

SECTION 2: YOUTH SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGIES

ABOUT THE 15 STRATEGIES

The prevention strategies presented below are derived from evidence-based research, public input on draft strategies, and recommendations from the Governor’s Task Force on Youth Suicide Prevention.⁷

STRATEGY 1: DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGNS

OBJECTIVE

Develop and implement public education campaigns that will:

- increase knowledge about symptoms of depression, suicide risk and protective factors, indicators of possible suicidal behavior, skills for responding to a suicidal individual, and community resources
- increase help-seeking behavior by decreasing the stigma associated with behavioral health care

AUDIENCE

General public.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Many adolescents report that embarrassment, stigma, and fear are the main reasons they do not seek help for their problems. Studies show also that most adolescents do not seek help for suicidal ideation even when it is identified as the most pressing problem they are experiencing.⁸

Recognizing and responding appropriately to such troubled youth can prevent suicides. In addition, wider public understanding of the science of the brain and behavior can reduce the stigma associated with seeking help for behavioral health problems, and consequently may contribute to reducing the risk of suicidal behavior.

A community-wide public education campaign can be an effective way to provide useful information on these subjects to all citizens.

Evaluation of such a campaign recently conducted in Washington state indicates that it increased: (1) awareness of information about youth suicide prevention, (2) recognition of indicators of suicidal behavior, and (3) willingness to use suicide intervention skills in helping distressed youth.⁹

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Greater public awareness and knowledge about youth suicide prevention may expand the need for mental health and crisis intervention services. Providers should anticipate this possibility with contingency plans for managing the increased demand.

Public education campaigns about suicide prevention must be sustained efforts in order to maintain a necessary level of awareness.

“Many teenagers hide their true feelings. they need to know what to do and where to go.”
- an Oregon Youth

Knowing the signs of depression and suicide, and what to do can save lives.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Secure agreements from television broadcast stations to air public service announcements.
- Work with local print media to publish feature articles on adolescent depression and youth suicide prevention.
- Create, produce, and disseminate information through a variety of sources, including: grocery bags, book marks, slides at movie theaters, milk cartons, and local public access televised media.
- Disseminate informational flyers, brochures, and other materials to identified groups.
- Organize a community-wide Youth Suicide Prevention Week.
- Create, produce, and post informational posters in youth centers, health centers, employee assistance offices, and other places with high visibility to the general public.
- Create and distribute wallet cards to youth in and out of school, parents, and the general public that contain information about warning signs, how to help, and local /state/national resources.
- Create a speaker's bureau of professionals, survivors, youth, etc., for community presentations.



STRATEGY 2: PROMOTE EFFORTS TO REDUCE ACCESS TO LETHAL MEANS OF SELF-HARM OBJECTIVE

Energize Oregonians to restrict youth access to means of suicide by educating them about such vital issues as:

- the link between lethal means in the home and completed suicide
- safe firearm storage (locked and stored separately from ammunition)
- the importance of removing lethal means (firearms, poisons, medications, alcohol, etc.) from homes with a youth at high risk of suicidal behavior

AUDIENCE

All Oregonians, particularly parents/ guardians, firearm owners, community gatekeepers (Strategy 7), young people - especially those aged 10 to 24, behavioral health care providers, teachers, school administrators, law enforcement, clergy, juvenile justice workers, physicians, public health practitioners, and legislators.

Removing or restricting access to lethal means of self harm is an effective suicide prevention strategy that can decrease suicide.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Increased public awareness of the role of firearms in youth suicides and knowledge about safe firearm storage can save young lives. Here are some pertinent facts: Firearms are used in fully two-thirds of youth suicides in Oregon.¹⁰ During the last three and one-half decades, the rate of suicide by firearm increased 4.3 times faster than did the rate of suicide by other methods. An estimated 16% of Oregon households with children under 18 have firearms that are loaded and unlocked.¹¹ During 1994-1997, 71% of firearm suicides among Oregon youth aged 10 to 24 occurred at home. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises that parents of depressed or suicidal adolescents remove firearms and ammunition from the home.¹²

Education on the restriction of access to lethal means is seen as one of the most promising and economical strategies for preventing youth suicide.¹³ Removing or restricting access is an effective suicide prevention strategy that can decrease suicide.^{14, 15} Among parents whose children visited an emergency department for a mental health assessment or treatment, those who received injury prevention education from hospital staff are significantly more likely to limit access to lethal means of self-harm than are families who did not receive such education.¹³

"No one loves me. I don't want to go on." 10th grade boy

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

The safety of Oregon's young people is a serious concern both of gun owners and of those who do not own guns. Messages on restricting access to means of suicide should be crafted collaboratively by both groups to achieve community-wide support. Public education campaigns aimed at preventing youth suicide should incorporate messages on reducing access to lethal means of self-harm as well (see Strategy 1).

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Select and/or create media to educate the public about the role of firearms in youth suicide, safe storage, and firearm disposal.
- Conduct a public information campaign(s) designed to reduce the accessibility of lethal means of self-harm (including firearms) in the home.
- Solicit help from community gun owners and sellers to support campaigns for safe storage.
- Conduct public forums for parents, guardians, and media on strategies for securing weapons (gun boxes, trigger locks, etc.) and medications, particularly prescription drugs and those stored in large quantities.
- Train professionals and other adults who provide services to youth at risk for suicide about firearm access issues.
- Increase the proportion of primary care and other health care providers who routinely assess the presence of lethal means (including firearms, drugs, and poisons) in the home and educate patients about actions to reduce risks.
- Conduct a local community assessment to determine the extent to which firearms and other lethal means are stored safely in homes with children and adolescents.

STRATEGY 3: EDUCATE YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS ABOUT SUICIDE PREVENTION

OBJECTIVE

Increase suicide prevention awareness, knowledge, and skills of youth and young adults. The underlying benefit is the creation of school communities in which all members accept responsibility for each other's safety and can provide a competent initial response to those at risk.

All youth and young adults need to be able to help suicidal peers seek professional care.

AUDIENCE

Middle and high school-age youth in school and vocational training settings. Youth and young adults in higher education, job corps centers, youth shelters, military installations, detention facilities, and other community settings. Staff responsible for supervising youth in school and community settings.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

About one-half of adolescent females and about one-third of males report having talked to someone who was definitely or potentially suicidal, and yet only about 25% told an adult about their suicidal peers.¹⁷ It is important that all youth and young adults have the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to help suicidal peers get professional help.

Evaluation studies indicate that suicide prevention education programs increase the knowledge of students about suicide warning signs and about sources for help and referral.¹⁸ Students who participated in such programs were found to be more likely to refer other students to hotlines and crisis centers than students who did not participate.¹⁹ Students who participated in a school-based suicide prevention campaign in Washington state demonstrated increased awareness of information about youth suicide prevention, increased ability to recognize indicators of potential suicidal behavior, and a greater likelihood of offering advice to others about how to get help.⁹

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

There is no evidence that school-based prevention programs increase the likelihood of suicidal behavior.¹⁶ Nevertheless, care should be taken in selecting, designing, and presenting the information to avoid sensationalizing, normalizing, or inadvertently offering how-to instructions for committing suicide.²⁰ As with any sensitive classroom topic, teachers of suicide prevention education should anticipate and plan for the possibility of negative reactions, particularly on the part of students who have had some personal experience with suicide.

Some of the highest risk youth are not in conventional schools. Efforts to reach these youth are especially important to consider.

Classroom curricula should focus on basic knowledge, attitudes, and skills that help students become more confident and competent in helping troubled peers. The curricula should be implemented as part of a comprehensive school program that also includes administrative policies and procedures for dealing with suicide situations; training for all school personnel; three to five classroom lessons for students in health

and/or family life studies; presentations to parents; and possibly such other components as school crisis teams, training of community gatekeepers, and or/media campaigns.²¹

Strategies 7 (Gatekeeper Training), 8 (Screening and Referral), and 13 (Skill-Building Support Groups) are appropriate complements to suicide prevention education programs and consideration of simultaneous implementation is encouraged.

"I think school would be better if it had a teen group for lonely students." - an Oregon Student

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Identify existing suicide prevention education activities and venues within communities where youth aged 10 to 24 receive suicide prevention awareness, information, and skills. Document gaps in services.
- Select safe, age-appropriate suicide prevention curricula, materials, and programs for use in schools and other community settings.
- Conduct suicide prevention education and outreach in community venues that serve out-of-school, street, and homeless youth and young adults.
- Work with school boards, educators, and parents to get suicide prevention education taught to students, supported with training for school staff and parents.

STRATEGY 4: REDUCE HARASSMENT IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

OBJECTIVE

Reduce harassment in schools and communities through the creation and implementation of inclusive anti-harassment school policies, staff training, and school curricula.

AUDIENCE

All staff and students in schools.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Students must feel safe in school and other learning environments if they are to achieve their maximum potential. Lack of physical and emotional safety can result in negative educational outcomes linked to risk behaviors.

Students may be marginalized for a wide variety of reasons, including physical characteristics, disability, medical conditions, religion, gender, race, ethnic/cultural identity, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

Studies have established a link between victimization at school with an elevated risk of suicidal ideation and behavior in adolescents.^{22, 23, 24} Nearly one-third of Oregon high school students responding to the 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) reported being harassed at school during the previous 30 days. These students were three times more likely to report a prior suicide attempt. At greatest increased risk were victims of sexual harassment and those who were perceived to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual.²⁵



IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Communities differ in the extent to which they accept individual and group differences and schools tend to reflect the attitudes of the community. It is important to work with all aspects of the community in finding agreement about what constitutes safe and supportive learning environments for all youth and young adults.

Staff training should clearly define inappropriate student behavior and empower staff to intervene effectively.

There is a strong link between victimization at school and an elevated risk of suicidal ideation and behavior.

Teaching students tolerance is best done within the context of other risk and protective factors that affect student health and safety.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Assess school district policy with regard to non-discrimination, student protection from harassment and violence, user-friendly grievance procedures, and the existence of clearly stated consequences that are consistently enforced.
- Work with school boards and school districts to identify gaps and address needs in school policy language and enforcement to increase safety in school learning environments.
- Utilize local YRBS data or other student survey information to assess needs and implement action plans to address needs.
- Train school staff to identify harassing behavior and effectively intervene.
- Train school staff to teach tolerance.
- Implement tolerance education in classroom curricula.

STRATEGY 5: PROVIDE MEDIA EDUCATION AND GUIDELINES

OBJECTIVE

Reduce suicide contagion through communications media by providing editors with guidelines for reporting youth suicide and suicide prevention resource information.

AUDIENCE

Editors in all communications media, including newspapers, radio, and television.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

There is persuasive evidence that outbreaks of suicide - i.e., "suicide contagion" - occurs, and adolescents and young adults are particularly vulnerable.²⁶ Studies show that mass media coverage of the suicide of a youth can influence others to engage in suicidal behavior.^{27, 28} The more networks carry a story about suicide, the greater the increase in suicides thereafter.²⁷

The manner of reporting a suicide may increase or decrease the possibility of contagion. Media guidelines recommend that excessive reporting of suicide, how-to descriptions, glorification of persons who commit

suicide, and simplistic explanations be avoided.²⁹ When suicide is reported, prevention information and community resources should also be provided.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

On an issue as sensitive as youth suicide, it is important that communities work with the media to achieve a balance between the mission of the news media and the need for responsible coverage.

Media guidelines should be regularly updated, repeated, and reinforced to reflect new developments in suicide reporting and to ensure that both new and experienced editors stay informed.

Media approaches to reporting suicide can increase or decrease the possibility of additional suicidal behavior in a community.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Collaborate with media representatives in developing youth suicide reporting guidelines using the media guidelines recommended by the Centers for Disease Control as a model.²⁹
- Provide guidelines to local media personnel in a position to report youth suicide.
- Provide the guidelines to key partners in youth suicide prevention, such as mental health professionals, community leaders, survivors, and gatekeepers.
- Present/distribute guidelines at media association meetings.
- Identify someone to collect and analyze local news articles, television/radio news coverage, and other media on how youth suicide is reported and whether reports include crisis lines and other local/ state/ national resources for help.

STRATEGY 6: PROVIDE EDUCATION FOR PROFESSIONALS

OBJECTIVE

Increase training and education specific to health care professionals, educators, and human service providers who work with youth and families.

Many professionals are inadequately prepared to address suicide issues with youth and families.

AUDIENCE

Professionals and those in professional training programs who work with children, youth, young adults, and families. This audience includes but is not limited to: physicians, nurses, mental health providers, juvenile justice personnel, counselors, teachers, school administrators, crisis response providers, psychologists, social workers, alcohol and drug treatment providers, volunteers with organizations serving youth, and religious/spiritual leaders.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Health care professionals, educators, and human service providers are in key positions to identify, assess, intervene, and refer youth and young adults who are at risk of suicidal behavior. Unfortunately, a number of studies indicate that many professionals are inadequately prepared in these areas.

A survey of pediatric residency programs in the United States found that topics least often cited as adequately covered included psychological testing and violence prevention.³⁰ Another study found that continued education for adolescent medicine physicians was associated with increased competence in addressing suicide.³¹ A survey of graduate schools in psychology found that only 40% had some training on suicide.³² In a survey of high school health teachers, only 9% believe they would recognize a student at risk for suicide. Suicide prevention education programs for teachers increase their ability to recognize warning signs for suicide, their knowledge of treatment resources and willingness to make a treatment referral.³³ Teachers who attended an in-service program on adolescent suicide, or who have experience teaching about youth suicide, or who work on a school-based crisis intervention team reported a higher level of confidence in being able to recognize a student at risk for suicide.³⁴

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Training for professional groups should be tailored to reflect the focus and service delivery model of each profession. Champions in each discipline should be recruited to work within their field to promote interest in and support for youth suicide prevention education.

Educational strategies for professionals and service providers will require sustained implementation to keep pace with new developments in the field of suicide prevention and to adjust for the attrition of personnel.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Assess what is currently being taught about youth suicide prevention within identified course work, in-service training, and continuing education for professionals.
- Identify audiences and training opportunities.
- Recruit and train individuals to conduct youth suicide prevention education for specific professional groups.
- Conduct and evaluate in-service training for professionals.
- Advocate for the inclusion of youth suicide prevention education in relevant graduate/undergraduate programs as a requirement for certification/licensure and for certification/licensure renewal.

*"Just because you haven't attempted suicide doesn't mean you're not depressed. I think the way students feel about things is just as important as what they do."
- an Oregon Student*

STRATEGY 7: PROVIDE GATEKEEPER TRAINING

OBJECTIVE

Establish a network of adults and youth in every community who can recognize and respond to youth exhibiting signs of suicide risk and can assist them in getting professional help.

AUDIENCE

Gatekeeper training should be provided to adults who have regular contact with youth and their families. This includes but is not limited to: health care professionals, mental health providers, substance abuse counselors, law enforcement officers, juvenile corrections workers, protective service workers, family planning staff, school personnel (nurses, social workers, psychologists, counselors, teachers),

tribal leaders, clergy, peer helpers, crisis line workers, emergency room personnel, and others who have significant contact with youth between 10 and 24.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Gatekeeper training for adults who work with youth builds their competence and confidence to:

- recognize risk factors associated with youth suicide
- identify at risk youth
- communicate with youth at risk for suicide
- make referrals to connect at-risk youth with skill-building and/or crisis intervention services
- implement policies to guide interventions with at-risk youth (e.g., never leave a suicidal youth alone)
- facilitate a 30- to 45-minute awareness program on the topic of youth suicide
- serve on a school/community prevention team and/or crisis response team

Gatekeeper training for youth builds their competence and confidence to:

- recognize the risk factors associated with youth suicide
- increase positive communication with youth at risk for suicide
- tell an adult of their concerns about a peer
- connect a peer at risk with an adult capable of helping

Adults and youth can be trained to identify youth at risk, show they care and connect youth with services.

Adults who are community gatekeepers interact with youth in a variety of school and community settings. Once trained, they're in a position to recognize youth at high risk of suicide and to intervene with them.¹⁶

Youth are more likely to talk with peers than with adults about suicidal feelings, ideation, plans, and behaviors.²¹ Gatekeeper training for youth offers more in-depth training than general suicide awareness education and provides a cadre of youth with a high level of awareness and skill in intervening with and referring high-risk peers to professional help.

Results from Washington state gatekeeper training programs indicate that trained adults and youth are significantly more likely than the general public to: (1) believe they would act to prevent youth suicide, (2) demonstrate greater confidence in suicide assessment and intervention knowledge, and (3) report higher levels of comfort, competence, and confidence in helping at-risk youth. Youth who participated in a 2-day gatekeeper training were significantly more likely to know warning signs for suicide and more likely to respond with effective suicide prevention steps than non-participating peers.⁹ Gatekeeper training programs in Colorado and New Jersey have shown similar results.³⁵

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

A public education campaign (Strategy I) is adequate for the majority of parents.

Gatekeeper training is not generally designed for parents of youth identified as high-risk for suicide. Those parents should be contacted and referred to professional help.

A number of gatekeeper training methodologies are commercially available. Two train-the-trainer models currently in use in the Pacific Northwest are LivingWorks and Question Persuade and Respond (QPR) for Suicide Prevention.^{36, 37}

Adult gatekeeper training should take place before youth training to ensure that the trained youth gatekeeper will have adult support and follow-up when reaching out for help for themselves or friends.

Gatekeepers - especially youth gatekeepers - should receive ongoing supervision, debriefing, and training to help ensure that suicide intervention activities do not increase the risk of suicidal behavior by gatekeepers themselves.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Identify community members who are already trained gatekeepers.
- Assess the need for additional gatekeepers.
- Utilize trained gatekeepers to provide youth suicide awareness education and serve on local prevention/crisis response teams (Strategy II).
- Conduct a training to increase the number of gatekeepers.
- Provide support and ongoing training for current gatekeepers and for those seeking to become gatekeepers.

STRATEGY 8: IMPLEMENT SCREENING AND REFERRAL SERVICES

OBJECTIVE

Screen youth and young adults for suicide risk and refer identified individuals for further evaluation and intervention.

AUDIENCE

Screening and referral is appropriate for youth in any setting but may be particularly warranted for those in subgroups known to be at higher risk for suicide. These include: incarcerated youth, youth with history of juvenile justice and/or protective service involvement; American Indians; white males; depressed youth; substance abusers; high-striving, perfectionist youth; potential dropouts; run-aways; gay and lesbian youth; victims of assault and/or abuse; and pregnant teens.³⁸

Screening can identify which youth need assessment and care.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Screening can identify youth with symptoms of depression, suicidal ideation, and behavior, thus providing a means to determine which of them are in need of further assessment and care.

Screening using a three step process that reduces the number of false positives has been shown to be efficient and cost effective when used with both individual youth and large populations.³⁹

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Screening programs can be characterized as **focused or broad**. Focused screening would select youth known to be at increased risk who present in settings such as juvenile corrections, foster care, alcohol and drug treatment, mental health, youth shelters, and family planning programs. Broad screening programs screen every youth in a population.

One focused approach is to screen high risk youth in settings where they appear for protective services, detention, or health care. Screening can be accomplished by trained paraprofessionals at service delivery sites administered by state and local agencies and community-based organizations.

Suicide-risk screening instruments are still in the developmental stage, with evaluation a priority research area. Some promising screening instruments that have been used include: Suicide Ideation Questionnaire; Evaluation of Imminent Danger of Suicide; Emergency First Aid; Measure of Adolescent Potential for Suicide; Columbia Teen Screen; and the National Institute of Mental Health Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children.^{40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45}

Settings in which screening should occur include: juvenile corrections centers, homeless shelters, crisis centers, family planning clinics, mental health centers, alternative schools, recreation centers, homeless shelters, crisis centers, employee assistance offices, and alcohol and drug treatment programs.

Periodic screening of high-risk youth should be conducted, since an individual's risk for suicide may change over time.

"I think that teachers and staff members need to pay more attention to kids who are depressed. When they get in these depressions, many become violent and may harm others or attempt suicide." - an Oregon Student

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Assess current efforts and gaps in screening youth and young adults for suicide risk in school and community settings.
- Identify screening approach, either focused or broad.
- Identify environments where high-risk groups appear and where screening should occur.
- Identify screening instrument.
- Train staff to administer screening process.
- Ensure that clinicians are available to assess and treat referred youth.

- Conduct screening and document implementation processes.
- Refer youth at high risk to clinicians for further assessment and intervention.
- Assist youth at imminent danger of attempting suicide with immediate crisis intervention.

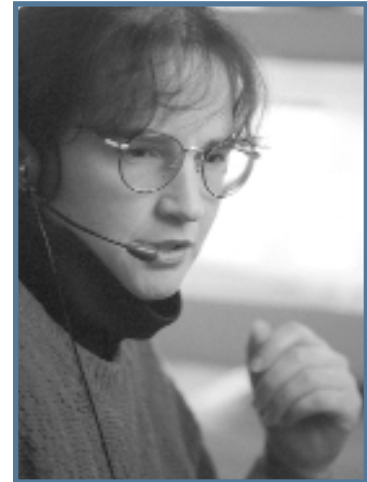
STRATEGY 9: INCREASE EFFECTIVENESS OF CRISIS HOTLINES

OBJECTIVE

Improve the effectiveness of 24-hour local, state, and national crisis hotlines by helping youths to increase their knowledge about how, when, and why to use them.

AUDIENCE

The primary audience is youth and young adults aged 10 to 24, especially those at high risk for suicide. A secondary audience includes community members who are especially concerned with youth suicide and for whom hotlines can be a helpful, readily available resource. These include family members, peers, and trained community gatekeepers (Strategy 7).



RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

There is evidence that hotlines: (1) are preferred by youth over mental health centers, especially if they are known to cater to youth and provide peer counselors; (2) provide a service for individuals troubled by suicidal ideation; (3) succeed in attracting populations they are designed to help; (4) are associated with decreases in suicide rates among white females under 25, the most frequent users of hotline services; and (5) reach otherwise underserved populations in the community.¹⁶

On the other hand, Shaffer notes that research on the effectiveness of crisis hotlines suggests that they have little impact on suicide rates in a community.³⁹ He concludes, however, that their impact may be improved if enhanced by appropriate advertising and if hotline personnel are trained in how to respond more specifically to callers regardless of the caller's problems.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Providing youth-friendly hotline response and outreach is important in facilitating the use of hotlines by young people.

Immediate help is as close as a telephone.

Implementation efforts should include plans for anticipating and dealing with an increase in crisis hotline use. Without such preparation, hotline workers and other care providers may be overwhelmed by public response.

Hotline workers should receive regular supervision from a mental health clinician.

Hotline workers should receive training in crisis response and management.

Hotline workers should have latest information to assist in linking to emergency resources.

A system for tracking the frequency and type of calls is an important tool for documenting and monitoring changes in crisis line use.

Publicity should include national youth hotlines for youth who may, for a variety of reasons, choose not to contact a local crisis line.

Some communities may find it more efficient and cost effective to implement this strategy as part of a regional collaboration with surrounding communities or counties.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Identify the number of crisis hotlines, number of calls received from youth aged 10 to 24, the nature of hotline calls, and gaps and coordination issues in the local service area.
- Develop a plan to track calls to collect data as an aid to monitoring effectiveness.
- Develop and implement strategies for making crisis hotlines more user friendly to youth.
- Use a variety of media to publicize availability of crisis lines and crisis services to community members, families, and youth, especially youth at high suicide risk.
- Monitor, evaluate and improve standards for crisis line services.

STRATEGY 10: ENHANCE CRISIS SERVICES

OBJECTIVE

Enhance existing community-based crisis services to accommodate the growth in demand for these services resulting from successful implementation of youth suicide prevention strategies.

AUDIENCE

Crisis hotline staff and other crisis service providers.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Implementation of the youth suicide prevention strategies in this plan is likely to increase the demand for crisis services; crisis service staff should anticipate and plan for this increased workload.

When an action plan for enhancing crisis services was implemented in Washington state in 1996, crisis services staff reported increases in awareness of suicide prevention, visibility of crisis services, interest from school counselors and others, and helpful resources for improving crisis service staff competencies and for conducting community presentations.⁹

Effective community response after a suicide crisis depends on the education of responders and coordination specific to suicide built into a community's crisis response plans and protocols.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Standards for certifying crisis workers and crisis agencies have been established by the American Association of Suicidology <http://www.suicidology.org> www.suicidology.org.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Document the frequency, type, and nature of crisis events involving youth and young adults and the crisis service provided in order to monitor delivery of services and provide a data base for continuous improvement.
- Ensure that crisis hotline staff have adequate training to respond to at-risk youth callers.
- Identify barriers to the delivery of crisis services to at-risk youth and make recommendations for ways of improving those services.
- Involve crisis service providers in the selection, implementation, and evaluation of community youth suicide prevention strategies.
- Survey crisis service providers about their needs.

STRATEGY 11: ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN CRISIS RESPONSE TEAMS

OBJECTIVE

Establish and maintain trained, responsive, school and community crisis response teams (CRT) to help minimize the likelihood of suicide contagion in schools.

Quick and appropriate response from crisis workers can minimize the negative impact of a suicide in a community.

AUDIENCE

The primary audience is current and prospective school and community CRT members. A secondary focus is other community members who play an important role in facilitating the work of a school CRT. These include: school administrators, school counselors, teachers, social workers, psychologists, mental health providers, religious/ spiritual leaders, bereavement counselors, hospital representatives, trained gatekeepers, parent groups, survivor groups, media representatives, crisis service providers, treatment providers, law enforcement, and emergency medical personnel.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Exposure to the suicides of family members, friends, or others may increase the risk for youth and young adults already at high risk of self-destructive behavior. Suicide clusters (groups of suicides occurring closer in space and time than would normally be expected) and copycat suicides are rare events, but adolescents and young adults seem particularly vulnerable to such contagion. Estimates indicate that the percentage of adolescent suicides identified as cluster-related may range from less than 1% to 13%.⁴⁶ Schools and communities should be prepared to respond quickly to minimize the likelihood of suicide contagion following one or more youth suicides.

The advisability of a crisis response plan to manage the risk of multiple youth suicides is widely accepted by experts. In the absence of a crisis, it is difficult to evaluate the adequacy of response plan interventions.

Unfortunately, no evaluations exist on the effectiveness of crisis response team interventions on youth suicide behavior.¹⁶

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

No matter how well developed a CRT plan might be, it will not work effectively if community stakeholders are not aware of the content of the plan or supportive of it. To ensure a coordinated, cooperative response in the event of a tragedy, school staff and community members should be educated about the role of crisis response teams in suicide prevention.¹⁶

CRT plans should specify a process for helping team members reduce stress resulting from interventions that prevent a suicide. Team members report significant benefits from participating in these critical incident debriefings.⁴⁷

In addition to school-based and school/community-based CRTs in many communities, Oregon counties have access to National Office of Victim's Rights (NOVA) teams to respond to crises. An informal survey by the Oregon Department of Education in the fall of 1998 showed that most Oregon school districts have a crisis response plan that includes post-suicide intervention. However, many of the plans had not been updated within two years, and only about 25% of school districts had provided any kind of annual staff training in crisis response and crisis response planning. These two types of training were identified as the areas of greatest need.⁴⁸

Suicidal behavior among high-risk youth may also be precipitated by accidental death or homicide or by other significant losses in schools and communities. The use of CRTs after these events should therefore be considered.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Establish CRTs in areas without existing teams.
- Incorporate CDC Recommendations for a Community Plan for the Prevention and Containment of Suicide Clusters into new and existing CRT plans.⁴⁹
- Involve local CRT members in community youth-suicide prevention efforts.
- Educate community stakeholders about the role of a CRT in the aftermath of youth suicide and solicit their support and utilization of a CRT when appropriate.
- Coordinate crisis response activities with existing community resources.

*"We need to open our eyes and face reality. We have problems here and need to look at them."
- an Oregon Student*

STRATEGY 12: IMPROVE ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH CARE OBJECTIVE

Improve access to affordable behavioral health care for youth and young adults by:

- taking information and services (education, screening, treatment, consultation) to youth in places where they gather (schools, youth centers, events, youth-serving agencies, churches, athletics, shopping malls, etc)

- increasing the number of school-based health centers that provide behavioral health services
- improving linkages and collaborative relationships between schools and community providers of behavioral health services
- advocating for low-cost or no-cost services and more behavioral health treatment insurance coverage

AUDIENCE

The key audience consists of administrators of institutions that serve youth and young adults, insurance providers, and legislators. An important secondary audience includes public and private entities that provide behavioral health services, school-based health centers, parents, youth, business leaders, suicide survivors, and professional organizations and associations affiliated with health, mental health, and substance abuse issues.

Mood disorders and alcohol abuse and other drug abuse are strongly linked to suicidal behavior.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Barriers to obtaining treatment for behavioral health conditions in adolescents include availability, transportation, and cost - as well as the social stigma often associated with behavioral health problems (Strategy 1).⁵⁰ Oregon youth cite ease of access as the single most important reason why they use a school-based health center.⁵¹ Access to treatment can be increased by providing affordable and confidential services in schools, youth centers, shopping malls, churches, and other places in the community frequented by youth. In addition, access may be facilitated by increasing parental knowledge of mental health services (Strategy 1) and assisting adolescents to initiate contact with a service provider.⁵²

There is ample evidence that many youth suffer from a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, and many of them do not receive the care they need.^{53, 54, 55} Teens who abuse alcohol or drugs are more likely to progress from suicidal ideation to suicide attempts.⁵⁶ Mood disorders, conduct disorder, and/or substance abuse are the conditions commonly linked to suicidal behaviors among teenagers.^{57, 54} Various therapies and medications have been shown to be effective in the treatment of depression in children and adolescents.⁵³ Increasing access to effective treatment provides more opportunities for addressing the unmet behavioral health needs of children, adolescents, and young adults.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Implementation of other strategies in this plan, such as screening and referral (Strategy 8) and gate-keeper training (Strategy 7), are likely to increase the need for community behavioral health treatment resources. It is important to anticipate this possibility so individuals with identified treatment needs can access existing resources in a timely manner.

School and community providers should collaborate to coordinate delivery of behavioral health care to youth and families.

The Health Division Center for Child and Family Health has published state and community based strategies for improving adolescent access, availability, and utilization of behavioral health services which can be found at: www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/ccfh/cfhna.htm

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Involve youth and families in planning improvements in access to care.
- Inform adolescents of their right to health care access and confidential health services
- Perform outreach to enroll adolescents eligible for Children’s Health Insurance Program or the Oregon Health Plan.
- Identify ways to decrease barriers and increase access to services and treatment.
- Create an outreach action plan for the delivery of behavioral health information and services in places where young people gather.
- Conduct focus groups with youth and young adults to identify barriers to utilizing local behavioral health services.
- Increase the number of school-based health centers providing behavioral health services that match needs and are planned to supplement local community resources.
- Advocate for affordable behavioral health treatment that achieves parity with medical insurance coverage on local, state, and national levels.

STRATEGY 13: PROVIDE SKILL-BUILDING SUPPORT GROUPS FOR YOUTH

OBJECTIVE

Provide skill-building support groups for identified at-risk youth in school and community settings that work to reduce the impact of multiple-risk factors, enhance protective factors, and involve families in supporting youth involvement and success.

AUDIENCE

The primary audience is young people who have multiple risk factors linked to suicidal behavior. The strategy should concentrate on school and community locations where at-risk young people are found. These include, but are not limited to, high schools, teen health clinics, college counseling/ health centers, youth activity centers, community health centers, juvenile detention facilities, youth shelters, and Job Corps centers.

Skill building that includes learning to set goals, make decisions, reduce anger, solve problems, and abstain from alcohol and other drugs is a promising approach to reduce suicidal behavior.

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

Skill-based support groups offer an opportunity to intervene with troubled youth and young adults short of the clinical intervention necessary for those at high risk of suicidal behavior. One feature that often characterizes at-risk youth is the challenge of facing multiple problems at the same time. Risk factors such as emotional distress, family strain, school strain, drug involvement, poor school performance, and low levels of personal and social support may overwhelm a young person’s coping abilities. Conducting skill-based support groups for identified at-risk youth can be an effective prevention strategy.⁵⁸

Studies show that youth with suicidal thoughts and behaviors are more likely to use emotion-based coping strategies and less likely to use problem-solving strategies than non-suicidal youth.^{59, 60} Deficiencies in such functions as goal setting, decision-making, anger management, problem-solving, and drug use control compound a youth's sense of hopelessness. Social and family support combined with skill development in these areas shows promise in reducing youth suicidal behaviors.^{61, 62, 63} Cognitive and behavioral experiences that increase feelings of competency and mastery will increase protective factors that offset risk factors of hopelessness and poor self esteem.

Talking with at-risk youth about their suicidal thoughts, combined with the support of caring adults in the youth's social network, appears to significantly reduce critical risk factors linked to suicidal behavior.⁶² Several programs have shown to be effective for depressed youth and youth at risk for suicidal behavior, including the Coping with Depression Course, Group Problem-Solving/Support Interventions, and Reconnecting Youth.^{64, 65, 61} Each of these programs has developed curricular materials for program planning and implementation.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

Young people in need of mental health services beyond the scope of skill-building support groups should be referred to mental health providers. Adults working with youth identified to be at high suicide risk should contact parents immediately and refer the family to a behavioral health care provider.

Lack of parental or family support is associated with youth suicidal behaviors.⁶⁶ The family component of skill-building groups focuses on parent involvement and linking youth and their families to sources of support. Collaboration between each youth, the program manager, and a parent/guardian (or adult friend or family member for a young adult) is important for involving at least one caring adult in a young person's life.⁵⁸

It is important to select an evidence-based model that offers a multi-component prevention approach. It is also important to assess existing groups according to the model followed and to what extent they are skill based, they provide a family support component concurrent with the youth's group involvement, and they are effective in reducing depression and suicidal ideation/behavior.

Youth with multiple risk factors have a dramatically higher probability of having attempted suicide than youth with few risk factors.⁵⁴ Assessing youth who may benefit from participation in skill-based support groups depends on identifying those with risk factors linked to suicide or youth populations with an elevated suicide risk (Appendix A). Care should be taken to avoid including youth who do not need the group intervention and to assure that high suicide-risk youth receive more intensive clinical services.

The presence of risk factors or a combination of risk factors can be indicative of risk behaviors other than suicide.

A good question to ask would be: "When you felt depressed, did you have access to items which could have ended your life?"
- an Oregon Youth

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Identify support/skill-building groups for youth and young adults that already exist in school and community settings, and identify gaps in services.
- Identify locations where high-risk youth are likely to be found as possible places to conduct groups.
- Train professionals to conduct skill-building groups for high-risk youth.
- Conduct group programs in coordination with screening programs and referral systems.
- Develop a plan for ongoing facilitator training, consultation and supervision services, and program evaluation.

STRATEGY 14: SUPPORT SUICIDE SURVIVORS

OBJECTIVE

Foster the development of bereavement support groups for youth and adult survivors of suicide (those who have lost someone by suicide).

AUDIENCE

Suicide survivors, including parents, other family members, and young people who have lost a friend.



RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

In 1998, 569 Oregonians died by suicide.⁶⁷ It has been estimated that six to eight people are directly affected by each suicide death, suggesting that at least 3,000 Oregonians each year face the emotional pain of losing a loved one or friend to suicide.⁶⁸ A survivor's own risk of suicide can increase as a result of cultural taboos and stigmatization, leading to criticism or condemnation of the survivor, social isolation, and loss of social support.⁶⁹ Young people who have lost a friend or acquaintance to suicide may be at increased risk of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation and behavior. Social support should be provided for these potentially bereaved and depressed youth.⁷²

Research on the effectiveness of supportive intervention with suicide survivors is limited. One study concluded that group interventions are initially worthwhile in helping adolescents cope with peer suicide, but that supportive intervention may be needed to offset a decrease over time in self-worth and academics.⁷¹ Another study of bereavement support group outcomes for adult survivors produced significant reductions in overall depression, distress, and despair.⁷

Many survivors find that involvement with suicide prevention promotes healing, reduces stigma, and helps them cope with the grief of losing a loved one or friend.

Suicide survivors are at increased risk for suicide.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

The stigma often associated with suicide inhibits some survivors from risking public visibility; care should be taken in outreach efforts to protect their privacy. Collaboration with established survivor networks and/or local survivor leadership is recommended.

Bereaved youth and their families may need crisis intervention services, individual counseling, or participation in a peer support group or community-based bereavement support group. Parents of and adults working with bereaved youth should be knowledgeable about local services and should assist youth in getting the support they need.

SAMPLE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

- Conduct outreach to suicide survivors and invite them to participate in implementing suicide prevention strategies.
- Assist survivors in organizing local bereavement support networks.
- Assist survivors in connecting with state, regional, and national organizations working to support survivor advocacy in preventing suicide.
- Support efforts to create community and regional events that increase survivor networking and involvement in suicide prevention activities.

Annually, 3000 Oregonians lose a loved one or friend to suicide.

STRATEGY 15: IMPROVE FOLLOW-UP SERVICES FOR SUICIDE ATTEMPTERS

OBJECTIVE

Improve emergency room and after-care services for youth suicide attempters and their families by:

- training emergency room staff in the use of a protocol to increase treatment adherence
- providing follow-up after-care for youth and their families

AUDIENCE

Emergency room personnel and after-care service providers.

A prior suicide attempt is the strongest predictor of a future attempt

RATIONALE AND EFFICACY

One of the strongest predictors of a future suicide attempt is a past attempt.⁷³ Follow-up studies have found that 31% to 50% of youth whose suicide attempts are serious enough to warrant medical care will make another attempt. As many as 11% will eventually take their own lives.^{74, 75} Studies show that psychiatric intervention can have a positive effect in reducing subsequent attempts.⁷⁶ Yet, approximately half of all adolescents seen for suicidal behavior receive no mental health intervention after their emergency room visit, and of those who do receive follow-up, as many as 75% do not adhere to the recommended treatment.⁷⁵ Appropriate medical care and after-care for suicide attempters is important for preventing future attempts in this highly vulnerable population.

A specialized emergency room program for adolescent attempters has demonstrated increased adherence to treatment after-care.⁷⁷ In addition, a brief family therapy model has shown promise in reducing overall symptom levels in youth suicide attempters, but research following them over time is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the model.^{77, 78}