

Postvention Planning Before It Happens: Obstacles, Decisions, and Readiness Strategies

Live TA discussion using a South Carolina school-based scenario

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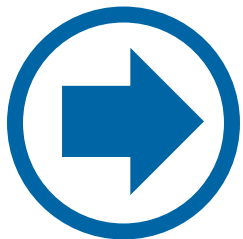
About SPRC

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) advances effective suicide prevention nationwide through free consultation, training, and tools for community organizations and coalitions; workplaces; state and Tribal leaders; health/behavioral health systems; professionals and professional education programs; and national public and private partners. SPRC is supported through a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Session Purpose

- Use a real-world school postvention challenge to identify practical readiness strategies.
- Clarify which decisions are easier and safer to make before a loss occurs.
- Explore how GLS grantees can support schools and communities without becoming the sole decision-maker.
- Invite peer learning from grantees who have faced similar questions.

Learning Objectives



- Identify common postvention readiness gaps in school and community settings.
- Describe key decisions that should be clarified before a suicide death or other sudden loss occurs.
- Apply safe messaging and memorialization considerations to a real-world scenario.
- Identify practical roles GLS grantees can play in strengthening postvention planning.

GLS in South Carolina

- Collaboration between South Carolina Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (BHDD), Office of Mental Health (OMH), Suicide Prevention (SPP), and School Mental Health Programs (SMH)
- BHDD – Developmental disabilities, mental health, and substance use
- OMH – South Carolina's public mental health system; 16 centers covering all counties; multiple programs
- SPP – Statewide training and outreach; 988 Lifeline management
- SMH – 30 years; almost 250 clinicians in almost 500 schools in 60 school districts

GLS in South Carolina

Key Activities

- Working in 3 counties and school districts
- Embedding Sources of Strength Elementary curriculum in K-5 and Sources of Strength Secondary model in 6-12
- Developing a model suicide policy for schools with the Education Development Center
- Facilitating suicide prevention workshops for clinicians through SafeSide Prevention
- Creating partnerships with South Carolina American Academy of Pediatrics, Crisis Text Line, and South Carolina Tribal nations

Case Study

- Student died by suicide in 9th grade following a referral and discipline by school.
- Four years later, the student's parent contacts the school four days before graduation.
 - *Parent was upset that the student's name wasn't included in program and wanted the student's name announced during graduation.*
- School cannot accommodate name in program; places empty chair with flower to be seated with other students.
- School does not have written procedures for memorialization.

How We Will Use the Case

- This is a learning scenario, not a critique of a school, family, or grantee.
- The goal is to slow down the decision points and think through what would help a community respond with care and consistency.
- We will consider immediate response, longer-term readiness, and what GLS grantees can build before the next difficult situation.

You do not need the perfect answer.

The goal is to identify what questions, partners, and decision points would help a school respond safely and compassionately.

Real-Time TA: What Would You Want to Know First?

- What policies or informal practices already exist for memorialization?
- Who has decision-making authority: school, district, legal/risk management, communications, behavioral health, or another group?
- What supports have been offered to the family, staff, students, and school community over time?
- How has the school handled other student or staff deaths?
- Are there current concerns about contagion risk, media attention, or student distress?

Immediate Decision Points

- How to respond compassionately to the parent while maintaining safe and consistent school practices.
- Whether and how to acknowledge the student during graduation.
- How to support staff who may feel guilt, fear, resentment, or uncertainty.
- How to communicate with students and families if questions arise.
- How to document the decision-making process and lessons learned.

Memorialization: Questions to Consider

- Is the response consistent across student deaths, regardless of cause?
- Could the memorial unintentionally increase distress, risk, or contagion?
- Does the response avoid glamorizing or romanticizing the death?
- What alternatives allow the family and school community to grieve safely?
- How will anniversaries, graduation, and other milestones be handled in the future?

What to Avoid in Postvention and Memorialization

- Making one-time decisions under pressure without a clear process
- Treating suicide deaths differently than other deaths in ways that may feel inequitable or unsafe
- Creating permanent or highly visible memorials without considering contagion risk
- Sharing details about the death
- Relying on one person to make decisions alone
- Returning to business as usual without support for staff, students, and family

Key Areas for Improvement

- Create written procedures for postvention and memorialization.
- Provide follow-up and support for suicide loss survivors beyond the first year.
- Prioritize equal posthumous remembrances for all deaths, regardless of cause.
- Use community partners as a resource.

Possible GLS Grantee Roles

- Serve as a thought partner for schools and districts as they clarify options and risks.
- Connect schools and districts to safe messaging, postvention, crisis response, and school mental health resources.
- Facilitate tabletop exercises or planning conversations before a crisis occurs.
- Review draft policies, protocols, communication templates, and memorialization guidance.
- Create bridges to community partners, crisis services, behavioral health providers, Tribal partners, and family/youth supports.

Roles GLS Grantees May Not Own Alone

- Final school or district memorialization decisions.
- Legal, liability, or risk management determinations.
- Family negotiations or commitments made on behalf of the school district.
- Media response, unless specifically authorized.
- Clinical care for affected individuals outside the grantee's role, scope, or setting.

Readiness Strategies to Build Before a Loss

- Develop written postvention and memorialization procedures.
- Identify decision-makers and communication pathways before an urgent request occurs.
- Clarify how schools will respond consistently to student or staff deaths from all causes.
- Create templates for family communication, staff communication, and community messaging.
- Plan for short-term response and longer-term anniversaries, graduations, and milestones.
- Practice with realistic tabletop scenarios.

Small Group Discussion: Apply the Scenario

- What would you recommend the school do in the immediate situation?
- What would you want to avoid?
- What should have been clarified in policy before this request occurred?
- What role could the GLS grantee play after the event and before the next one?
- What partners should be at the table?

Small Group Discussions

- As suicide prevention professionals, how integrated are we into the schools and communities we serve?
- How do we build ourselves into the workflow of suicide prevention?

Building Suicide Prevention Into the School Workflow

The goal is to move from being called in after a crisis to being built into the system before, during, and after risk emerges.

Suicide prevention professionals can support schools by:

- Helping develop protocols
- Training staff
- Clarifying decision points
- Strengthening safety planning and warm handoffs
- Supporting reentry and follow-up
- Guiding postvention and memorialization decisions before communities are forced to make them in the middle of grief or urgency



Building Suicide Prevention Into the School Workflow

After This Session: Practical Next Steps

- Review whether partner schools have written postvention and memorialization procedures.
- Identify gaps in leadership, family communication, safe messaging, and decision-making authority.
- Clarify how schools, crisis providers, community mental health providers, state suicide prevention partners, and family/youth supports coordinate.
- Consider a tabletop exercise using a realistic school-based scenario.
- Document lessons learned and use them to strengthen readiness across districts.

Resources to Bring Into Planning

- SPRC postvention resources and safe messaging guidance
- After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools
- School district crisis response and communications policies
- AFSP and NAMI resources for suicide loss survivors
- State suicide prevention plan and local crisis response pathways
- 988 Lifeline, mobile crisis, community mental health, and youth/family support partners

Closing Reflection

- Postvention readiness is built before a loss but strengthened through honest reflection afterward.
- The goal is not to have every answer in the moment.
- The goal is to establish a compassionate, consistent, and safe process that helps schools and communities respond with care.



Questions?

Resources

Suicide Prevention in Health Care Settings:

<https://sprc.org/health-care/>

Preventing Suicide in Tribal Communities:

<https://sprc.org/tribal-resources>

Centering Lived Experience in Prevention Efforts:

<https://sprc.org/livedexperience/>

How to Get Started in My Community:

<https://sprc.org/community-suicide-prevention/>

Suicide Prevention Infrastructure for States
and Territories:

<https://sprc.org/state-infrastructure>

Choosing a Suicide Prevention Program:

<https://bpr.sprc.org>



Thank you!

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