

SUICIDE PREVENTION CORE COMPETENCIES:

Local Health Department Staff Assessment

Community members will share the responsibility for preventing suicide. As community members who also represent local public health, ideally all local health department (LHD) staff should possess some fundamental knowledge about suicide and suicide prevention. To support, implement, or lead suicide prevention efforts, LHD staff need specific skills and knowledge. The table below lists suicide prevention core competencies organized by categories representing three levels of career progression for LHD staff working in suicide prevention:

- **Foundational (New Professional/Contributor):**
LHD staff who are new to suicide prevention or whose work touches suicide prevention through shared risk and protective factors (e.g., those working on substance use and overdose prevention, maternal and child health, violence prevention, and social determinants of health).
- **Intermediate (Practitioner/Implementer):**
LHD staff who apply knowledge and concepts to plan, implement, coordinate, or evaluate suicide prevention activities or closely related programming.
- **Advanced (Strategic Lead/Systems Leader):**
LHD staff who—as advanced career professionals—lead or significantly influence a community-based approach to suicide prevention either in a leadership role or as experienced specialists.

Core competencies are outlined in six key areas:

1. Suicide prevention knowledge
2. Safe and responsible communication
3. Trauma-informed practice
4. Data and surveillance
5. Program planning, implementation, evaluation
6. Workplace wellness and culture

Several core competencies listed below are adapted from Safe States' [Core Competencies for Injury & Violence Prevention](#).

Instructions: Individually, with your supervisor, or as a team, review the core competencies table and check-off competencies that you already meet.

Then, discuss your responses to the prompts below to identify your next steps for addressing any gaps. It likely won't be feasible to make progress across all competencies at once, and that's ok!

Challenge yourself to find one gap or opportunity to strengthen a core competency in this quarter.

Competency Area 1: Suicide Prevention Knowledge

Many of the competencies in this area are covered in NACCHO's free course: [Community-Based Suicide Prevention for Local Health Departments](#).

Foundational (New Professional/Contributor)

- Explain that suicide is preventable and evidence-based prevention strategies exist across the prevention continuum (primary, secondary, tertiary prevention)
- Understand suicide risk and protective factors
- Recognize warning signs
- Understand and apply best practices to respond to suicide warning signs (e.g. knowledge available via gatekeeper training such as [Question, Persuade, Refer](#) or [LivingWorks ASIST](#))
- Understand structural contributors to suicide risk (e.g., housing instability, unemployment, and barriers to healthcare access)
- Understand those at risk of suicide in the community

Intermediate (Practitioner/Implementer)

In addition to all Foundational Competencies:

- Understand suicide prevention strategies and approaches with the best available evidence across the prevention continuum (primary, secondary, tertiary prevention)
- Understand and apply a public health approach to suicide prevention
- Understand risk and protective factors that suicide shares with other public health priorities (e.g., youth violence, intimate partner violence, substance use)
- Understand current research related to suicide and suicide prevention
- Understand state or local policies or legislation pertinent to suicide prevention

Advanced (Strategic Lead/Systems Leader)

In addition to all Foundational and Intermediate Competences:

- Understand broader landscape of the suicide prevention field, including emerging issues and trends; relevant legislation and policy; key national, state, and regional players; and funding opportunities and gaps

Competency Area 2: Safe and Responsible Communication

The National Action Alliance's [Framework for Successful Messaging](#) webpage may help meet several competencies in the Foundational and Intermediate levels.

Foundational (New Professional/Contributor)

- Understand importance and examples of person-centered, non-stigmatizing language
- Communicate about suicide prevention (written and verbal) following safe messaging principles to reduce potential for harm

Intermediate (Practitioner/Implementer)

In addition to all Foundational Competencies:

- Develop communications materials (e.g., talking points, web content, communications tools) that follow safe messaging principles
- Understand key guidance on safe reporting to share with contacts at media outlets (e.g., SAVE's [Media recommendations for responsible coverage](#))
- Apply skills and knowledge to educate or advise the community and partners on safe messaging principles
- Apply strategic thinking to any suicide prevention communications (e.g., identify goal, audience, call to action, intended impact)
- Identify communications that do not follow safe messaging principles and address these concerns with education and guidance

Advanced (Strategic Lead/Systems Leader)

In addition to all Foundational and Intermediate Competences:

- Develop a local, data-driven communications strategy
- Collaborate with internal and external partners to develop and implement a plan for community messaging following a local suicide death, including guidance for identifying when messaging is needed

Competency Area 3: Trauma-Informed Practice

Foundational (New Professional/Contributor)

- Define trauma
- Understand trauma's impact on individuals and communities
- Have a basic understanding of trauma-informed principles and practices

Intermediate (Practitioner/Implementer)

In addition to all Foundational Competencies:

- Assess existing suicide prevention efforts and programming for gaps in trauma-informed practices
- Apply trauma-informed principles and practices to the development, implementation, and evaluation of suicide prevention efforts

Advanced (Strategic Lead/Systems Leader)

In addition to all Foundational and Intermediate Competences:

- Apply skills and knowledge to educate or advise community partners in the application of trauma-informed principles and practices in suicide prevention

Competency Area 4: Data and Surveillance

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center's free [Locating and Understanding Data for Suicide Prevention](#) training may help meet several competencies in the Foundational and Intermediate levels.

Foundational (All Staff)

Understand terminology related to types of suicide data (e.g. morbidity, mortality, attempts, ideation, risk and protective factors)

Intermediate (Program & Technical Staff)

In addition to all Foundational Competencies:

Understand key national sources for suicide surveillance and syndromic data

Identify current and potential state or local data sources, including data related to upstream risk and protective factors

Identify and engage key multi-sector partners to facilitate collection of, access to, and/or use of suicide-related data

Apply principles of ethical and legal data use and management (e.g., protecting privacy and maintaining confidentiality)

Interpret available suicide data to identify or understand burden and trends, including those related to upstream risk and protective factors

Assess, investigate, and report potential suicide clusters

Conduct methods of primary data collection, including surveys, focus groups, and key informant interview

Communicate suicide-related data clearly and effectively to diverse audiences, following safe messaging guidelines

Advanced (Leadership)

In addition to all Foundational and Intermediate Competencies:

Assess existing data collection and reporting methods and recommend improvements

Develop a suicide prevention data management plan (e.g., how data is organized, securely stored, and confidentiality maintained; how quality and accuracy of data will be maintained; how data will be accessible and shared)

Develop a suicide data analysis plan (e.g., what relevant data and sources will be used; how data will be analyzed and interpreted; how results will be summarized, visualized, and shared to support decision-making)

Competency Area 5: Program Planning, Implementation and Education

Foundational (New Professional/Contributor)

- Understand the LHD's role in planning, implementing, and evaluating suicide prevention programs
- Recognize that suicide prevention efforts require collaboration with multi-sector partners

Intermediate (Practitioner/Implementer)

In addition to all Foundational Competencies:

- Develop and maintain multi-sector partnerships
- Understand and apply principles and processes necessary to use data to drive decisions
- Select, adapt, and/or design programs that respond to the unique needs/context of the community
- Identify appropriate roles for the LHD in planning, implementing, and evaluating suicide prevention efforts
- Develop or contribute to a logic model and evaluation plan that includes short-, intermediate-, and long-term outcomes and indicators
- Ensure prevention strategies, decision-making processes, and policy approaches meaningfully include and reflect the input of program participants and impacted communities
- Utilize evaluation data to guide program adaptations and improvements

Advanced (Strategic Lead/Systems Leader)

In addition to all Foundational and Intermediate Competencies:

- Design a comprehensive local strategy to prevent suicide that incorporates data-driven approaches across the prevention continuum (primary, secondary, tertiary)
- Make systems-level recommendations and/or advocate to strengthen systems that will improve planning, implementation, and evaluation

Competency Area 6: Workplace Wellness and Culture

Foundational (New Professional/Contributor)

Recognize potential emotional impact on staff working to prevent suicide due to the difficult nature of the topic and possible connection to personal experiences

Understand resources and supports available in the workplace and community

Self-assess and identify signs of burnout, and understand how to access support as needed

Intermediate (Practitioner/Implementer)

In addition to all Foundational Competencies:

Recognize and appropriately respond to signs of stress, burnout, or mental health concerns among colleagues

Assess workflows or team practices for impact on staff well-being and adapt to reduce stress and enhance staff wellness

Integrate mental health promotion or awareness into daily work with colleagues (e.g, normalize conversations about mental health, promote or model boundary-setting, share resources for support. [NAMI Stigma Free website](#) has a free training and several resources to advance mental well-being in the workplace.)

Advanced (Strategic Lead/Systems Leader)

In addition to all Foundational and Intermediate Competences:

Assess workplace policies to identify gaps and opportunities related to mental health and suicide prevention promotion

Advocate for workplace policies that promote mental health, connect employees with necessary resources, and reduce stigma

Promote a sense of connection and belonging among staff by regularly checking in on mental health needs and encouraging/modeling use of workplace employee supports

What?

Looking at the core competency checklist above,

- In which categories do you/your team meet the most core competencies? In which categories do you/your team meet the fewest core competencies?
- Where do you/your team meet the most foundational level core competencies? Where do they meet the fewest? What about at the intermediate and advanced level?
- What stands out to you/your team about the checklist responses, overall?

So What?

Overtime, you should work to fill all the gaps in your suicide prevention core competencies, but it is likely not feasible to tackle everything at once. Consider where to start:

- Which core competency areas are most critical to address first? Think about your current suicide prevention work and/or your goals for the near future and identify which competency areas are necessary for those efforts.
- Considering your current capacity and resources, which should you prioritize first?
- If met, which core competency areas would be most impactful if addressed first?

Now What?

- Without additional resources or authority, what next steps can you take to develop core competencies in the identified areas?
- If additional resources or authority are needed to address the core competencies you identified, who can you approach to advocate for these? How can you generate buy-in to allocate resources to address these core competencies?