Shield of Care: A System-Focused Approach to Protecting Juvenile Justice Youth from Suicide

Date: 2013 (For resources, this is the publication date. For programs, this is the date posted.)

Information
Type: Program/Practice, Education/Training Program
Organization: Tennessee Dept. of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services

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Developed by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (TDMHSAS) and partners, Shield of Care is an 8-hour, research-informed curriculum that teaches juvenile justice staff strategies to prevent suicide in their correctional facility environment. The Shield of Care suicide prevention model (S-Plan) is unique because it is tailored to the juvenile justice environment and emphasizes a system-focused model of preventing suicide. Specifically, the Shield of Care model does the following: (1) Emphasizes that policy, connectedness to youth, and communication between staff are essential system-level elements of suicide prevention; (2) Teaches staff specific steps of effective suicide intervention (Seeing, Protecting, Listening, Assessing, Networking); and (3) Provides opportunities for staff to reflect on internal policies for suicide prevention, discuss strategies for overcoming potential barriers, and plan how to take action in their specific facility context.

Shield of Care was developed in the following stages: (1) The need for a juvenile justice-specific curriculum was established through consultation with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC); (2) The Shield of Care model was developed by the Tennessee Lives Count (TLC) grant team using available research literature and TLC evaluation data; (3) Contracted partners (e.g. curriculum designer, videographer) worked with the TLC team to develop curriculum materials; (4) Content experts in suicidology and juvenile justice reviewed the curriculum; and (5) The final version was pilot-tested, yielding favorable program outcomes. (Note: SPRC’s program review process examined only program content; outcome data were not reviewed.)

Program Objectives

At the end of Shield of Strength training, participants should have increased:

1. Knowledge of suicide prevention strategies, including risk and protective factors.
2. Self-efficacy to prevent suicide.
3. Suicide prevention skills.

System-wide, there will be increased:

1. Connectedness among staff and with youth.
2. Suicide prevention communication.
3. Policy and procedure knowledge.
4. Self-efficacy to work through facility-level barriers to suicide prevention.

Implementation Essentials

- Juvenile justice settings that use the Shield of Care program should have established protocols for addressing youth who may be at risk for suicide. Administrators and staff should be aware of the protocols. Trainers need to have mental health backgrounds and be willing to administer the evaluation.

2012 NSSP Objectives Addressed:

Objective 1.1: Integrate suicide prevention into the values, culture, leadership, and work of a broad range of organizations and programs with a role to support suicide prevention activities.
Objective 7.1: Provide training on suicide prevention to community groups that have a role in the prevention of suicide and related behaviors.