

Death in the MSAD#4 Community

The Superintendent is notified of the death. _____

Superintendent decides to activate the crisis team. Crisis team members are called, and a time and place is set for a meeting. _____

A designated administrator checks with appropriate authorities concerning the facts of the death.

The crisis team meets and may accomplish some or all of the following actions:

- * Meet individually or in small groups with teachers who will be personally affected by the death. Schedule a faculty meeting and notify all teachers and staff of the death and the time and place of the meeting.
- * Arrange for substitutes for some teachers if warranted, and advise them of the faculty meeting. If warranted arrange substitutes to be “rovers” to relieve teachers who may be affected.
- * Prepare announcements to be read to students, a script for people answering the phones, and a press release for the media.
- * Prepare a memo for teachers, which include the death announcement, suggestions for being helpful for students, and lists of students who may be most affected.
- * If the deceased is a student, identify the student’s close friends, and friendship groups. Make contact with these students and their parents.
- * Decide if any school wide or district events need to be postponed or canceled.
- * Designate areas for in school counseling for students who may need it. Decide if community mental health professionals should be brought in.
- * Brief any professionals who will be providing counseling.
- * Designate school personnel to monitor halls, restrooms, etc. during the school day.
- * Develop plans for emotional and/or behavioral disruption should they occur.

A designated administrator contacts the deceased person’s parents or next of kin to offer condolences and advise them of the school’s planned response. _____

The principal or designee meets with all faculty and staff to inform them of the death and the planned response. Each teacher will receive an announcement to be read to the students at the start of the school day. The designated media spokesman for the district and/or school is identified, to whom they should refer all media/parent requests for information. _____

If a faculty meeting cannot be held, the crisis team will institute a telephone tree, giving faculty and staff all relevant information. All information should be identical and accurate. _____

At the faculty meeting the school counselor or other mental health professional, gives suggestions for dealing with grieving students, and explains the logistics of counseling referrals to designated areas during the school day. _____

For a student death, a counselor is present in the deceased student's classroom for the start of the school day, to help classmates clarify their feelings regarding the death.

For a teacher death, an experienced teacher meets the deceased teacher's class, the following day. A counselor is on hand to help students clarify feelings. Teachers watch out for affected students who need extra help, and refer to school counselor, who may refer to volunteer counselors. _____

Invited volunteer counselors from other school districts or community agencies sign in at a central location where they are provided nametags, facts about the death, and a designated area. Individuals who answer school phones take information from other potential volunteers and refer the names to a designated coordinator who screens information, and makes a decision on whom to approve.

The principal or a designated staff person removes the personal effects of the deceased from classrooms, desks and lockers. These items are screened and returned to the next of kin by the principal, counselor, or designated staff person. If the deceased is a student, his/her desk should remain for at least the first school day, following the death. _____

Near the end of the day, the principal or his/her designee uses the public address system to call for a moment of silence in memory of the deceased. If available, funeral or memorial service information can be passed on. _____

At the end of the school day the principal meets with faculty and staff to assess the current situation, review the day, receive feedback regarding the day, receive concerns regarding affected students, and take suggestions. Members of the crisis team will be available to debrief staff and help with grief/loss issues among staff. _____

When the staff meeting concludes, the crisis team meets to review the day's procedure and plan for the following day(s). Designated members of the team may contact parents of students who have been identified as deeply affected by the death. The member may assist the parent(s), in scheduling additional counseling for their child. The crisis team will meet or connect on a daily basis until the crisis subsides. _____

Within three weeks of the subsiding of the crisis, the crisis team will survey all affected personal regarding the effectiveness of the crisis response. The team will meet to review this information and make any changes in the crisis plan that may be warranted. _____

Area Counselors and Mental Health Agencies:

- Charlotte White Center: 564-7106
- Community Health and Counseling Services: 564-8175
- Northeast Occupational Exchange: 368 - 2072
- Behavioral Care Center: 564-3411
- Family Counseling Services: 876-2815
- Womancare: 564-8165

Auxiliary counselors and/or mental health providers will be utilized at the request of the crisis team. A designated person will be responsible for notifying auxiliary personnel. Any non-SAD#4 personnel that meet with students will do so only with the approval of the crisis team.

SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR USE WITH STUDENTS

AFTER A (POSSIBLE) SUICIDE

The following information and sample announcements are taken from the book *MANAGING SUDDEN TRAUMATIC LOSS IN THE SCHOOLS* by Maureen M. Underwood, LCSW and Karen Dunne-Maxim, MS, RN (1997). This is a wonderful resource for school administrators. It is available from the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, University Behavioral Health Care, Piscataway N J 08845-1392. Telephone (908) 235-4109. This book is also available on loan from the Information Resource Center of the Maine Office of Substance Abuse by calling **1-800-499-0027**.

1. After the school crisis response team has been mobilized, it is critical for administration to prepare a statement about the death for release to faculty and students. The announcement should include the facts as they have been officially communicated to the school. Announcements should not overstate or assume facts not in evidence. If the official cause of death has not as yet been ruled suicide, avoid making that assumption. There are also many instances when family members insist that a death that may appear to be suicide was, in fact, accidental.
2. An announcement should be presented to faculty at a meeting called by the building administrator as soon as possible following the death. The building administrator and a member of the Crisis Team could facilitate the meeting. The goals of such a meeting are to inform the faculty, acknowledge their grief and loss, and to prepare them to respond to the needs of the students. Faculty will then read the announcement to their students in their home rooms so that students get the same information at the same time from someone they know.
3. The sample announcements in this section are straightforward and are designed for use with faculty, students, and parents as appropriate. Directing your announcement to the appropriate grade level of the students is also important, especially in primary or middle schools. A written announcement could be sent home to parents with additional information about common student reactions to suicide and how to respond as well as suicide prevention information.

Day 1

Sample Announcement

For When a Suicide has Occurred

Morning, Day 1

“This morning we heard the extremely sad news that _____ took his life last night. I know we are all saddened by his death and send our condolences to his family and friends. Crisis stations will be located throughout the school today for students who wish to talk to a counselor. Information about the funeral will be provided when it is available, and students may attend with parental permission.”

**Sample Announcement
For a Suspicious Death Not Declared Suicide
Morning, Day 1**

“This morning we heard the extremely sad news that _____ died last night from a gunshot wound. This is the only information we have officially received on the circumstances surrounding the event. I know we are all saddened by _____’s death and send our condolences to his family and friends. Crisis stations will be located throughout the school today for students who wish to talk to a counselor. Information about the funeral will be provided when it is available, and students may attend with parental permission.”

**Sample Announcement
Primary or Middle School
Morning, Day 1**

“We want to take some time this morning to talk about something very sad. Name) _____, an eighth grader, died unexpectedly last night. At this point, we do not officially know the cause of (his/her) _____ death. Death is a difficult issue for anyone to deal with. Even if you didn’t know _____, you might still have some emotional reactions to hearing about this.

It is very important to be able to express our feelings about _____ death, especially our loss and sadness. We want you to know that there are teachers and counselors available in the library all through the day to talk with you about your reaction to _____’s death. If you want to talk with somebody, you will be given a pass to go to the library where we have people who will help us through this difficult time.”

End of Day 1

4. At the end of the first day, another announcement to the whole school prior to dismissal can serve to join the whole school in their grieving in a simple, non-sensationalized way. In this case, it is appropriate for the building administrator to make an announcement similar to the following over the loud speaker:

“Today has been a sad day for all of us. We encourage you to talk about _____’s death with your friends, your family, and whoever else gives you support. We will have special staff here for you tomorrow to help in dealing with our loss. Let us end the day by having the whole school offer a moment of silence for _____.”

Day 2

5. On the second day following the death, many schools have found it helpful to start the day with another homeroom announcement. This announcement can include additional verified information, re-emphasize the continuing availability of in-school resources and provide information to facilitate grief. Here's a sample of how this announcement might be handled:

“We now know that _____’s death has been declared a suicide. Even though we might try to understand the reasons for his/her doing this, we can never really know what was going on that made him/her take his/her life. One thing that’s important to remember is that there is never just one reason for a suicide. There are always many reasons or causes and we will never be able to figure them all out.

Today we begin the process of returning to a normal schedule in school. This may be hard for some of us to do. Counselors are still available in school to help us deal with our feelings. If you feel the need to speak to a counselor, either alone or with a friend, tell a teacher, the principal, or the school nurse, and they will help make the arrangements.

We also have information about the visitation and funeral. The visitation will be held tomorrow evening at the _____ Funeral Home from 7 to 9 pm. There will be a funeral Mass Friday morning at 10 am at _____ Church. In order to be excused from school to attend the funeral, you will need to be accompanied by a parent or relative, or have your parent’s permission to attend. We also encourage you to ask your parents to go with you to the funeral home.”

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS SERVICES AVAILABLE TO SCHOOLS IN MAINE

Available Services:

- **Telephone consultation** - to help determine if an assessment is indicated.
- **Assessments** - to determine if a student is at risk of harm to self or others.
- **Stabilization** - short-term, solution focused counseling for up to 30 days as a result of crisis evaluation.
- **Crisis Stabilization Residential Services** – are available short term.

How To Access Services:

- Call the local crisis services provider:
- Call the statewide crisis hotline **1-888-568-1112** -- 24 hours/day, 365 days/year
- Speak with a crisis worker or crisis supervisor to determine if a face-to-face assessment is appropriate or for consultation.

What To Expect:

- Crisis services will respond as immediately as possible.
- Parents must be notified and agree to an assessment of their minor child. In an emergency situation, an assessment process can be started. Crisis workers cannot make a recommendation for needed services without parent or guardian consent, unless the situation is determined to be an emergency. Implementation of the clinician's recommendation requires parental consent
- Crisis worker will do an assessment at the school, at the agency office, at the nearest hospital emergency department or other suitable location. Workers cannot assess a student in an unsafe environment. If the individual is aggressive, hostile, or in possession of lethal weapons, police assistance would be obtained to assure the safety of the individual and the worker.
- Student, parents and other informed individuals will be consulted together and separately. Crisis workers cannot discuss an assessment unless a *Release of Information* has been signed by the parent/guardian, except in an emergency.
- Authorities (such as DHS) may be notified if necessary.
- Referrals to other community support services such as case management, medication management and residential services will be made as appropriate.
- Crisis services are not designed to prescribe medications; advise on medication management; involuntarily commit a minor or respond to a purely disciplinary situation.

Announcing a Suspected, but Unconfirmed, Suicide Death

To: All faculty

From: _____

Date: _____

Please read the following announcement to students in your first period class:

We are saddened to learn of the death this weekend of one of our students, _____. _____ died Saturday afternoon of a gunshot wound. The complete details of his/her death are not available at this time. I know that this news may be upsetting to some of you. If you need to talk with a counselor, please let me know. I will give you a pass to the counseling office.

Suggestions for Helping Students

[Note: Refer to previous memorandum for information that was included in this section]

If you have first or second period conference, please go to the counseling office to see if your assistance is needed. A counselor will follow _____'s class schedule to meet with his/her classmates throughout the day. If I feel that any further action is needed in response to this death, I will call a faculty meeting or will send you a memorandum.

[Note: Although it was common knowledge among students at this school that _____ shot him/herself at his/her home, the coroner had not ruled the death a suicide. If it had been ruled a suicide, the announcement would have read: "died.....of a self-inflicted gunshot wound."]

Announcing a Suicide Death

The suicide of a student, particularly one who was well known or popular, can produce campus wide trauma if the death occurs when school is in session. In announcing the death, it may be helpful to include information about the grieving process and sources of assistance. The following example was adapted from an announcement prepared in 1988 by Robert Enos, an Austin, Texas, high school principal. [It was shared with the author by the district's crisis coordinator, Dr. Betty Phippips].

The SAD #4 school community is saddened by the reported suicide of one of our students. The death of any member of a community is a loss that in one way or another diminishes each of us, but the tragic circumstances of _____'s death are more difficult to accept. Feelings of anger, hurt, depression, and guilt are natural following a suicide. We may wonder what we could have done to prevent this act of desperation. Although feeling guilt is natural, none of us can assume responsibility because the ultimate decision was not ours to make. There is, however, something each of us can do. You, as students, can assist your friends and classmates. Your teachers, counselors, and administrators are here to help all students, whatever the problem. If you, or one of your friends, need to talk, let a teacher or counselor know. Both students and faculty can be alert for others who need help. Often, a friendly smile, an offer to have lunch together, a word of encouragement, or just listening can make a difference. Whether we realize it or not, we do need each other.

Following the announcement, teachers may lead class discussions or send students to previously determined areas for counseling.

Announcing a Death That Occurred in the Summer

The following memorandum was given to teachers before the first day of school concerning a student who killed himself in August. At a preschool in-service meeting, the principal advised teachers to make this announcement only if students seemed upset or asked for information. In this instance, the principal chose to ignore the event (see the section on determining degree of trauma in Chapter 2). If the death had occurred during the school year, it would not have been ignored. Because only a few students were upset, the first day of school, the chosen response proved appropriate. These students were counseled individually and referred to the school's grief support group.

To: All Faculty

From: _____, Principal

Date: _____

Read the following announcement only if there seems to be a need (i.e., students request information about the death or seem upset).

_____, who would have been a senior this fall, died on August 15th of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. A memorial service was held August 17th at the _____ Funeral Home. If you find this news upsetting, you may want to talk with your counselor.

The counselors will offer a loss and grief support group beginning next week for interested students. A workshop for concerned parents may also be held. Information about these activities is available in the counseling office.

Teachers: As most of you know, loss and grief groups are offered each year for students grieving the death of a relative or friend. Please notify the counseling office of students who may profit from the group. The parent workshop on student suicide may be of interest to you as teachers and parents. Descriptions of the student group and parent workshop are available in the teachers' lounge.

Letter to Parents

Following some deaths, the principal communicates with parents by mail and/or public forums. A sample letter to be used following a student suicide is given below. A similar letter may be needed after a homicide death or tragic accident.

Dear Parents:

The SAD #4 community has been saddened by the suicide death of one of our students, _____ . I want to let you know what steps we are taking to assist our grieving students. *(Describe what actions are being taken.)*

You can expect that your child will be affected in some way by this tragedy even if he or she did not know this student well. I encourage you to talk to your child about what happened. Discussing thoughts and feelings about death is important to the resolution of grief. You will not “put ideas into your child’s head” by talking about suicide. We all need to reinforce, however, that such actions are foolish and that there is help for any problem. Encourage your child to talk to you or some other adult when life stresses become overwhelming. If you are concerned about your child, please contact staff person at phone number .

I have enclosed an information sheet that may help you understand and respond to your child’s feelings. (Enclose information about helpful responses, how students this age react to death, and warning signs of depression or at-risk behaviors.)

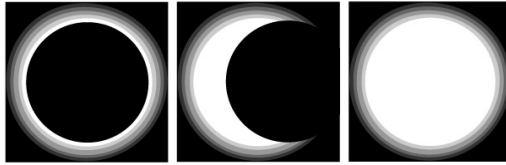
A meeting for concerned parents will be held _____. (If a meeting is planned, give the details.)

If you have any questions concerning this incident or the actions we are taking, please call my office. You are an important part of our school community and your child’s life.

Sincerely,

_____, Principal

Enclosures



Maine Youth Suicide Prevention

Education, Resources and Support—It's Up to All of Us.

MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS WHO MAY INTERACT WITH REPORTERS ABOUT YOUTH SUICIDE

There is Scientific Basis for Concern

Research has demonstrated potentially harmful effects of some types of news coverage about suicide on vulnerable individuals in the community. There is evidence of an increase in suicidal behavior, especially among youth, following prominent news coverage of a suicide. This behavior may result in multiple suicide attempts and completions. It is referred to as suicide copycat behavior. It is very important to address this concern with representatives of the media and to describe how responsible reporting can help reduce the risk of copycat suicides.

Media reports should neither sensationalize nor normalize suicide. Reporting should be concise and factual to minimize the likelihood of copycat behavior. Reports of suicide should not be graphic in the details of the method, and never use the phrase "a successful suicide". Use of the term "completed suicide" is to be encouraged. Media accounts can actually serve as a preventive tool if the reporting ends with published hotline phone numbers and nearby counseling resources. Exploration of these themes is given below.

Suicide is a Tragedy, It will be Reported

The mission of a news organization is to report information on events in the community. If a suicide is considered newsworthy, it will probably be reported. Efforts to prevent news coverage may not be effective; the goal should be to assist news professionals to report responsibly and accurately.

"No Comment" is Not Productive

Refusing to speak with the media will not prevent coverage of a suicide. Use a media request for information as an opportunity to influence the contents of the story. Always provide information on state and local resources for suicide prevention and crisis intervention and other available services.

Responsible News Coverage May Help Prevent Suicide

It is not news coverage *per se*, but certain types of coverage, which promotes copycat suicides. Explain the potential for copycat suicides associated with certain types of reports and suggest ways to minimize this risk. Encourage news reporters to provide information that increases public awareness of risk factors, warning signs, and possible actions to help a suicidal person. Emphasize the importance of listing available community resources for individuals at-risk and describing what is being done to promote safety for vulnerable individuals in the aftermath of a suicide. Provide relevant hotline number(s) and ask that they be published. Encourage news stories that portray individuals who have found positive ways of coping with their difficult situations.

Aspects of News Coverage that May Promote Copycat Suicides

Although scientific research in this area is not complete, preliminary findings indicate that the likelihood of copycat suicides may be increased by the following actions:

Presenting Simplistic Explanations for Suicide

Suicide is never the result of a single factor or event; it usually results from the complex interaction of many factors. Although a final precipitating event may have occurred, it is unlikely that it was the sole cause of the suicide. Most persons who commit suicide have had a history of problems that may not have been reported during the aftermath of the suicide. A detailed description is not necessary, but acknowledgment of the complexity of suicidal behavior is recommended.

Engaging in Repetitive, Prominent or Excessive Reporting of Suicide

Repetitive or prominent coverage of a suicide tends to promote and maintain a preoccupation with suicide among at-risk persons. This preoccupation has been linked to copycat suicides.

Providing Sensational Coverage of Suicide

Sensational news coverage of a suicide also heightens the general public's preoccupation with suicide. This reaction is associated with the development of suicide copycat behaviors. Providing the morbid details of a suicide increases sensationalism. Reporting the story prominently and using dramatic photographs related to the suicide (e.g., photographs of the funeral, the deceased person's bedroom, or the site of the suicide) also increase the risk of copycat suicides.

Reporting "How-To" Descriptions of Suicide

Describing technical details about the method of suicide is not recommended. For example, reporting that a person died from carbon monoxide poisoning may not be harmful; however, providing graphic details of the mechanism and procedures used to complete the suicide may promote imitation of the suicidal behavior by other at-risk persons.

Presenting Suicide as a Tool for Accomplishing Certain Ends

Suicide is usually the rare act of a troubled person. Presenting suicide as a way of coping with personal problems (e.g., the break-up of a relationship or retaliation against discipline) may suggest to at-risk persons that suicide is a reasonable solution.

Glorifying Suicide or Persons Who Commit Suicide

Reports of community expressions of grief (e.g., public eulogies, flying flags at half-mast, and erecting permanent public memorials) should not be overemphasized. Such actions may contribute to copycat suicide by suggesting to susceptible persons that society is honoring the suicidal behavior of the deceased person, rather than mourning the person's death.

Focusing Only on the Suicide Completer's Positive Characteristics

Empathy for family and friends often leads to a focus on reporting only the positive aspects of a suicide completer's life. As a result, statements praising the deceased person are often repeated in the news. Family members, friends or teachers may be quoted as saying the deceased person "was a great kid" or "had a bright future." When these statements are not accompanied by acknowledgement that the deceased person had problems, however, suicide may appear attractive to other at-risk persons, especially those who rarely receive positive reinforcement.