
Section 4: Stay Active

Introduction:

Volunteer groups tend to start out strong, but can gradually lose focus and energy to carry out the vision. Our society also has a tendency to work on something for a while, and then to drop the ball. But the problem of youth suicide is not going away.

What keeps people in a group, staying active? How can group members find it rewarding and fun to be involved? What can be done to sustain this effort?

You can learn from Case Studies included in this section, detailing the impetus, planning and activities of three community groups in Washington working on youth suicide prevention.



In this section, you'll learn about:

4.1 Looking back and looking ahead

- What makes this work rewarding? Review the benefits of your labors.
- What are the challenges? How can we tackle them with new energy?
- Tips for breathing new life into the group and keeping meetings fun.

4.2 Promote your Activities

Promoting your projects through the media lets others know about what you are doing, can influence community leaders and educate the public. Seeing reports in the media can also help your group feel good about its accomplishments.

- How to write a Press Release
- How to write a Letter to the Editor

4.3 Celebrate

Recognition of your hard work is vital. It's important to feel acknowledged and appreciated. After a solid effort, have a gathering to celebrate your success. Give kudos and awards to each other for all your hard work.

4.4. Case Studies

- Life Is Valuable (LIV), North Kitsap
- Clark County Task Force
- Greater Issaquah Youth & Family Network

Dealing with Challenges

Youth suicide prevention is challenging work. GHCF survey respondents said that, while progress is often slow, efforts are underway and most were positive about their ability to meet the challenges.

Challenges included overcoming misconceptions and working to have youth suicide prevention seen as an important issue. Other challenges include fostering collaboration, keeping people interested and involved, keeping the issue visible in the absence of crises, and sustaining activities once they have begun.

“Our current effort is only two years old—the work goes slowly, but I am sure we will see definite outcomes in the next five years.”

— GHCF Community Networks Report

Challenges* and potential solutions

1. Overcoming the public’s reluctance to talk about suicide. *“There is such a stigma about mental health and shame around suicide. It is still a taboo subject. This issue does not get discussed or talked about enough. People think that this won’t happen to them but in reality it could very easily happen to anyone.”*

Try: Continue to talk openly about youth suicide in public forums

2. Convincing the public that youth suicide needs to be addressed at the level of the entire community, not just in the schools.

Try: Hold a public education event aimed at parents

3. Debunking the myths, helping people learn there are skills everyone can use for intervention.

Try: A public education campaign on the prevention skills

4. Being involved in the community and listening to what they want. *“We hear they want ASIST training; and more support by churches, doctors, and key community leaders.”*

Try: Continue to promote training, fundraising and networking

5. Elevating youth suicide prevention to high priority status within the health department and other agencies and organizations.

Try: Letter writing campaign, editorials with statistics

6. Promoting community collaboration. *“We continue trying to convince agencies to work together.”*

Try: Continue networking; recruit people within agencies to become proactive.

7. Presenting the programs to schools and obtaining their buy-in.

Try: Go through contacts at your school district, or make a presentation to the school board. Show examples of positive benefits at other schools. Explain that it is better to address the issue before it happens.

8. Getting people involved. *“There are only a small number of people working on very large goals. People will say they are interested, but don’t take action, or step up.”*

Try: Some people are willing to help, but don’t have much interest in or patience for group planning. Keep in touch with all who express interest. Invite them to participate with a specific task: e.g., “Can you run a car wash to fundraise for ASIST training at our school?” “Will you attend our awareness presentation next Thursday, and invite friends and colleagues?”

9. Getting gatekeepers to attend trainings. *“When the community wants education and information it works smoothly, but when suicide prevention drops off the radar we always have a low turn out.”*

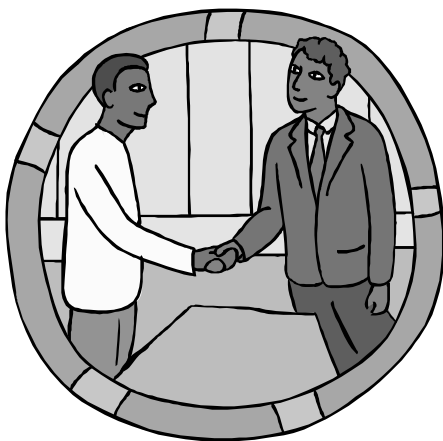
Try: Educate the gatekeepers on why the issue is important - and that it’s key to get training **before** it happens.

10. Keeping it at the forefront without a current crisis. *“It floats under the surface until something happens. After something happens—we have the horse pushing the cart instead of pulling it.”*

Try: Remind the community in an editorial. Celebrate the fact that the community has not had a youth suicide occur in the last xx months...but mention all the work being done to help keep it that way!

11. Sustaining the momentum and the resources to get the work done.

Try: Celebrate! Have a party (see page 75) and consider making it a fundraiser.



Define Obstacles and Solutions

Take some time at a meeting to reflect on the specific difficulties the group has faced, and explore ways to tackle the issues.

Obstacles	Solutions

Keep Meetings Fun

Remaining effective and getting results is what makes community work rewarding. If you find that your meeting attendance is down and energy levels are running low, try some of these suggestions:

- Have a party (see page 75)
- Keep the meeting schedule. Make sure time is not being wasted. (see Meeting Tips on page 17)
- Energize your meetings with speakers. Contact YSPP for help arranging a speaker.
- Meet with another group in a different community to share experiences and ideas.
- Involve young people, to infuse the group with fresh energy and drive.
- Bring in some new activities: team-building games?
- Meet in a park or restaurant for a change of pace.

Ideas for improving the group experience:



4.2 Promote your Group and its Activities

Promoting your project informs the community of your existence and the work you are doing. Effective promotion sparks community interest, awareness and potential support for your project. It also assists in building a profile for you and your project.

First steps include:

1. Create a simple logo - can be just text.
2. Create letterhead or flyers

People should know about your meetings. Promotion is a good way to get the word around. Keep your message short, understandable and simple. Be creative and colorful, as visually interactive, eye catching publicity is more effective.

Other publicity ideas include personal contact or word of mouth, leafleting, newspapers, phone trees, e-mail lists, newsletters on community bulletin boards and information tables.

Some promotional ideas:

- Send a press release to the local newspaper, radio and/or television station
- Inform other community groups in the area about the project.
- Write to local organizations and companies who are sympathetic to your cause
- Write to businesses in your community
- Distribute flyers and/or mailers
- Inform local schools of the activity
- Notify local leaders

Other marketing vehicles include:

- Advertising
- Brochures
- Direct mail
- Face-to-face marketing
- Internet
- Marketing kits
- Media relations
- Networking
- Newsletters
- Partnership programs
- Seminars and presentations
- Speaking engagements



Dealing with the Media

Reporters are always on the lookout for new and interesting stories. Often the best stories come from ordinary people: “Hey why don’t you do a story about...?” Many community or school newspapers publish human-interest stories, in addition to Calendar listings of upcoming events, which are also important.

Become familiar with the local media in your area. Get to know which stations and newspapers report on these types of issues. Talk with people who work at the newspapers. Don’t be intimidated to approach reporters; they need good stories to do their job well!

Stories about suicide can inform readers and viewers about the likely causes of suicide, its warning signs, trends in suicide rates, and local crisis resources. Stories about individual deaths by suicide may be newsworthy and need to be covered, but they also have the potential to do harm. Be sure to refer local media to YSPSP guidelines on reporting on suicide, found at www.yspp.org/media/reportingGuidelines.htm.

If your efforts to reach the public through Media and the press are working, look for articles or notices of events in the local paper. Clip and save in the ‘archives!’

When writing a news release remember:

- Think before you write. Target narrowly and carefully
- Keep it to one page, and relevant to your target (see example on next page)
- Keep the important information in the first paragraph
- Tailor the information to your target audience
- Re-read, re-read and re-read and rewrite, rewrite and rewrite
- Only commit to actions you know you’ll complete
- Follow up professionally - call to ask if your release was received, and if anyone at the media outlet is interested in covering the story

What is newsworthy?

The media is only interested in newsworthy topics. You need to develop an angle that will spark public interest. When pitching a story idea to the media, keep these seven indicators of a story’s newsworthiness in mind:

1. **Timely** - Is the story something that relates to current events or breaking news? Is it being released on the heels of national or province wide news on the same subject; i.e., is it localizing a national or regional story?
2. **Impact** - How many people in the community will the story impact or affect. How many people are affected by the issue that you think is news?
3. **Unusual** - Is there anything out of the ordinary happening? Is there something that will challenge our assumptions or beliefs?
4. **Currency** - What are people talking about now? Is the item something that is occurring in current events, or on everyone’s lips?
5. **Prominence** - Are well-known people or institutions involved? Do prominent newsmakers, celebrities, politicians, or other high-profile people play a role in the story?
6. **Proximity** - Is the news happening in the community or region where you are pitching the story idea?
7. **Conflict** - Is there drama, clashes between people and institutions, etc.?



Example: Sample press release

(a) **YSPSP –Youth Suicide Prevention Program**

(b) For Immediate Release: September 28, 2004

(c) Contact: Sue Eastgard, Youth Suicide Prevention Program, 206-297-5922

(d) National Survivors of Suicide Day: National Teleconference and Panel Discussion at UW Bothell

(e) SEATTLE - Every year the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) sponsors a nationwide event to provide an opportunity for suicide survivors to come together for support, healing, information and empowerment.

National Survivors of Suicide Day helps survivors express and understand the powerful emotions they experience, and connect with others who have survived the tragedy of losing someone to suicide. Simultaneous survivor conferences are held throughout the country and connected through a live national web cast.

The Nursing Program at the Bothell campus of the University of Washington will host the Puget Sound conference, to be held at 18115 Campus Way NE, Bothell, WA 98011. The event will be on Saturday, November 20th from 9 am to noon.

Following the web cast from 9 - 10:30 am, a panel of experts, including Dr. Charles Huffine MD and Sue Eastgard MSW, Director of the Youth Suicide Prevention Program of Washington State, will answer questions from participants.

Information about participating in a support group, contributing to a survivor quilt, lobbying for prevention programs in the state Legislature and/or joining a speakers' bureau will also be available.

The event is FREE and advance registration is not required.
Park in the south parking garage (\$1.00) and follow the signs to UW2-005.
For more information, call YSPSP at 206 297-5922.

(f) # # #

Key to Sample Press Release:

- a. Logo (preferably letterhead) or heading -- your organization's identity must be clear
- b. "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" followed by the data you plan to send it, or "FOR RELEASE AFTER:" followed by the date
- c. The name and phone number of the person in the organization to contact for information
- d. The suggested headline for the story; be as succinct and informative as possible, but capture the meaning of the story
- e. Formatting: Indent paragraphs five spaces. Double space the body of the release, type on one side only, and use wide margins. For a release running more than one page, use the word "-more-" at the bottom of each page and head each subsequent page with the page number and a shortened version of the headline
- f. At the end of the release, use "-30-", "end" or "# # #". This is standard form for news releases -- we aren't sure why, but newspaper editors do!

Preparing Letters to the Editors and Editorials

What is a letter to the editor?

- A written way of talking to readers of a regularly printed publication
 - Generally found in the first section of the publication or on the editorial page
 - Can be for or against an issue, or simply to inform
 - Usually less than 300 words
-

Why should you write a letter to the editor?

- You're angry about something and want others to know
 - An issue is so important that you must speak out
 - To persuade others to take a specific action
 - To suggest an idea to others
 - To influence public opinion
 - To educate the public
 - To influence policymakers
-

Should you use e-mail or fax?

Yes, just make sure that the publication accepts letters by e-mail and fax.

Pros: It's faster and easier than normal mail, It's less likely to get lost

Con: Easily deleted; you might call to be sure it was received.

How do you write a letter to the editor?

1. Open with a simple salutation
 2. Grab the reader's attention
 3. Explain what the letter is about at the start
 4. Explain why the issue is important
 5. Give evidence for any praise or criticism
 6. State your opinion about what should be done
 7. Keep it brief
 8. Sign the letter.
 9. Check your letter to make sure it's clear and to the point
-

How do you get your letters accepted?

- Keep it under 300 words
- Keep most important points in the first paragraph
- Refer to something recent & relevant in the community
- Use local statistics and personal stories
- Include your title as well as your name
- Include your phone number
- If it's not accepted the first time around, try again

Sample Letter

This letter was written by a survivor who is active in the community to tell his story, inform citizens to the statistics and funding issues, and to alert readers of an upcoming event held on National Survivors of Suicide Day. At 800 words, it is longer than most Letters to the Editor, so could be considered a Guest Column or Editorial.

Letter to the Editor: An opinion from a survivor
by Jonathan Manheim, Bainbridge Island
November 8, 2004

Up until a few years ago, like most people, I knew very little about suicide. In spite of the fact that my wife's grandfather and cousin had taken their own lives, I found the subject of suicide dark and uncomfortable and I was blissfully ignorant of the scope of the problem and the reasons people chose to end their lives. That all changed for me on July 11, 2001 when my son Garth died by suicide at the age of sixteen.

Garth was the product of a whole and loving family. He had two sisters, an extended family of grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. He did not do drugs or drink alcohol. He loved tennis, video games, writing, chess, and fantasy novels. He had two parents who loved him as much as it was possible to love a child.

Garth's death was a devastating blow to all of us. We all cast about for the reasons, since none were obvious. His mother and I knew that Garth was deeply dissatisfied with himself, and in a peculiar way we could not define, he seemed singularly ill-prepared to face modern life. The ordinary disappointments of his interactions with the world deeply disturbed him and generated great anger and self-disgust, out of proportion to the importance that they seemed to have to us.

We realized that Garth probably suffered from clinical depression. What we didn't realize was how dangerous that was, and we did not get him psychiatric help. We know now that he was contemplating suicide for at least a year before he actually accomplished it, and we face this knowledge with great bitterness and regret. Unfortunately, Garth chose to reveal none of his suicidal thoughts with us, his friends, teachers, or anyone else.

Garth was by no means unique. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among the 15-24 age group. Since 1950, the suicide rate among young white men has tripled, and among young white women it has doubled. Suicide takes more than 30,000 lives a year in the US alone, making it the 11th leading cause of death. Twice as many people die of suicide than of AIDS each year. This is not just a problem in the US; suicide is an epidemic problem around the world.

Suicide is rooted in mental illness, chiefly the poorly-understood mood disorder we call clinical depression, but suicide rates are also high among sufferers of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and alcoholism. The good news is that these disorders are clinical in nature and treatable through medication and counseling. The bad news is that we lack the knowledge to systematically diagnose and treat these disorders. We have made great progress in recent years, but much work needs to be done.

Many organizations provide education and support services with the goal of reducing the suicide rate, including the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), National Alliance for the Mentally ILL (NAMI), and the Youth Suicide Prevention Program (YSPP) of Washington State. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has a research program that provides grant money for independent groups studying various clinical aspects of the suicide problem. AFSP is only able to raise about \$7 million per year to cover all of its programs, of which about \$1.5 million goes to the research grant program. Compare that to more than \$500 million the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has donated to help fight

AIDS, or the \$100 million the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation raised last year. Our willingness to support research into the root causes of suicide is way out of proportion to the size of the problem. We must change that.

Two things need to happen now if we are to significantly reduce the suicide rate. We need to increase, by several orders of magnitude, the funding we give to both educational, support, and clinical research on mental illness and suicide. We also need to change the way we think about mental illness and suicide. We need to stop thinking of these disorders as character flaws, and start thinking of them as diseases. We would not tell a diabetic to "snap out of it", and neither should we expect that of a depression sufferer.

November 20 is National Survivors of Suicide Day. Every year, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention sponsors this nationwide event to bring the survivor community together for support, healing, information and empowerment. Conferences are held in dozens of cities, linked by a live national broadcast via satellite and on the web.

Our local conference will be held at the University of Washington's Bothell campus. If you are interested in participating in this event, or more information, go to the Youth Suicide Prevention Program website at www.yspp.org.

Jonathan Manheim
Bainbridge Island
November 8, 2004

4.3 Celebrate!

Celebration is an important aspect of any community initiative. People are proud of the work they do, and want to have a venue to express that. Sharing feelings of celebration with the community is powerful, showing others what you have done and how happy you are to be doing the work that is vital to the community.



No matter the outcome of your activities, it is important to step back from the work and pat yourself on the back. It's important to reward yourself and your colleagues for what you have accomplished.

Celebrations should never be reserved strictly for accomplishing incredible goals. Any time people put time and energy toward improving their community, it is worth special recognition.

Throw a party...

1. After reaching an important goal. It is important to recognize achievements in every stage, including brainstorming, planning, organizing, and implementing.
2. At the end of the year.
3. When you don't quite reach a goal; gather everyone together to boost morale.
4. Moments of transition. When team members join or leave.
5. Anytime! Sometimes, it's great to celebrate for no real reason at all, because it allows people to sit back and enjoy themselves, getting to know the people around them.

Tool: Arranging the party

Budget: How much can you spend? _____

Who's helping with organization? _____

Place: _____

Time: _____

Who do you need to contact? _____

Food: _____

Beverages: _____

Entertainment: _____

Other details: _____

Guest list: _____

4.4 Case Study I: Life Is Valuable

By Renee Arcement, YSPSP Public Education Coordinator
Member, LIV (Life is Valuable), North Kitsap, WA.

How did the group come together? What was the original impetus?

In Oct. 2002, our school district lost its first student to suicide in at least 25 years. The school didn't have a crisis response plan in place; parents and students did not have the knowledge to deal with the corresponding grief.

In February of 2003, we unfortunately lost another student to suicide. There was a loud outcry from the community. The district brought all of us together to meet with them, and asked for ideas, programs, etc. to share with each other and decide on a direction. In March 2003, the North Kitsap LIV(Life is Valuable) Youth Suicide Prevention Task Force was born.

What kinds of people, agencies and/or skills are represented?

The group is comprised of community members who want to see the prevention message spread in our community, including school counselors, a drug/alcohol interventionist, district employees, a Kitsap Health district employee, along with community advocates.

How often does the group typically meet, and where?

We meet once a month, the 3rd Tuesday from 7:45AM-8:45AM, in a school district conference room. Normally, we meet during the school year only.

Did the group set objectives and goals? What activities did/does the group do?

Our first priority was to create a crisis response plan for our secondary schools. We supplied information to the schools to develop their own plan. Now we are encouraging the elementary schools to develop plans. Also, we continually encourage training of all staff, administrators, and teachers in each school on the plan.

We all agreed that it was important for youth to feel that they had a voice in the message, and so have encouraged the secondary schools to implement a peer education campaign.

7 LIV members took ASIST training to start building a safety net. Currently, we are working on securing funding for ASIST training for all of our school counselors. We continually organize and promote community education nights.

Do you consider it worthwhile?

This has been a very worthwhile endeavor for our group. It is a topic that our community is aware of. We may not have knocked out the stigma, but we continue to keep the conversation going.

Are there obstacles to overcome?

The stigma surrounding suicide remains. Mainly individuals are afraid to talk about it, believing that talking about suicide could cause it. We continue to get the message out on prevention and did not have a student die by suicide this school year. We feel our youth are watching out for each other and letting adults know.

Do you have any suggestion for others forming a group?

I feel perseverance is of the greatest importance. If we had all climbed back in our shells after the first suicide passed, we may have never known there were others in our community and schools willing to work on the issue.

Secondly, don't go to your school saying, "What are you going to do about this?" It needs to be a partnership between the schools and the community members, as it does take a tribe to raise a child. Go to your school and say, "What can we do together, to help prevent suicide in our community?"

Educate yourselves by getting ASIST training, so you know what to do when a kid comes to you and says "John is thinking about suicide, I am worried about him." It doesn't help to just educate our kids, if we are not ourselves educated enough to follow through with the right responses.

Case Study II: Clark County

By Sue Eastgard, YSPSP Director.

How did the group come together? What was the original impetus?

Between September 2000 and May 2001, six Clark County youth, ages 13-16, died by suicide. These deaths spurred the Board of County Commissioners (with assistance from the Dept. of Community Services) to convene a task force to develop an approach for preventing future suicides.

What kinds of people, agencies and/or skills are represented?

To provide support to the task force, the Dept. of Community Services requested assistance from group partners, including Community Choices 2010 and Southwest Washington Health District. Community representatives invited to take part in the task force included individuals from local school districts, faith-based organizations, neighborhood and community organizations, medical and health agencies, youth, parent-teacher associations, and County judicial, juvenile justice and social service departments.

How often does the group typically meet, and where?

The task force met from May to November 2001, conducting background research and developing a set of strategies to guide the community's efforts to prevent future suicides. They were aided in the process by Judith Clegg, a private consultant with Clegg & Associates.

Did the group set objectives and goals?

The written plan identifies six strategies:

- develop active community involvement in positive youth development;
- educate the public about youth suicide;
- establish media partnerships;
- develop peer resources through school-based prevention programs;
- conduct suicide prevention & intervention training for professionals and others who work with youth; and
- improve access to mental health and substance abuse intervention and treatment services.

What activities did/does the group do?

A teen hotline was funded and in December 2003, TeenTalk began. Grant funds for a University of Washington suicide prevention research study (CAST-Plus) were secured; the study was conducted in several high schools in Vancouver, WA. Resources were made available for the delivery of several gatekeeper training programs.

Are there obstacles to overcome?

Securing and maintaining a focus and funding, even when no more suicides occur.

Do you consider it worthwhile?

Yes; the issue was brought out in the open.

Case Study III: Greater Issaquah Youth & Family Network

By Sue Eastgard, YSPSP Director and Advisor to GIYFN, Issaquah, WA.

How did the group come together? What was the original impetus?

Established by law in 1992, the Family Policy Council (FPC) of Washington State is charged with making systemic changes to improve outcomes for children and families. One of the Council's main activities is working with the State's Community Public Health and Safety Networks, of which the Greater Issaquah Youth & Family Network (GIYFN) is one. The networks work to address important social problems such as child abuse, youth substance abuse and teen suicide.

What kinds of people, agencies and/or skills are represented?

Like other networks across the state, GIYFN consists of volunteers from the local school district, social service agencies, faith-based organizations, parent-teacher organizations, as well as community advocates for children & youth. A staff person provides support to the network and helps to ensure compliance from contracting agencies/individuals.

How often does the group typically meet, and where?

The GIYFN board meets monthly at various locations, including the administrative offices of the school district.

Did the group set objectives and goals?

Each network determines their individual priorities; GIYFN "took on" teen suicide following several deaths in 2001-2002.

What activities did/does the group do?

GIYFN organized and facilitated a community forum to raise awareness about teen suicide and to develop an action plan. Action committees on postvention, prevention/intervention and resources were mobilized and GIYFN put money into supporting specific initiatives, such as grief counseling training, parent education, and the purchase and distribution of resource directories.

Are there obstacles to overcome?

In a recent survey of individuals who attended the initial community forum, there was a general feeling that GIYFN got things started but the community's (not the network's) interest waned as there was the belief that the crisis had passed. It is clear that the commitment must be long term and not just a knee-jerk reaction to a particular suicide.

Do you consider it worthwhile?

On May 3, 2005, GIYFN received Issaquah School District's 2005 regional leadership award from the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA). In nominating GIYFN, Superintendent Barry wrote:

"No one can absolutely know if or how many lives have been saved by the Greater Issaquah Youth and Family Network's prevention, intervention, awareness and support work in Issaquah. One can only list the programs they've made possible, the awareness they've raised around the once-taboo topic of student suicide, and their generous readiness to 'be there' with prevention, intervention, and post-suicide support."

Conclusion

We hope you have found this Toolkit useful for starting and growing a community action group. At YSPP, we know we can't do this work without your help. Your work is extremely important and valuable. You are helping to make your community more aware and to save young lives.

Thank you!

Sue Eastgard, MSW
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