to protect itself from mental health issues. By fighting isolation and creating strong bonds within the community, this program creates a strong support network while also encouraging farmers to seek help whenever they feel overwhelmed.