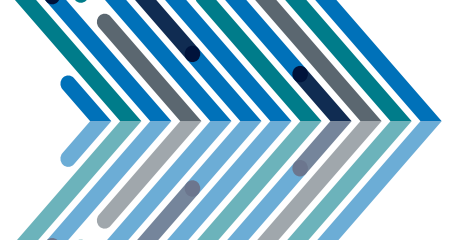


# MESSAGING ABOUT SUICIDE PREVENTION in Law Enforcement



## Strategies for Safe and Positive Messaging

This was developed through the National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide (the Consortium) and focuses on the importance of safe messaging. Through the Consortium, five task force groups were formed to identify recommendations and considerations for the policing profession as it relates to suicide prevention efforts in an agency or department: messaging, data and research, organization and system change, peer support, and family support. This resource provides information for leadership to use to help promote and support suicide prevention efforts.

### WHY DOES MESSAGING ABOUT SUICIDE MATTER?

Research has shown that messaging about suicide can either increase the risk of suicide and undermine prevention efforts or promote positive behaviors and support prevention goals.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> There are many complexities to what contributes to suicidal thoughts or behavior in an individual police officer. **Words matter**, and the way a police agency talks about suicide has a significant impact in preventing suicide and encouraging help-seeking behavior for those who may be in crisis. Contrary to best practice recommendations, many messages focus on the specific type, location, or graphic descriptions surrounding suicide loss, providing detailed information that is inappropriate for the people hearing the messages. In order to help promote and support prevention efforts, agencies should consider the evidence-based recommendations provided in this toolkit.

### WHAT IS PUBLIC MESSAGING?

Public messaging is broadly defined as any communications released into the public domain, including internal and external departmental

communication through email, newsletters, training, intranet, websites, flyers, social media posts, public presentations, media interviews, press releases, and any other messages or materials to a large group.<sup>4</sup> The guidelines below are not intended to address private conversations, interactions with individuals in crisis, one-on-one conversations including with a chaplain, or interventions with a member of peer support or treatment professional.

### WHAT ARE THE KEY COMPONENTS WHEN MESSAGING ABOUT SUICIDE?

In 2014, the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (Action Alliance), the nation's public-private partnership for suicide prevention, released the [Framework for Successful Messaging](#), a research-based resource outlining four key components when messaging to the public about suicide.<sup>5</sup> These key components include:



#### STRATEGY

Upfront thinking and planning that helps messages succeed



#### SAFETY

Avoiding potentially harmful messaging content



#### POSITIVE NARRATIVE

Sharing messages that promote hope and help-seeking



#### GUIDELINES

Utilizing specific messaging guidelines or recommendations.

“It comes down to courageous leadership from the top. Police chiefs need to send the message that it's okay to ask for help and outline how to do it.

– President Steven Casstevens, *President, International Association of Chiefs of Police*



# Start with Strategy

Developing a strategy is the first step to any effective communications or messaging effort. Departments should ensure that any public messaging is strategic and well thought out. To do this, agency leaders can apply the following questions:

## ■ WHAT ARE THE GOALS OF THE MESSAGE?

- Be specific with the goals. A broad goal such as “raise awareness” is not specific enough. Instead, consider a goal like “increase the number of officers who utilize our peer support program.”

## ■ WHO IS THE AUDIENCE?

- Messages targeted too broadly, such as “everyone,” will not be effective. Each audience will have unique needs that need to be addressed through the messaging. For example, messaging to a recruit will be different than messaging to a command officer. Additionally, developing messages department-wide will be different than messaging to a specific group such as retired officers or officers who identify as LGBTQ+.

## ■ WHAT ACTION/BEHAVIOR IS THE AUDIENCE BEING ENCOURAGED TO TAKE?

- The targeted action/behavior the audience is recommended to take should be specific and help the audience take small steps towards a broader goal. For example, a specific action might be “learn how to support a fellow officer who may be struggling or in crisis by learning to identify the warning signs of suicide.” Consider if the audience is being encouraged or asked to take a specific action or if it is a mandate, such as the department implementing routine mental health check-ins with a professional.

## ■ HOW DOES THE MESSAGING ALIGN WITH OTHER PROGRAMS OR SERVICES?

- Be intentional about alignment with programs, services, and the mission of the department. For example, if an agency develops a poster that promotes help-seeking, the agency should include information about available services such as a peer support program or available crisis lines for officers. Additionally, it can be important to connect mental health programs with physical health programs and overall well-being.

“The most dangerous person we can potentially encounter each day is our mindset if we don’t take care of ourselves.

– Nic Allen, *South Dakota Highway Patrol, Crash Assistance Program, West River Victims’ Witness Coordinator*



## Support Safety

The language used when talking about suicide is critically important. Evidence corroborates that how we message publicly about suicide can have an impact on suicidal behavior and may put vulnerable populations at increased risk.<sup>6, 7, 8, 9, 10</sup> Messaging that can contribute to increased risk includes providing details about suicide method or location, glamorizing a suicide death, portraying suicide as common or an expected response to adversity, and presenting a simple explanation for a death. Agencies should use terminology stating an officer died by suicide instead of sharing the specific method or location details to officers, the community, or the media. It is helpful to communicate that struggles played a role in a suicide death while also not providing a simple explanation. Statements indicating a sole contributing factor to a suicide death should be avoided. One circumstance is often not the only factor which contributed to a suicidal crisis. Also, it can be harmful to communicate or contribute to a perception that suicidal crises are normal among police, as if they are just a part of the job, or a common reaction to trauma. Agencies can refrain from glamorizing suicide in their communications by avoiding commenting that the deceased is now “free from all suffering”.

To help support safety through all messaging efforts, it is important that agencies:

- **EMPHASIZE** the fact that most people who face adversity do not die by suicide, but instead find support or treatment.
- **HIGHLIGHT** that suicide results from a complex interplay of factors and cannot be attributed to one single cause.
- **SHARE** stories which focus on thriving, recovery, and healthy coping.
- **ADJUST** terminology away from using the word “commit” which can have a criminal connotation and instead use words such as “died by” or “died of” suicide which are more consistent with physical health terms.



## Share Positive Stories

Balance the negative aspects of suicide with stories of officers who have sought help and gone on to recover, live, and thrive. Think about how the message will help others envision hope, recovery, and resiliency. Some examples of how you can share positive stories include:

- **TANGIBLE** actions your audience can take, such as knowing the warning signs of suicide risk and reaching out to an officer that is going through a tough time.
- **STORIES** of coping and resiliency sharing all ends of the continuum from coping with financial troubles, to bouncing back from a broken arm, to healing from a suicide attempt.

- **PROVIDE** available resources such as in-house mental health services, Employee Assistance programs, peer support, chaplain support, community-based resources, and crisis hotlines.
- **HOW** people are making a difference, including stories of how personnel in the department are supporting others or found peer support valuable.

This component is not meant to downplay the seriousness of suicide, but rather apply the evidence that our messaging matters and everyone has a role in balancing the negative aspects of suicide with positive action steps people can take to help prevent suicide.



## Follow Guidelines

This component recognizes that there are many helpful resources available for specific types of messaging—such as specific channels, like print materials or electronic communications, or specific goals, like increasing resilience. When developing messages, agencies should use guidelines and best practices that are already available. These guidelines and more messaging resources can found at:

[National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention Framework for Successful Messaging](#)

[IACP Media Relations Considerations Document](#)

[IACP Social Media Document](#)

[IACP Blog Post: It's Simply Not Your News to Break](#)

“ There isn’t an officer who gets through 20 years and doesn’t have some challenges. Every single officer is going to go through this. We must talk about it and give them the tools on the front end, so they know what to do.

– Dianne Bernhard, *Deputy Chief, Ret., Columbia (MO) Police Department and Executive Director of Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S)*

# A Key Component of an Agency-Wide Suicide Prevention Approach

Disseminating appropriate and positive messages is one of the 11 components of the *Comprehensive Framework for Law Enforcement Suicide Prevention*, a resource of the Consortium that provides law enforcement agencies with comprehensive strategies to support officers through messaging, training, support, connectedness, and more. Below are considerations for messaging by chiefs, command staff, peers, and families of officers.

## CHIEFS AND COMMAND STAFF

Officers know the priorities of their chief and command staff through what and how they communicate personally and through the chain of command and through what they reinforce in action.

Chiefs and command staff need to communicate that suicide prevention and officer mental health are priorities. Officers need to know that chiefs and command staff are not only saying something, but they want to see that leaders truly mean it, believe it, and are committed to suicide prevention and mental health support. Agency leaders can request feedback to understand how to deliver messages to various ranks, as well as how to reinforce those messages. Starting at the academy, officers are aware that they are analyzed by how they control situations. Leaders must communicate that asking for help is a sign of being in control, not a sign of weakness. Communicating that it is normal to experience stress and trauma, and that actively maintaining one's mental health as a part of a career in policing helps to normalize help-seeking behavior. Agencies should make messaging about mental health and suicide prevention routine and talk about it early and often throughout an officer's career. Providing regular messages on the importance of mental health throughout an officer's career will reinforce the commitment to keeping officers safe and well. It is best to include stories of healing, recovery, and resilience, by sharing personal stories and augmenting the voices of peer supporters. Powerful stories of seeking help, surviving a suicidal crisis, managing one's anger, getting support after trauma, and recovering from an addiction normalizes help-seeking, demonstrates the agency has the officer's back, and builds a culture of support for officer mental health



## Tips for Chiefs and Command Staff

- **SHARE** stories of those who have experienced mental health challenges or a suicidal crisis and experienced healing and recovery.
- **COMMUNICATE** a positive, hopeful, and resilient, message indicating that support is available, treatment is effective, and, in most situations, suicide can be prevented.
- **TALK** about mental health and suicide prevention regularly before a critical incident occurs.
- **TAILOR** messages to the diverse needs of the audience considering the impact culture may have on mental health challenges.
- **CONSULT** a suicide prevention expert when talking with media regarding law enforcement suicide prevention or following a suicide loss.
- **EXERCISE** caution when talking about complex issues like what contributed to suicidal behavior. Be careful not to communicate in a way that states an oversimplified cause.



## FRONT LINE SUPERVISORS

Sergeants, corporals, and other leaders in roles of supervising personnel wear many hats ranging from being the insulation between line personnel and management, to keeping an eye out for inappropriate behaviors, to working to develop team unity and cohesion.<sup>11</sup> Front line supervisors have a key role in taking care of the members of their team, looking for signs, following up on absences, and referring an officer to Employee Assistance Programs or others support when necessary. Sergeants and corporals should remain cognizant of the messages they send about mental health and suicide prevention, how individuals interpret those messages, and the role they play in creating and maintaining a culture of support. Supervisors can make or break a culture of “It is okay not to be okay.”



### Tips for Front Line Supervisors

- **COMMUNICATE** that it is okay to focus on and take care of yourself, because ultimately taking care of yourself is taking care of everyone else, including your unit, your family, and your community.
- **MODEL** self-care with both action and messages.
- **ACT** as a coach when it comes to mental health, if possible and appropriate for the situation. A way of communicating this might include, “I am not concerned about your job, I am concerned about you.”
- **DEMONSTRATE** as much concern for the members of the team as is demonstrated for the community, risk management, or management perception.
- **MESSAGE** about mental health and wellbeing routinely and leverage the use of technology when appropriate.

## PEERS

Peers have a unique opportunity to break through the skepticism and challenges with trust that some may have within policing. When a peer shares their personal experience with mental health struggles, substance use, or a suicide attempt, it can combat the challenge of silence that can exist around these issues. Peers sharing their experiences empower individuals in the force who might be experiencing similar challenges. The voice and presence of a peer, of someone who has been there, can send a message of “This officer is not embarrassed about it. This officer has been there. I

am not the only one going through this.” It enables an officer struggling to say, “I am going through the same thing.” Peers show that it is brave to be vulnerable, that one does not have to be paralyzed by perceptions of getting help, and it is okay to prioritize getting better. When a peer has struggled, they often become their own champion and this passion spreads to others in the agency or the group they are speaking to. The guidance for messaging related to peers’ stories and communication about their own experience is to be applied to communication to groups of people. Peer supporters must be able to adjust their language to meet the needs of individuals they are supporting and share their message in a genuine and engaging manner. Peers need to share their message in a genuine and engaging manner. They must be able to tell the right story in a way that connects with others throughout the agency. These messages need to be delivered in a balanced way, avoiding making it all about one person’s story or implying that what worked for one will work for all. Specific details of a suicide attempt or substance overdose should be given only if it is essential to relate to the group. It is impossible to measure the full impact of peers in communicating about suicide prevention and normalizing mental health challenges.



### Tips for Peers

- **SHARE** stories in a genuine, approachable, and vulnerable manner while connecting with the specific needs of the groups you are communicating with. Use caution to refrain from making stories seem all about one’s personal experience.
- **COMMUNICATE** in a safe manner and include graphic details only if it is necessary.
- **FOCUS** on the full spectrum of mental health challenges – by addressing the things that might seem less significant, one might prevent crises.
- **EMPHASIZE** help-seeking, accessing treatment, and using a variety of resources including peer support.
- **ADJUST** approach, message, and stories to the audience maintaining sensitivity to culture. One size does not fit all, and what a peer shares to the family support unit may be different with the S.W.A.T. team or a group of corrections officers working at a women’s facility.
- **CHANGE** the delivery of the message to fit the audience; however, the message of self-care, hope, resiliency, and recovery cannot change.



## FAMILY

Agencies must remember the larger police network and that families and support persons play a key role in suicide prevention and mental health promotion. Agencies can create intentional messaging to families which will serve to increase family support and provide information to family members who may be one of the first to see warning signs of a suicidal crisis. Agencies can keep the following in mind to create suicide prevention messages to family members of police and to support positive family interactions throughout an officer's career.

It is important to emphasize that the law enforcement family member will have positive and satisfying times in their career. It is equally important to normalize times of challenge and mental health struggles. Agencies should inform families who to go to for assistance and resources if they become concerned about their family member so they can still be a competent and in control officer. Provide family members information about ways to help care for their officer's mental wellbeing, who they can reach out to if concerned about their officer, and what to look for regarding signs of concern across the spectrum of issues that may arise. In addition to written materials, it is helpful for families to receive communications about mental health promotion and suicide prevention during the academy, at family events, promotion and retirement gatherings, support groups, and any other means through which families are engaged in the agency. When developing messages about suicide prevention for families, agencies should consider that support persons may not call a phone number off a card on a refrigerator magnet if they have no other experience or information about that resource. Remember that the only information a family member may have is what the officer has shared with them.

It is a good practice for the professionals providing mental health support to be at events where families are to help build trust, even if the event is not a mental health-focused event. Engage families in understanding the strength it takes to be an officer, the resilience that officers show on a daily basis, and the importance of being an active part of the support system. Messages need to communicate the culture of the agency about mental health, share accurate information, and refrain from alarming families. Agencies can ask family members to be active in caring for themselves and include information encouraging family members to get help for themselves when needed.



## Tips for Families

- **INCLUDE** all support systems that a law enforcement officer might identify as family, beyond blood relatives or married partners.
- **ASSIST** families in understanding they can support their officer while still respecting the officer's sense of independence and strength.
- **FOCUS** on strength, resilience, and positive messages in addition to messaging about signs and what to look for in a family member.
- **COMMUNICATE** how to support police from a family perspective.
- **SHARE** that suicide risk is concern without over-emphasizing the concern or contributing to a heightened awareness from support persons.
- **GIVE** facts on how to respond, and who to go to.

## Conclusion

It is essential to talk openly about mental health and suicide prevention in departments, across all levels, and to do so in a way that connects to the unique needs of police officers and their families. Agencies should honor a member that has died by suicide while also respecting the needs of those who may be struggling. This can be done by following safe messaging guidelines. Sharing stories of healing and recovery empowers officers to seek help for themselves and to have each other's backs. Suicide can be prevented when it is talked about in a safe, positive, and effective way.



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## ABOUT THE BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

The **Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)** helps to make American communities safer by strengthening the nation's criminal justice system: BJA s grants, training and technical assistance, and policy development services provide government jurisdictions (state, local, tribal, and territorial) and public and private organizations with the cutting-edge tools and best practices they need to support law enforcement, reduce violent and drug-related crime, and combat victimization.

BJA is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office for Victims of Crime, and Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking.

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BJA provides leadership and services in grant administration and criminal justice policy development to support local, state, and tribal law enforcement in achieving safer communities. BJA supports programs and initiatives in the areas of law enforcement, justice information sharing, countering terrorism, managing offenders, combating drug crime and abuse, adjudication, advancing tribal justice, crime prevention, protecting vulnerable populations, and capacity building. Driving BJA's work in the field are the following principles:

- **EMPHASIZE** local control.
- **BUILD** relationships in the field.
- **PROVIDE** training and technical assistance in support of efforts to prevent crime, drug abuse, and violence at the national, state, and local levels.
- **DEVELOP** collaborations and partnerships.
- **PROMOTE** capacity building through planning.
- **STREAMLINE** the administration of grants.
- **INCREASE** training and technical assistance.
- **CREATE** accountability of projects.
- **ENCOURAGE** innovation.
- **COMMUNICATE** the value of justice efforts to decision makers at every level.

To learn more about BJA, visit [www.bja.gov](http://www.bja.gov), or follow us on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/DOJBJA](https://www.facebook.com/DOJBJA)) and Twitter (@DOJBJA). BJA is part of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs.

## ABOUT THE IACP

### The International Association of Chiefs of Police

**(IACP)** is the world's largest and most influential professional association for police leaders. With more than 30,000 members in over 165 countries, the IACP is a recognized leader in global policing. Since 1893, the association has been speaking out on behalf of law enforcement and advancing leadership and professionalism in policing worldwide.

The IACP is known for its commitment to shaping the future of the police profession. Through timely research, programming, and unparalleled training opportunities, the IACP is preparing current and emerging police leaders—and the agencies and communities they serve—to succeed in addressing the most pressing issues, threats, and challenges of the day.

The IACP is a not-for-profit 501c(3) organization headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia. The IACP is the publisher of The Police Chief magazine, the leading periodical for law enforcement executives, and the host of the IACP Annual Conference, the largest police educational and technology exposition in the world. IACP membership is open to law enforcement professionals of all ranks, as well as non-sworn leaders across the criminal justice system. Learn more about the IACP at [www.theIACP.org](http://www.theIACP.org).



## ABOUT THE EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT CENTER

**Education Development Center (EDC)** is a global nonprofit organization that advances lasting solutions to improve education, promote health, and expand economic opportunity. Since 1958, EDC has been a leader in designing, implementing, and evaluating powerful and innovative programs in more than 80 countries around the world. With expertise in areas such as suicide prevention, early childhood development and learning, and youth workforce development, EDC collaborates with public and private partners to create, deliver, and evaluate programs, services, and products. This work includes:

- **CREATING** resources such as curricula, toolkits, and online courses that offer engaging learning experiences
- **CONDUCTING** formative and summative evaluations of initiatives
- **APPLYING** expertise in capacity building, professional development, and training and technical assistance
- **PROVIDING** policy advisement, information documents, and research and analysis
- **CONDUCTING** qualitative and quantitative studies to inform our programs and assess their impact

For decades, EDC has offered evidence-based support and resources to prevent and address violence, suicide, and trauma across the U.S. and around the world. EDC houses several leading centers and institutes focused

on suicide prevention, including the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, and the Zero Suicide Institute. Drawing on this expertise, EDC leads initiatives and consults with national and local law enforcement agencies and departments in examining the complex issues underlying suicide among public safety workforces, identifying threats, and designing proactive and comprehensive solutions. EDC brings extensive program development expertise, quantitative and qualitative research skills, and training and curriculum development experience, as well as content expertise in suicide prevention, violence prevention, trauma-informed approaches, and substance use. Learn more about the work of EDC at [www.edc.org](http://www.edc.org).

## ABOUT THE NATIONAL ACTION ALLIANCE FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

**The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention** (Action Alliance) is the public-private partnership working to advance the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention and make suicide prevention a national priority. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration provides funding to EDC to operate and manage the Secretariat for the Action Alliance, which was launched in 2010. Learn more at [theactionalliance.org](http://theactionalliance.org) and join the conversation on suicide prevention by following the Action Alliance on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

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