

# VERMONT SUICIDE POSTVENTION PROTOCOLS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT PROFESSIONALS

- **CONTEXT**
- **RESPONDING TO A DEATH BY SUICIDE:**
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## **I. CONTEXT**

As with prevention and intervention, postvention for law enforcement can be very different from other professionals. Law enforcement professionals are trained in responding to untimely, unexpected and suspicious deaths. A death by suicide may be difficult to determine and may require investigation on scene and after the fact before it can be confirmed.

Law enforcement agencies all have existing protocols that dictate actions, specific steps, and the order of those steps. These are best practice suggestions to review along with existing policies.

Law Enforcement Professionals reviewing these protocols have suggested departments consider creating a specific checklist of steps to take at a death scene that is potentially a suicide.

**NOTE:** Law Enforcement Professionals suffer from a higher than average rate of suicide. It is highly recommended that law enforcement agencies consider specific education and prevention activities, and make note of staff needs following community suicide deaths.

## **II. RESPONDING TO A DEATH BY SUICIDE: On Scene**

A “death by suicide” occurs when death results from **actions of intentional self-harm**. If intentional self-harm was not immediately witnessed by you or another, it can be hard to tell if a person has died by suicide or not. This makes it very important to not say someone has died by suicide unless that has been CONFIRMED by a medical examiner.

1. Follow your agency’s dictated procedures on arriving at a death scene, regarding securing the scene, restricting access, collecting evidence, contacting medical services. Best practices when arriving at a possible suicide scene include:
  - a. Do not announce or “confirm” that it is a death by suicide to anyone, unless you are the approved person to make that assessment.
  - b. Refer all questions from press or anyone else to your agency’s approved spokesperson.
2. Support survivors on the scene. Law enforcement professionals express that responding to the family and loved ones on scene is often one of the hardest situations in which to “know what to do.” The following suggestions come directly from survivors, and other law enforcement/EMT professionals.
  - a. Express empathy. Suggestions from survivors and other law enforcement professionals include is a straightforward, simple: “I am so sorry for your loss.”
  - b. Follow up with a question that provides a **concrete role** you can take on to help in the moment. Ask directly – “Can I contact someone to come and be with you?”

- i. Make those calls yourself if you are able to do so.
  1. Survivors report that they are frequently in such a state of shock and grief, that it is immensely helpful to have a trusted figure such as a police officer do this.
  2. Law enforcement professionals report that this is a step that helps them to feel focused and helpful, as well.
    - a. Thinking about how this will help you is not being selfish – it is cultivating the best tools you can, just as you prepare and practice your responses for other types of emergency situations.
    - b. In thinking about what you need at times like this to help yourself feel more prepared is directly serving survivors.
    - c. Remember, YOU are experiencing trauma yourself in these circumstances, even if the deceased is not someone you know personally.
- ii. Sometimes survivors will need help focusing and gentle guidance in choosing a person.
  1. Making suggestions is appropriate to your role and can help.
  2. “How about a family member or a friend?” “Do you have a faith tradition?” [if yes] “Can I call your [*pastor/priest/rabbi*] or someone from your [*church/synagogue/mosque*]?”
- c. Allow survivors to express their thoughts and feelings, **but resist making any statements yourself related to deaths by suicide, especially anything that could be construed as judging the deceased.**
  - i. Your training in helping people in crisis gives you invaluable skills to be with survivors in the moment and listen to whatever they have to say, without expressing an opinion or judging their reaction. If they begin apologizing for what they are saying, it is **appropriate** to respond: “Say whatever you feel... whatever you need to say.”
  - ii. We all have strong opinions about suicide and in our innate need to offer comfort in the face of death, it can be easy to accidentally use language that may sound judgmental and insensitive. Examples:
    1. **NOT APPROPRIATE:** “I don’t understand how he could do this to you.”
    2. **NOT APPROPRIATE:** “I’m sure she didn’t mean to hurt you so deeply.”
  - iii. **APPROPRIATE:** “I am so sorry for your loss.” It is fine to stop there, to repeat that simply phrase if need be, and move on to “Can I call someone to be with you?”
- d. Help survivors identify people they can go to for immediate support.
  - i. Survivors and law enforcement professionals suggest carrying a short list of good immediate resources. A wallet card-sized list of three or four names and phone numbers:
    1. Your local designated mental health agency that can respond to emergency counseling needs.
    2. A local counselor who specializes in suicide bereavement, or grief/bereavement in general.
    3. A crisis line (national or local), or direct number for a survivor support group.
    4. If you would like to also carry and offer contacts for spiritual counsel, this may be of great comfort to some survivors. But it is recommended that you **not assume** survivors have or want contact with a community of faith, even if you know them and know they have a faith tradition.
      - a. Suicide can create complex feelings of anger, shame, and alienation, and even those deeply connected to their faith may not be in a place in this moment of intense shock and grief to want to speak to a faith leader.
      - b. Soliciting the family – as in step (b.) above – is the best way to determine if a spiritual counselor is a good choice. Directly asking in a clear, simple manner “Can I contact someone for you?” will help elicit

the people who are likely to be most helpful for that survivor in that moment.

- e. Give written resources.
  - i. Survivors are often overwhelmed in the moment, and having a hard copy of names and phone numbers for the next day can give them a place to start in reaching out for help.
  - ii. This can be a short list, to help them not feel overwhelmed in choosing someone to call.
  - iii. Excellent resources include: survivor support groups, mental health providers, and national support organizations that offer crisis response lines for survivors. You will know your community best for choosing local resources.

### III. RESPONDING TO A DEATH BY SUICIDE: Immediate Follow-up

#### MAKING A PUBLIC STATEMENT:

If you are responsible for communicating about the death to the public or the media, best practices have evolved over time. Review the following and compare it with your agency's regulations on public communication.

1. Give a short statement as soon as possible.
  - a. Only give information that has been confirmed.
  - b. Giving a response soon, even if it doesn't have all the information, can be more helpful than no statement.
  - c. Let people know that you WILL give more information when you have it.
  - d. Short statements of the facts will help stop rumors and guessing when no statement at all leaves people wondering and can lead to more rumors.
2. Have one person make all official statements. Only the Crisis Contact from your organization should make statements and answer questions.
3. **If you ARE the Crisis Contact**, go on to Step One.
4. **If you are not the Crisis Contact**, tell everyone who asks you questions to talk to that person.
  - a. Use a short simple statement over and over.
    - i. "You need to talk to our Crisis Contact about that."
    - ii. "I can't say anything about this situation. Please talk to our Crisis Contact."
  - b. Do not talk about the death publically.
  - c. Do not take part in rumor, guessing, speculation, or gossip.

#### STEP ONE: Confirm All Information

1. **CONFIRM** all information you plan to say before you make any public statement.
2. **Do not talk about unconfirmed information** with others, even if you know details about the death.
  - a. A serious and proven concern with suicide is **contagion**: when the suicide of one person influences others to also think about or attempt suicide.
  - b. Discussing unconfirmed cause of death is a very real danger.
3. **Use direct but nonspecific terms** concerning the death until cause is confirmed.
  - a. "A death has occurred."
  - b. "He/she has been pronounced dead."
  - c. "He/she has died."

4. Be prepared to be asked questions about cause of death, or about details you may know but can't share.
  - a. Clearly say you can't give a cause of death and that only the medical examiner can do that.
  - b. Stop there. Repeat the same sentence if asked again. Do not be drawn into speculation or feel you have to come up with an answer for every question.
  - c. People may ask surprising and inappropriate questions – have a short response ready and use it over and over.
    - i. "I don't have any more information at this time."
    - ii. "We need to wait until we have more confirmed information."
    - iii. "I strongly urge you for the safety of others to not speculate or repeat/print things that we do not know at this time."
    - iv. "I've already said that I can't say anything more about that at this time."
  
5. Tell people you will give more information as soon as you have it. Knowing that more confirmed information is coming helps control rumors and encourages people to wait until they hear facts.
  
6. Directly discourage rumors, gossip, and speculation. They can increase the **risk of contagion**.
  - a. **SOCIAL MEDIA** – online sites, Facebook, Twitter, texting, chat – **WILL be used** in times of crisis. You cannot prevent this from happening. It is difficult to control but YOU CAN HELP.
    - i. Ask others directly in your statement to be careful how they use social media.
    - ii. Say that it is **dangerous to spread uncertain information on social media**, and tell them why. Explain suicide contagion to them.
  - b. Ask others bluntly to not spread rumors or information that has not been confirmed. Tell them it is dangerous.
  - c. If you can help stop rumors with direct statements, do so.
    - i. "We don't have confirmed information so we need everyone to not spread rumors."
    - ii. "I am asking you to not print or spread information that hasn't been confirmed."
    - iii. "It can be very dangerous to other people to spread information that isn't confirmed."

## **STEP TWO: Prepare a Fully-Confirmed Written Statement**

1. Issue a written statement as soon as you can, even if you are also making a verbal statement.
  - a. A written statement is clear and specific.
  - b. A spoken statement can be easy for others to hear incorrectly, not understand, or misinterpret.
  - c. A written statement can be looked at again and copied for others, instead of relying on memory to try to repeat a spoken statement.
  - d. Others can use your written statement as a guide in helping them talk about the death.
  
2. Find out all correct, confirmed information that you can share.
  - a. Make the best statement you can as soon as possible, with the information that is available.
    - i. You may not be able to confirm everything quickly – state that.
    - ii. A statement soon after the death can help stop rumors and is safer than saying nothing.
    - iii. Even just saying that you will give more information can help stop rumors.
  - b. For information that has not been verified, state that you cannot speak to that information now, but that you will share it when you can.
  
3. Keep the reference to the death direct but nonspecific until a cause of death is officially announced.
  - a. "A death has occurred."
  - b. "He/she has been found deceased."
  - c. "He/she died on [date]."

4. Be honest if the cause of death has been announced, or if you have been specifically asked to announce it.
  - a. Use the real word: “suicide.”
  - b. Learn the words for talking about suicide, that are sensitive *and* help stop contagion.
    - i. Say the person “died by suicide,” “took his own life,” or “killed herself.”
    - ii. **DON’T** use the word “committed” suicide. *Committed* is a word that is used mostly with “sin” and “crime” and carries strong emotions of guilt and shame. “Died by suicide” easily replaces “committed to suicide” in any sentence.
    - iii. **DON’T** use the words “successful” when talking about a suicide. “Died by suicide” easily replace “successful suicide” or “successfully took his own life” in any sentence.
  - c. Look at **Appendix F – Guide for Media**. Even if you are not personally speaking to media, this information can be helpful in talking about the death.
5. Gather up-to-date contact information for resources you can offer to people you are notifying.
  - a. Giving resources can be one of the most important parts of your response.
  - b. Confirm telephone numbers, names, emails, and websites for local mental health organizations, suicide resource and support organizations, hotlines, grief counseling, Employee Assistance Programs, and faith leaders.
  - c. Hand out paper copies of the resource list.
6. Do not share details about the suicide.
  - a. You can say “suicide” without giving more information.
  - b. You may know a lot of details about the death – you do not have to share every detail you know.
  - c. **TOO MANY DETAILS can contribute to contagion risk.**
    - i. **DO NOT** provide details like *how* the person killed themselves or *where* the suicide happened.
    - ii. **DO NOT** give information about whether or not someone left a note.
    - iii. **DO NOT** give a reason why someone killed themselves.
7. **DO NOT** give opinions.
  - a. **DO NOT** offer an opinion on why someone killed themselves.
  - b. **DO NOT** offer your opinions on suicide.
  - c. **BE CAREFUL** not to use judging statements such as “suicide is cowardly” or “suicide is selfish.”
8. Contact the family of the deceased.
  - a. Express your condolences for their loss.
  - b. Ask if there is information they would like you to pass on in your statements, like funeral arrangements.
  - c. If the family asks that the cause of death not be given as suicide, gently let them know that in most states “cause of death” is public information.
    - i. Tell them you will try to respect their wishes.
    - ii. Tell them people may already know suicide was the cause of death.
  - d. If the family asks for details to be shared widely and in your professional opinion those details may be dangerous for others or increase risk for contagion, offer gentle guidance to the family about public statements.
  - e. If the family continues to request that the cause of death be withheld, respect the family’s wishes as best you can, while balancing safety and the reality that many people may already know.
9. Contact professionals who have spoken or will speak to the family before you make public statements, if it is not in your professional role to contact them yourself.
10. Talk about suicide as **something that can be prevented** and stress that **there is help** for people who feel there is no way out.

- a. Talk about the fact that suicide is almost always the result of an illness and that there is help for depression.
- b. Don't condemn suicidal behavior as "bad," "cowardly" or "sinful."
  - i. It is important to NOT create more shame and guilt around suicide and depression.
  - ii. People who identify with the deceased need to be encouraged to seek immediate help if they are suicidal, and shame and guilt make it much harder for them to do that.
  - iii. Remember that law enforcement professionals are highly vulnerable to suicidal thoughts and behaviors and reinforcing stigmatizing attitudes can increase that vulnerability.
- c. Always leave people with a way to contact immediate help if they need it.

### **STEP THREE: Self-Care for the Helping Professions**

One of the hardest steps for many who work in professions devoted to helping others is to recognize and act on the need to take care of yourself.

1. Recognize that you need support, too.
  - a. You have had a difficult experience, even if you are not close to the person who has attempted suicide.
  - b. Being at the scene of an attempted suicide or working with people after an attempt is difficult and can be traumatic, even for people who are trained to do it and who have done it in the past.
  - c. You may need to delay your own personal reactions to the experience, or to the topic of suicide in general, which creates psychological strain.
  - d. Even if this work is part of your job and you have done it many times in the past, if you find yourself struggling for any reason at all, ASK FOR HELP.
2. Access your organization's resources: Employee Assistance Program, referrals, on-staff counselors.
3. Access the resources you are giving out to others.
4. Don't ignore your own experience in an attempt to serve others.
  - a. As you go about your job, pay attention to your own responses and emotional reactions to the attempt.
  - b. If you realize that you are not able to fill your role or continue to provide support to others because of your own responses, or if you need additional support in your duties, talk to your supervisor.

## **IV. RESPONDING TO A DEATH BY SUICIDE: Ongoing Follow-up**

### **Offer Education**

1. Educate yourself about the community risks and the risks among your profession.
2. Sponsor and hold educational events.
  - a. Hold presentations/workshops on hard topics: grief, depression, suicide, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.
  - b. Hold presentations/workshops on the positive ways to support good mental health: help-seeking, stress reduction, taking care of ourselves, taking care of each other.

- c. Hold education and awareness events about the high rates of suicide among law enforcement professionals.
3. Hold workshops at times that are easy for staff or community to attend.
4. Hold events during the workday for staff, and make people are not “too busy” to be able to attend.
  - a. Be aware of what workload people have and what is expected of them.
  - b. A mixed message of “go for support” and “get all your work done and perform as usual” can be very hard on employees.
5. Put support and education materials in easy to see public places.
  - a. Fact sheets, brochures, short books, reading lists and posters are all helpful.
  - b. Posters give repeat public messages that help create an atmosphere of support.
  - c. Restrooms are an excellent place to leave brochures – we won’t fix our culture’s stigma on mental health and suicide overnight, and restrooms offer people a place to pick up information without anyone “seeing them.”
6. Offer suicide prevention training workshops **after the community has had some time to recover**.
  - a. Best practice research tells us that immediately after a suicide **is not the time** to jump into prevention skills workshops and training. Healing and help-seeking are the things to focus on right then, with already-trained professionals keeping a watch for warning signs.
  - b. After a waiting period that feels right to your community and circumstances, bring in professional trainers to talk about suicide prevention, warning signs, risk factors, and how **everyone can help prevent suicide**.

### **STEP THREE: Help Reduce Stigma**

1. Break the stigma around talking about suicide, mental illness and mental health.
  - a. Let people choose to participate in talking about these issues – don’t force anyone.
  - b. Regularly find ways to promote open communication about mental health.
  - c. Use the national “Suicide Awareness” and “Depression Awareness” weeks to bring topics up and talk about them.
  - d. Raise awareness that these are important issues for law enforcement communities, given the high rate of suicide among law enforcement professionals.
2. Lead by example.
  - a. Talk openly about stigma itself, and how hard it can be to talk about suicide and mental illness in our culture.
  - b. Reinforce repeatedly that it is okay to need help and access help. This is especially important among law enforcement professionals who may resist for fear of damaging their careers.
  - c. Be open and approachable to people seeking help.
  - d. Check in with people and ask how they are doing. Don’t insist on a response, but just let them know you care enough to ask.
  - e. If someone approaches you and you are not the right person to directly help them, listen to their need and have your resource list handy to give them a direct contact.
3. Educate educate educate!
  - a. Education is one of the best ways to break through stigma.
  - b. Keep at it. You are helping battle a long history of cultural stigma. YOU can make a difference.