



Rosa M. Gil, DSW  
President/CEO

## **TESTIMONY**

**Dr. Rosa M. Gil, President and CEO**

**Senate Standing Committees on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities  
and Health**

**June 4, 2019**

Good Morning, my name is Dr. Rosa Gil, the founder, president and CEO of Comunilife. I would like to thank the Senate Standing Committee on Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities and Health for inviting me to speak this morning on suicide and suicide prevention. I would also like to thank the New York State Senate and in particular Senator Sepulveda for supporting Comunilife's suicide prevention activities for Latina teens.

Comunilife is a 30 year old nonprofit located in New York City whose mission is to provide vulnerable communities with housing and culturally sensitive supportive services. Today I am here to speak about Latina adolescent suicide and the services that Comunilife provides to end this epidemic. Before I begin, I would like to thank Governor Cuomo for his commitment to ending suicide among Latina adolescents and other high risk populations. As a member of the Governor's New York State Suicide Prevention Task Force, I was able to work with leading physicians, researchers and service providers to investigate why suicide is so prevalent in our State and our findings were published in "Communities United for a Suicide Free New York" in April 2019.

In New York State, suicide is the second leading cause of death for Latina teens. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost 21% of Latina high school students in New York City seriously considered suicide in 2017 and more than 13% attempted suicide. These statistics are almost identical to those seen throughout New York State.



We know that there are multiple contributing factors that result in young Latina teens attempting to kill themselves. Research findings show that family conflict, acculturation, stress, domestic/sexual abuse, academic failure, bullying and anti-immigrant sentiment; coupled with the stigma of mental illness and the lack of culturally competent mental health providers are the major contributing factors. All are exacerbated by the climate in which we live. At least 25% of the teens have stated that victims of or witnesses to social/domestic violence.

Since 2008, our Life is Precious™ program (LIP as it is known) has been providing suicide prevention activities for Latina teens in New York City. Today, with Centers in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan, LIP is open to girls ages 12 to through high school graduation, unfortunately was also have a few 11 year olds who have sought assistance. Since LIP opened 11 years ago, we have served more than 300 teens.

The activities we provide correspond directly to the risk factors the teens face. Since the very beginning, in fact even before the first Center opened in the Bronx, we asked Latina teens and their families, what services they needed. This community informed approach has a resulted in program activities and a mindset that appeal to Latina teens and their families. Currently the teens receive academic support – both remedial and college prep, creative arts therapies – poetry, dance, art and music, and health and wellness programming. Understanding that suicide is a family issue, LIP also provides family services which strengthen communication, improve family support and often break the cycle of abuse and depression.

A major obstable to Latina teens and their families asking for and receiving help is the stigma that remains in the Hispanic community toward mental illness. We are conditioned from early childhood that certain discussions do not leave the family. This



results in help only being sought when tragedy strikes. To combat the stigma that results in this situation Comunilife developed the “Ni Una Mas” (“Not One More”) Awareness Campaign. This social and print media campaign, which is now being conducted in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Manhattan, was designed to begin a conversation on Latina adolescent suicide. The accompanying social media campaign, which will use Facebook as its primary platform, will highlight statistics related to Latina adolescent suicide and the provide a list of ‘warning signs” which may be indicative of depression and suicide ideation. These include:

- Withdrawl from family and friends
- Drastic change in personality
- Noticeable changes in eating and sleeping habits

All of these activities are only as good as the results. Since 2013, Comunilife has been working with the New York State Psychiatric Institute/Columbia University - New York State Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence to evaluate LIP’s outcomes with the goal of having Life is Precious™ designated a “Community Informed, Evidenced Based” model of care by SAMHSA. We completed the first phase of the evaluation process which included the development of a manual of operations and fidelity testing. We are now in Phase Two which includes control groups. The suicide ideation and depression levels of new LIP participants and a similar population of Latina teens who are only receiving outpatient clinical services are being compared. We anticipate that the results will be available within the next 12 months.

The research has shown that for every month a Latina teen participates in Life is Precious™ her level of suicide ideation and depression decreases. For Latina teens with a history of sexual abuse and/or drug and alcohol use, the decrease in suicide ideation and depression were more profound. Most importantly, not one of the more than 300 at-risk teens, who have participated in LIP, has completed suicide.



We know that LIP is achieving these successful results for the following reasons:

- 1) LIP is a community informed program which directly addresses the risk factors associated with Latina adolescent suicide
- 2) LIP provides culturally competent services that integrate cultural norms into all program development
- 3) LIP incorporates the entire family to reduce the risk of suicide among Latina teens.

In addition to the positive outcomes that the teens achieved, LIP has also resulted in unanticipated but noteworthy outcomes for the parents – primarily the mothers. As previously mentioned, mental illness is not discussed outside of the walls of the family. But the mothers' whose daughters participate in LIP have found allies and peers among the other mothers. They are not alone and, often for the first time, have someone with whom they can speak freely and lean on when difficult situations occur.

In keeping with the vision of the New York State Suicide Prevention Taskforce, our goal is that with expanded education and early intervention suicide is a thing of the past. That the phrase “Ni Una Mas” – “Not One More” is a reminder of a time when suicide rates among Latina teens and the broader community continued to rise. Until that day arrives, Comunilife is committed to providing at-risk Latina teens, in New York City, with the services and activities they need to work through the issues that led to their suicide ideation and give them the foundation to to become happy, healthy and educated young women.

Thank you



**Comunilife, Inc.**  
**Life is Precious™ Program**

**Program Background:**

Comunilife's Life is Precious™ (LIP) program has provided suicide prevention activities to New York City Latina teens who have seriously considered or attempted suicide. The girls, who range in age from 12 to 18, are immigrants or first generation Americans and live in some of New York City's lowest-income neighborhoods and; all are living with depression or other diagnosed mental illness. Opened in 2008, LIP has four program locations - the Bronx (2008), Brooklyn (2009), Queens (2015) and Manhattan – Washington Heights (2019) In January 2018, Comunilife initiated Proyecto Vida which provides school based suicide prevention education and outreach in the upper Manhattan community of Washington Heights. In 2018, 115 Latina teens accessed services. To be eligible for Life is Precious™, the teens must be enrolled in and regularly attending school, under the care of a mental health clinician and have parents' permission.

Latina adolescent suicide has reached epidemic proportions in New York State with suicide the second leading cause of death for Latina teens. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, released in June 2018, stated that in New York City \*20.9% of Latina teens seriously considered and 13.1% attempted suicide in 2017.

We know that there are multiple contributing factors that result in young Latina teens attempting to kill themselves. Research findings show that family conflict, acculturation, stress, domestic/sexual abuse, academic failure, bullying and anti-immigrant sentiment; coupled with the stigma of mental illness and the lack of culturally competent mental health providers are the major contributing factors.

**Program Activities**

LIP operates after school and Saturdays. Each program activity (academic support, wellness activities, and creative arts therapy) is integral to achieving LIP's program philosophy of "Survive, Strive and Thrive". This means that LIP must be a safe place in which to receive support (survive), offer activities that allow the teens to develop their unique voice (strive), and provide tools that help the teens envision and achieve goals (thrive).

In February 2019, Comunilife launched "Ni Una Más" a new public awareness campaign designed to reduce suicide among Latina adolescents. The campaign was launched in Washington Heights, Manhattan through print and social media and will be expanded to the boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens.

**Program Outcomes**

To date, more than 300 Latina teens have participated in LIP not one of whom has completed suicide. LIP's accomplishments are measured by the positive results achieved by the girls. This is validated by an evaluation which has been conducted, since 2013, by the New York State Psychiatric Institute/Columbia University - New York State Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence. The research has shown that for every month a Latina teen participates in Life is Precious™ her level of suicide ideation and depression decreases. For Latina teens with a history of sexual abuse and/or drug and alcohol use, the decrease in suicide ideation and depression were more profound. Comunilife's goal is to show that Life is Precious™ is a community informed, evidenced based model of care. Researchers from the New York State Psychiatric Institute/Columbia University have completed phase one of the evaluation where fidelity testing took place and a manual of operations was developed. Phase Two, which is working with control groups, is currently in process.

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**2018 Accomplishments**

- **115 Latina teens participated in Life is Precious™**
- **Case Management:** 225 case management sessions were provided to the teens and their families
- **Academics**
  - In June 2018, four Latina teens graduated from high school and started college in September 2018
  - 93.5% of the teens were promoted to the next grade.
  - 218 sessions of tutoring and homework assistance were provided
- **Creative Arts Therapy**
  - 398 individual and group music classes were held
- **Parental Engagements:** 302 sessions were held with parents
- **Outreach:** 181 Community outreach encounters and presentations were made

**Contact Information**

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Comunilife Website: [www.comunilife.org](http://www.comunilife.org)

LIP Website: [www.comunilifelip.org](http://www.comunilifelip.org)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/Comunilife/](https://www.facebook.com/Comunilife/)

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/comunilifeinc](https://www.twitter.com/comunilifeinc)

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**2017 CDC Youth High Risk Behavior Survey (Released June 2018)\*  
Latina Teens**

	NYS	NYC	Brooklyn	Bronx	Manhattan	Queens	Staten Island
Feeling Sad or Hopeless	43.2%	42.7%	44.5%	47.9%	40.0%	38.5%	48.2%
Seriously Considered Suicide	20.0%	20.9%	18.9%	22.1%	19.10%	22.6%	20.8%
Attempted Suicide	13.6%	13.1%	13.4%	13.0%	10.1%	16.4%	8.7%

\*CDC High School YRBS (2017)  
<https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/App/Default.aspx>



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<b>Feeling Sad or Hopeless</b>	43.2%	42.7%	44.5%	47.9%	40.0%	38.5%	48.2%
<b>Seriously Considered Suicide</b>	20.0%	20.9%	18.9%	22.1%	19.10%	22.6%	20.8%
<b>Attempted Suicide</b>	13.6%	13.1%	13.4%	13.0%	10.1%	16.4%	8.7%

\*CDC High School YRBS (2017)

<https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline/App/Default.aspx>