

SPRC

STAGING A SUICIDE
AWARENESS EVENT:
A 10-STEP PLANNING GUIDE

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If you have never organized a suicide awareness event, the task may seem overwhelming. This guide is designed to make your job easier by providing a step-by-step process and other practical information. Once you begin planning, others will join your efforts, particularly if you give them concrete ways to help. Follow this 10-step planning guide and you will be on your way toward staging a successful event that raises awareness about suicide and suicide prevention.

1. Determine the Focus or Purpose of Your Event

Before getting into the details of planning an event, you first must identify the purpose of your event. Your event can raise awareness about suicide and suicide prevention among community members and policy makers. An event also provides the opportunity to educate, advocate, and raise funds. Here are suggestions for each of those possibilities.

- *Raise Awareness*

You can raise awareness by staging an event that will attract a crowd and convey a powerful message. You may choose to organize a walk, quilt display, memorial ceremony, candlelight vigil, or gathering that features well-known individuals who share their stories about suicide. Bringing a group of people together sends the message that suicide affects everyone. Large crowds also can be useful in obtaining media attention and can result in further awareness raising in the broader community. Once people hear statistics about the rate of suicide in our nation and the number of lives lost to suicide daily and annually, they immediately have a keener understanding of suicide's impact. Most people are alarmed to learn that annual suicide deaths outnumber both homicides and deaths due to HIV/AIDS.

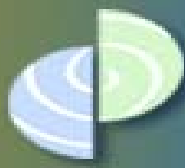
- *Educate* (see [Section 3](#))

In addition to raising awareness, provide some education about the risk and protective factors for suicide, the link between mental illness and substance abuse disorders and suicide, and the populations at greatest risk. Perhaps you could educate people about how to identify individuals at risk and teach them about available services (e.g., hotlines, crisis centers and community health centers). You could set up display tables and provide materials on suicide, suicide prevention and mental illness. You also could recruit a public figure or other well-respected individual to give a speech on a suicide-related topic.

- *Advocate*

You can sponsor an action-oriented event that provides participants with tools for getting involved in suicide prevention advocacy. Effective strategies include getting petitions or letters signed, organizing visits to your state legislature, or collecting funds to support an established suicide prevention organization or coalition. For example, the Suicide Prevention Action Network (SPAN USA) collects [advocacy letters](#) that call for the implementation of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention and for accessible and affordable mental health services year-round. Advocates deliver these advocacy letters to their legislators during their annual [National Awareness Event](#) in Washington, DC.

- *Raise Funds*



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You can sponsor a fund-raising event. One example is the [AIDS Walk](#), which takes place in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco each year. Funds are used to support hundreds of organizations, groups and clinics that provide support and services to individuals with HIV/AIDS. Within the suicide prevention community, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention organizes "[Out of the Darkness](#)" walks each year to raise awareness about depression and suicide. The walks also raise funds to support its research, education and prevention programs.

2. Collaborate

Volunteers can raise the profile of your event, provide you with expertise and contacts, and help you reach more potential supporters. Recruit volunteers from within your group, but also reach out to other individuals and organizations. Involve individuals and representatives of organizations early in the planning process of your event so that they will share a sense of ownership for the event.

Involve members from other advocacy and mental health organizations in your community. Talk to members of the [National Alliance for the Mentally Ill](#), the [National Mental Health Association](#), [Depressive and Bipolar Support Alliance](#), local survivor support groups, community mental health centers, local hospitals and health maintenance organizations (HMO's), and local chapters of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, among others.

Involve key people in your organizing committee. If, for example, your event is focusing on youth or elder suicide, invite representatives from these respective communities to sit on your organizing committee. At the very least, invite their input. They can provide valuable insights and contacts.

Collaborate with another organization. The best partners would be organizations that represent populations for whom suicide is an issue and that have experience in sponsoring awareness events. Talk to organizations that hold annual health/mental health observance events such as [National Mental Health Month](#), [Older Americans Month](#), [National Men's Health Week](#), [National Anxiety Disorders Screening Day](#), [National Problem Gambling Awareness Week](#), [Brain Awareness Week](#), [Alcohol Awareness Month](#), [National Depression Screening Day](#). In addition, most large advocacy organizations hold annual legislative events. You may want to partner with such an organization on your first attempt. Learning the ropes from someone who has done it before will make everyone's task easier.

Partner with the private sector. Local, state, and regional United Way organizations are excellent partners to help reach private sector businesses and corporations. Many United Way affiliates sponsor annual kick-off events that attract hundreds of business leaders. They also conduct onsite workplace events at large corporations during their campaign season. Local United Way affiliates frequently permit non-United Way funded agencies and organizations to participate in these events.

For legislative events, partner with an elected official. Find a legislative leader to help you arrange your event. Some state legislatures charge a considerable fee for holding an event at the State House, unless it is sponsored by a state representative



or senator. The legislator's office staff often will process the necessary paperwork, help with logistics (e.g., arranging for a podium, sound system, etc.), and provide valuable assistance in publicizing the event among colleagues (including arranging for coverage by the State House news bureau).

3. Form Committees

In order to ensure a successful event, form committees to manage the many different and necessary logistic and planning tasks.

Start planning early. Set up a meeting time for all those who have shown interest in your project and begin brainstorming. Consider the possibility of having one or more organizations cosponsor the event. Establish working committees (e.g., program committee, publicity committee, funding committee, logistics committee, etc.) and encourage interested individuals to volunteer for a specific committee. Even if your organizing group is small, motivated people can accomplish a great deal.

Appoint the event chair and committee chairs. If possible, select an event chairperson who has the time and talent to oversee the organization of the event, as well as the capacity to reach out to others effectively (e.g. businesses, media, and the philanthropic community). Appointing chairs for the working committee allows the leadership responsibilities to be shared and helps ease the burden.

4. Set a Date

This is one of the first things you should do after your committee structure is in place. Setting a date gives you a target to shoot for and commits you to developing and following a schedule.

Be sure the date gives you enough time, is consistent with your objective, and avoids conflicts. Set the date well in advance since it takes significant lead time to organize and advertise an event. If you are interested in a certain venue, find out how far in advance it books up and set the date accordingly. If you are planning a legislative event, schedule it during a time when the state legislature is in session and officials are not traveling. Also, be sure to check the calendars of local organizations or groups to make sure your event does not compete with other local events or happenings.

Dovetail your event date with a date that has national significance. For example, plan a legislative event during [National Suicide Prevention Awareness Week](#). By associating your event with a [national health or mental health observance](#), you can benefit from outreach materials developed by national organizations, wider exposure, and increased media interest.



5. Reserve a Location

As with setting a date, booking a location should be one of your first priorities.

Book your location early. If your event is to take place in a commonly used public place (e.g., a town square or the steps of a government building), reserve the location early, ideally six months in advance. Some public locations require permits. Others have specific security regulations. Be sure to check ahead.

Prevent overcrowding at your event. If your venue will have limited attendance capacity, set an RSVP date. Include the RSVP date in any materials used to publicize the event, as well as a contact name and address.

Have a contingency plan. If your event will be held outdoors, consider having contingency plans (if, for example, it rains or is very hot that day). Contingency plans may include an alternate date, alternate indoor location, abbreviated agenda, or even umbrellas to distribute.

6. Look for Ways to Reduce Your Costs

Sponsoring events can be very expensive. Look for ways to help you stage the best possible event at the lowest possible cost.

Form collaborations or seek financial support. Collaborating with other groups or organizations and inviting their cosponsorship may reduce the cost of your event. Alternatively, you might reach out to businesses and corporations for financial support. Healthcare organizations, such as local hospitals, HMO's, and foundations associated with HMO's (such as Blue Cross/Blue Shield) may be good partners who can provide financial support.

Don't forget about in-kind support. For example, an organization or business might be willing to pay for your mailing, produce flyers, or permit you to utilize their mailing list. If your organization is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization, you could approach potential vendors, such as printing companies or food suppliers, to provide their services as a tax write off, or they may offer their services at a reduced cost.

Example: A group organizing an annual Legislative Awareness Day decided to display 491 Iris flowers at an event symbolizing the 491 lives lost that year to suicide. The Iris also symbolizes hope and survival. Following the event, participants visited the offices of legislators and

left bouquets of flowers with legislative advocacy material. The flowers and vases were provided at cost by a volunteer who worked at a local flower shop.

Most foundations and corporations will only grant funding support to 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations. If your group does not have this status, ask a nonprofit



member of your group to serve as the funding conduit or “lead agency.”

7. Alert the Media ([see section 4](#))

Maximize the effectiveness of your event by working to obtain media coverage.

Identify local media outlets. Use the [media guide](#) on the SPAN USA Legislative Action Center to obtain contact information (i.e. address, phone numbers, e-mail and staff names) for numerous types of media, including: newspapers, political publications, online services, columnists, magazines, television networks, television stations, radio stations and news services.

Prepare a press release to alert the media of your upcoming event (see section 4a). Mail it to potential media outlets one month in advance. Send a media advisory out at least six working days before. Follow up by calling all key outlets the day before the event.

Give your press release a “human interest” slant (see section 4b). Personal stories make an ordinary press release stand out. Include a short paragraph about a member of your group’s personal struggle with a mental disorder or suicide attempt. Or, highlight a family dealing with the loss of a loved one to suicide. If possible, include information on how the media can contact the profiled person(s) for an interview.

8. Publicize

Use a variety of approaches to maximize attendance at your event.

Work through mental health, advocacy and community groups. Ask local mental health and advocacy groups to help publicize your event by including information on their website, in their newsletter, and/or on bulletin boards. To attract local participation, publicize your event with local affiliates of statewide and national advocacy groups. For example, NAMI has many local affiliates that have newsletters and outreach mechanisms suited to your needs. If your event is focused on suicide among a specific population, reach out to groups in that community. For example, for an event about elder suicide, publicize your event with local senior centers, elder service centers, and elder day care centers.

Produce flyers for your event and ask volunteers to distribute them. Post them in shop windows and on community bulletin boards. Distribute them to community health centers and faith-based organizations.

Notify local newspapers, radio stations and newsletters that feature community calendars. Ideally, local media outlets will not only include your event in their calendars, but produce an informational piece on your topic. To help encourage more in-depth coverage, be sure to provide a press release as well as a packet containing information on local suicide statistics, history of suicide prevention in your state or community, warning signs and risk factors of suicide, and local and state resources.



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Send invitations to community members (e.g., political leaders, emergency responders, faith-based leaders) who might be interested in attending and follow up your invitations with phone calls.

9. Record and Recognize

It is important to keep a record of those who attend your event and to recognize the individuals and groups who provide assistance and/or financial support. These simple actions will foster good will and help ensure success of future events.

Record attendees. If logistics permit you to have a sign-in sheet, ask participants to record their name, address, telephone number and email address. Such information can be valuable for future event planning, legislative advocacy work, and membership drives.

Thank everyone who supported your event. Be sure to recognize those who helped organize your event or provided financial support both at the event and afterward (by sending a thank you letter).

Consider annual recognition awards. If you plan on holding legislative awareness events every year, you might honor legislative and community leaders with an annual award. Promote long-term allies by presenting awards to legislators who have demonstrated leadership on behalf of suicide prevention or mental health, community leaders who have helped raise awareness, or media persons who have helped publicize the need for suicide prevention efforts.

10. Document and Evaluate

This step will help planners of future events by giving them information about what was done, what worked, and what did not work.

Compile clear records and supporting information. Keep track of steps taken and costs incurred during the planning process. If you plan to make your event an annual affair, keep a folder of all your important documents (e.g., contact lists, publicity samples, etc.) so that organizers in the future won't have to start from scratch.

Evaluate the event and record the results. Once the event and its wrap-up activities have been completed, take a moment to evaluate your event. Contact a sampling of friends and colleagues who attended the event to solicit their feedback on the event. What worked? What didn't work? Review your documents and records to jog your memory about mistakes that need correcting, areas for improvement, and major successes. Write down your conclusions and those of others for the planners of the next event.



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When you first picked up this guide, the idea of organizing a suicide awareness event may have been a fuzzy, intimidating concept. Now you should have some clear ideas on how to turn that idea into a reality. By following these 10 steps, you will stage a successful and informative event. In addition, you and your planning team will feel a great sense of accomplishment for a job well done.

SAMHSA

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REFERENCES

Administration on Aging
www.aoa.gov

AIDS Walk
www.aidswalk.net

American Association of Suicidology
www.suicidology.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
www.afsp.org

DANA
www.dana.org

Depressive and Bipolar Support Alliance
www.dbsalliance.org

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www.freedomfromfear.com

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National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Inc.
www.ncadd.org

National Council on Problem Gambling
www.ncpgambling.org

National Men's Health Week
www.menshealthweek.org

National Mental Health Association
www.nmha.org

National Health Observances
www.healthfinder.gov/library/nho/nho.asp

Screening for Mental Health, Inc.
www.mentalhealthscreening.org

Suicide Prevention Action Network
www.spanusa.org