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NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ANNOUNCES “STEPS” FOR TEENS

State Grant from Senator Thomas P. Morahan Launches Innovative Early Identification and Intervention Program for High School Teens In Rockland and Orange County

NEW YORK, May 2, 2007 – The New York University Child Study Center announced today the launch of “STEPS” (Screening, Treatment, and Education to Prevent Suicide) with a \$500,000 grant from Senator Thomas P. Morahan. This initiative identifies and provides access to treatment for teens with mental health problems to reduce risk for suicide and school violence and will be piloted in high schools in Rockland and Orange Counties.

Senator Thomas P. Morahan, who has been representing the 38th District since 1999 and serves as Chairman of the New York State Senate Committee on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities, stated, “If ever we needed a wake-up call, the tragic events at Virginia Tech gave us one. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in adolescents ages fifteen to nineteen. Over 90 percent of youth suicide victims have had at least one major psychiatric disorder, with depressive disorders being the most prevalent. About 80 percent of youth who are depressed are not diagnosed. We firmly believe that this program will begin to provide a local solution to a national problem.”

“Once again we are confronted with headlines telling us that violence has erupted in one of our schools,” said Harold S. Koplewicz, M.D., Founder and Director of NYU Child Study Center and Director of Nathan S. Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research in Orangeburg, New York. “In light of the Virginia Tech massacre and the anniversary of Columbine, it is even more apparent that the mental health of our teenagers needs to be a priority. I applaud Senator Morahan for his prescience in the field of mental health. Just as we traditionally evaluate hearing and vision in our children, this unique pilot program finally gives us the opportunity to identify and intervene to improve the outcomes for our depressed, anxious, and suicidal teens. The time is right for child and adolescent mental health problems to be given expert consideration. We can’t afford to wait.”

"STEPS" will work in collaboration with Health and Human Services Policy in Rockland County under the direction of Mary Ann Walsh-Tozer. "Suicide prevention efforts are a critical aspect of our work with young adults. In Rockland County, we have the opportunity to draw upon the expertise of researchers and clinicians from the Nathan Kline Institute and the Rockland Children's Psychiatric Center," said Ms. Walsh-Tozer. "I am looking forward to our collaboration on this project to help us enhance our screening for mental health issues including suicide among teens. Adolescents face many challenges, and I think that this effort is an important one."

"STEPS" will integrate with and supplement existing state and county mental health programs, providing a direct link between high school students and the services available to help those students with depression and other psychiatric disorders. In addition, the resources of the NYU Child Study Center will be involved with the program (www.aboutourkids.org). Treatments offered to the families of identified teens will include evidence-based therapies and medical interventions and will seek to improve the accessibility and acceptability of care for those with psychiatric disorders.

Christopher P. Lucas, M.D., M.P.H., Associate Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the NYU School of Medicine and attending physician at the NYU Child Study Center, developed the educational and screening tools used in "STEPS." According to Dr. Lucas, "STEPS' is more comprehensive and more efficient than other programs in the field. It is threefold, focusing equally on screening; education of teens, parents, and teachers; and facilitating treatment."

"Often those who are in a position to identify troubled teenagers lack the necessary tools and resources to connect students with appropriate treatment," continued Lucas. "This results in many teenagers slipping through the cracks and not receiving any treatment at all."

The three elements that differentiate "STEPS" from existing suicide prevention programs are:

- **Improving identification and help-seeking** – The educational components of "STEPS" will raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of teens at risk. This will include reducing the stigma associated with screening, help-seeking, and treatment. The very real concerns of students and parents regarding confidentiality, labeling, and individual choice will be thoughtfully addressed in an effort to increase the proportion of parents who agree to have their adolescents participate in screening and the numbers of teens who receive high quality treatments.
- **Making screening more efficient** - The use of computerized adaptive testing will radically improve the efficiency of screening and assessment procedures so that screening is both **brief** enough to be compatible with the demands for students' time within the high-school curriculum **and more accurate** so that the false positive rate is reduced. More specific screening procedures will make it easier to focus our efforts on students who are at greatest need of further assessment or intervention.

- **Facilitating access to services** - Finally, education and screening are not helpful unless one is able to connect teens with services that are likely to make a positive difference in their lives. The difficulty accessing high-quality and affordable treatment resources should not be underestimated. For this reason, a cornerstone of the “STEPS” program is the utilization of a variety of innovative treatment models including group and individual treatments offered at schools, as well as developing consultative and referral mechanisms to support and link with existing school-based and local specialist mental health providers.

“STEPS” is a continuing program with rolling admission beginning in the fall of 2007. Once a high school has agreed to participate, the NYU Child Study Center will implement the program, starting with teacher training, and then educational sessions for parents and students. Following this phase, a novel computer-based screening assessment will be offered to teens whose parents agree to participate. Rather than a “one-size fits all” approach, this pilot program includes a variety of prevention and screening models tailored to each individual high school’s circumstances and needs. It should be stressed that teens that choose to undergo screening do so only with full parental informed written consent and student assent. Finally, treatment of identified teens will be facilitated using the resources and experience of the NYU Child Study Center.

With “STEPS,” the NYU Child Study Center hopes to provide an innovative educational program to improve the identification of emotional problems in teenage youth, to make mental health screening more acceptable and efficient, and to reduce barriers so that teens can more readily access the most appropriate evidence-based treatments. The grant of \$500,000 from Senator Morahan allows the NYU Child Study Center to begin the program in Orange and Rockland County high schools. This pilot program has the potential to be expanded nationwide to provide much needed help for all of America’s youth living with depression and psychiatric disorders.

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NYU Child Study Center

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the understanding, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers expert psychiatric services for children, adolescents, young adults, and families with emphasis on early diagnosis and intervention. The Center’s mission is to bridge the gap between science and practice, integrating the finest research with patient care and state-of-the-art training utilizing the resources of the New York University School of Medicine. The goal of the Child Study Center is to bring together the most research-supported evaluations and treatments with an individualized and family centered approach. The Child Study Center was founded in 1997 and established as the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry within the NYU School of Medicine in 2006. For more information, please visit www.aboutourkids.org.