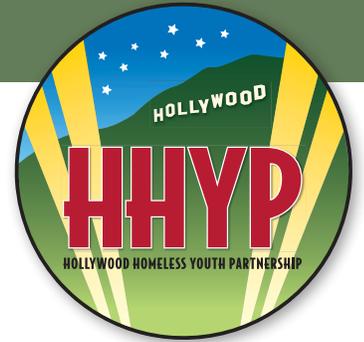


# A Guide to **Suicide Assessment and Prevention** for Youth Experiencing Homelessness



**D**irect care staff play an important role in suicide assessment and prevention at homeless youth serving agencies. **Always take any mention of suicide seriously.** The following 5 steps are designed to guide you in recognizing warning signs for suicide and taking appropriate action. Talking to someone about suicide can be daunting but it is critically important. Please review this information and speak to your supervisor if you have additional questions.

## **STEP 1: LOOK** for Warning Signs

Youth may indicate that they are thinking about suicide by what they say and what they do. You may hear or witness these behaviors directly or be informed by others.

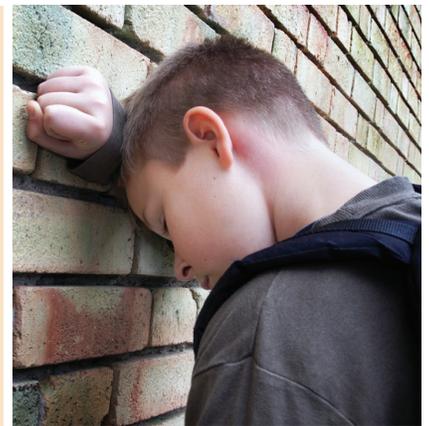
### **Verbal**

#### **Talking about:**

- Wanting to die or kill oneself
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling trapped
- Feeling unbearable pain
- Being a burden to others
- Harming selves or harming others
- Seeking revenge
- Not wanting to be here anymore

### **Behavioral**

- Displaying extreme mood swings
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Giving away possessions to friends or staff
- Withdrawing from friends or staff
- Acting anxious or agitated
- Behaving recklessly
- Making final arrangements
- Putting themselves in harm's way



**Possible Suicide Triggers for Homeless Youth:** Some experiences are even more devastating for youth experiencing homelessness because of past trauma, limited social support, and poorly developed coping skills. Homeless youth can be especially vulnerable to these stressful events:

- A breakup of a relationship
- Being victimized or feeling humiliated
- Anniversary of a significant event or trauma

## **STEP 2: ENGAGE**

- **If you are concerned about a young person and their risk for suicide, always inform your supervisor.**  
If your supervisor isn't available, notify and get help from your co-workers.
- **Talk about suicide directly** — You will **NOT** be putting ideas into a person's head. **It may actually be dangerous to avoid asking a person directly if they are feeling suicidal.**
- **Listen** — Show the young person that you care and acknowledge how difficult it is to talk about depression and suicide. Give the young person your full attention.
- **Ask questions** — Keep asking questions that allow the youth to express his/her feelings. (Sometimes youth need a space they can talk about their suicidal thoughts. Talking about their feelings sometimes de-escalates the risk for an attempt.) If they mention a suicide plan, don't leave them alone.
- **Be aware of your environment** — Make sure you are in a safe and comfortable space so you can fully focus on the young person. Inform other staff of the situation so that you are not handling it alone.

### STEP 3: ASSESS for Suicide Risk

It can be difficult to know what questions to ask. The most important information to find out is if they have a plan, if they have the means to carry out this plan, and if they intend to attempt suicide in the immediate future. Always share the results of this assessment with your supervisor so that you can develop an appropriate action plan.

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>PLAN</b>   | Does the young person have a plan in mind for suicide? How specific and lethal is the plan?  |
| <b>MEANS</b>  | Does the young person have the tools to carry out the plan? For example, does he or she have the pills, the weapon, or a bridge in mind? |
| <b>INTENT</b> | Does the young person have a time frame for their plan? Is he/she thinking about today, tomorrow, a month?                               |

### STEP 4: ACTION

- If at any point a suicide attempt is imminent, call 911.
- Consult with a supervisor to determine if the youth needs additional care or assessment using the following resources:

|   |  |   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
| <p>Psychiatric Response<br/>Medical Team (PRMT)<br/>323-226-5581</p> <p>LAPD Hollywood division<br/>SMART TEAM<br/>213-485-4188</p> | <p>CA Youth Crisis Line<br/>800-843-5200</p> | <p>Exodus Recovery Center<br/><a href="http://www.exodusrecoveryinc.com">www.exodusrecoveryinc.com</a></p> <p>23-hour Psychiatric Urgent Care Centers<br/>Ages served depends on location</p> | <p>Agency specific<br/>emergency contact</p> |
|---|--|---|--|

- If you or your supervisor decides to contact PRMT or the police, it is important to be as transparent as possible, considering the circumstances, and to prepare the young person for what will happen next. Provide the young person with updates, assistance, reassurance and reminders regarding the importance of a thorough hospitalization assessment (if necessary), given that a youth may want to leave.
- If a young person is highly agitated, it is not uncommon for them to leave during your suicide assessment or while you are waiting for an assessment team. It is generally not safe to detain or chase a young person who is suicidal. However, if you feel that they are in imminent danger, you should call 911 and notify your supervisor. It is very helpful to pay attention to the appearance and attire of the young person so that you can describe them to emergency personnel.

### STEP 5: DEBRIEF

- Always debrief with your team after a suicide assessment. Talking with a suicidal youth can be stressful.
- Get support from your coworkers and supervisor.
- Be aware of your thoughts and feelings and share them with a trusted family member or co-worker.



The Community Trauma Treatment Center for Runaway and Homeless Youth: SAMHSA Grant #SM57247, in partnership with Sara Train of Project SPIN at the LA Gay & Lesbian Center/LAUSD.

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