

Saving Lives

Suicide mitigation updates for parking garages.

By Larry J. Cohen, CAPP

MITIGATING SUICIDES IN PARKING FACILITIES is a continuing topic of interest. Recent media coverage of the suicides of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain revealed that people may be struggling and in pain with mental health issues to the point where they may consider suicide, but still exhibit few outward signs of their distress. Recent research released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that suicide rates rose by 25 percent across the country from 1999 to 2016, and 45,000 Americans age 10 or older died by suicide in 2016. In more than half of all deaths, the people had no known mental health conditions.

Experts say people are likely to scout convenient locations when they are considering suicide. That's when parking garages and facilities become part of the concern.

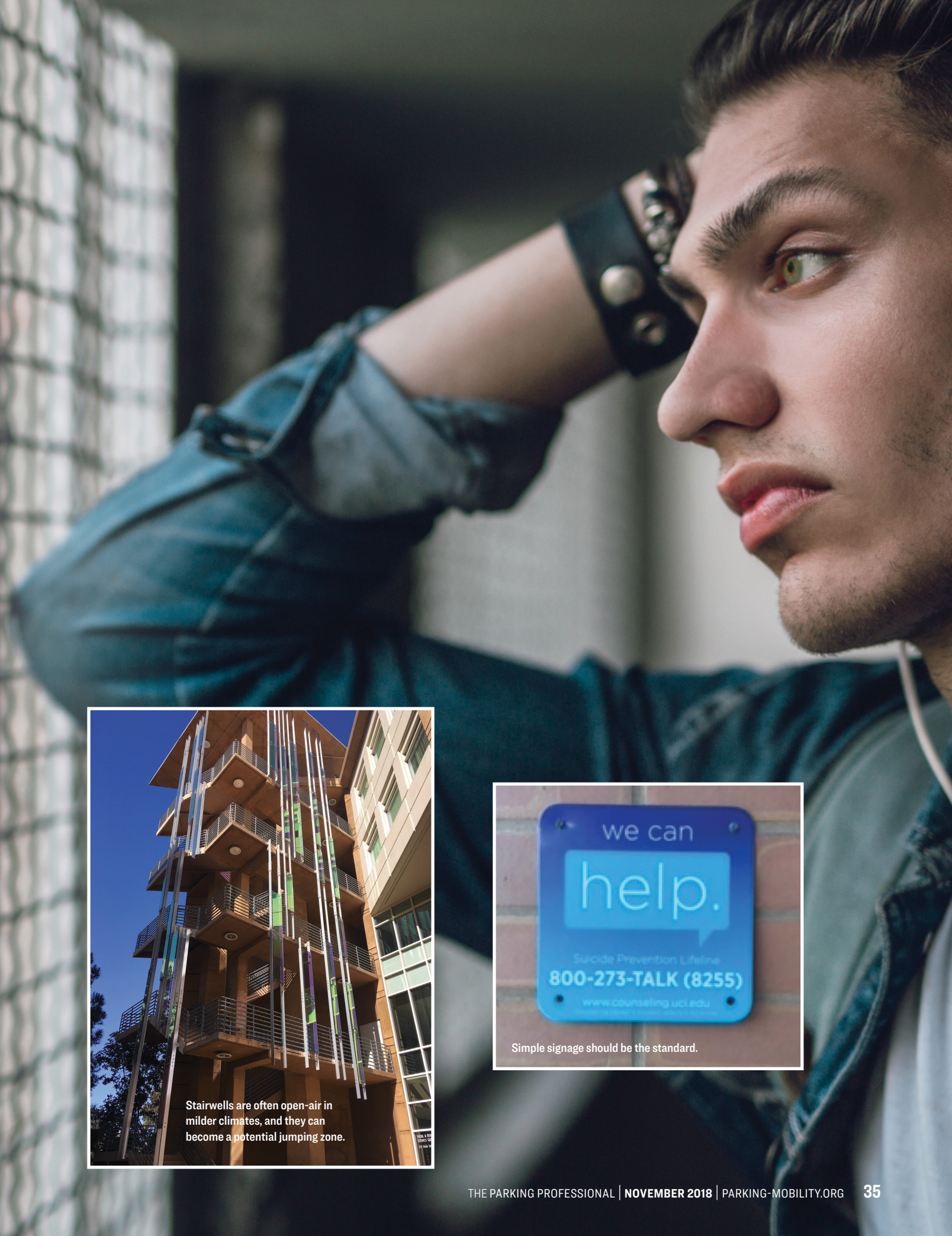
A large university in California asked for my assistance in a campus-wide assessment to help make parking locations safer or more unattractive for those who might be considering suicide attempts.

I've become a somewhat reluctant resource in an ongoing problem of parking garage suicide issues based on my experiences with the issue with a city parking authority. I expected the campus visit would enhance my knowledge of mitigation efforts, but I was surprised at the extent of the university's surveillance.

They asked me to look at more than 70 campus buildings. At first, it was overwhelming, but I went back to the same guiding principles I had previously used to review our own facilities.

For the past seven years, this university has been working on its suicide mitigation efforts while following best practices, which resulted in halting more than 20 suicide attempts. Even so, a small number of suicides had occurred, and the university administrators wanted to make sure they were staying ahead of the curve in their efforts.

I spent one and a half days onsite and was impressed by the investment level of the university's prevention efforts and creative and effective initiatives.



Stairwells are often open-air in milder climates, and they can become a potential jumping zone.



Simple signage should be the standard.



This trailer is a creative way to mitigate a landing location.




Creative use of cement-filled trash cans to eliminate potential landing area.



Greenery planted next to a garage offers a visual barrier for someone thinking of jumping.

We all learn from each other in this area. Here's a 10-step list to help your organization mitigate garage suicides and stay up-to-date with best practices:

- 1.** Bring together individuals from different departments to begin a strategic assessment that includes focused investments and agreement that suicide mitigation is a priority. This multidisciplinary team may include police, fire, facilities management, environmental health/safety/risk, student affairs, design and construction, and parking and transportation services.
- 2.** Recognize how geography can affect solutions. On the West Coast, many garage stair towers are open air because they do not have the winter weather conditions of the East Coast.
- 3.** Develop consistent suicide prevention messaging with a simple message and number of the local suicide prevention hotline. The message could be one listing the local help hotline, and it needs to be included in written publications and in all communication outlets.
- 4.** Place signs with your suicide prevention message strategically throughout garage roofs and building locations.
- 5.** In all trainings, try to include the importance of establishing a connection with individuals, which experts say could be the key to preventing suicide. Recognize that mental disorders are stigmatized by society, and it is difficult for people to admit that they have mental health issues.
- 6.** Focus on minimizing landing zones to act as a major deterrent. Look at options such as placing chairs and tables, umbrellas, trees (fake and real), awnings, landscaping, bike racks, trash cans (sometimes just filled with concrete), or anything that would make a potential landing area not so appealing to people who might be contemplating taking their own life at that location.
- 7.** Conduct evaluations every three to five years of all building and parking facilities greater than four stories in height.
- 8.** Offer ongoing training in CPR, first aid, first responder, assisting individuals in distress, customer service, and conflict resolution to all employees who may encounter someone in a distress situation.
- 9.** Use permanent and/or mobile CCTV units to target trouble areas.
- 10.** Don't wait to have a suicide to deal with it. Be proactive—and do it now—because losing one life is one life too many.

For more information, please refer to: "Savings Lives," *The Parking Professional*, August 2015; "Suicide in Parking Facilities: Prevention, Response, and Recovery," available at parking.org/sprp. 



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